



For a Scandalous Wager (Breaking the Rules of the Beau Monde #3)

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Category: Historical

Description: If Evelyn Markham entertained any aspirations of escaping an unwanted betrothal contract without a fine, she'd have to do more than break a few rules. She'd need to set the ton on fire with gossip or be seen with a man whose name alone could cause a scandal. Dalton Rochester was just that man. From the moment she laid down a daring wager during a game of billiards, her fascination with the dashing rogue burgeoned into something heart-poundingly real.

The shilling Miss Markham surreptitiously slipped into Rochester's pocket now lay snug in his boot, a constant reminder that even the tiniest pebble could feel like a boulder under the right circumstances. This was especially true when his best friend's sister could send his pulse rioting with a look and his billiard stick missing on cue. When she whispered her challenge, Make the shot, and I'll make your day, he found himself bewitched by the forbidden lady.

But now, he must steel himself against her charm because for the past three months, the little hoyden has been sending him notes requesting a private rendezvous. At this rate, his friendship with her brother, whom he owed a great deal, would not survive. Nor, with her persistence, would her virtue.

She started as a pebble in his shoe but quickly became his rock.

Total Pages (Source): 34

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:52 am

PROLOGUE

England 1824 A Shadow of things to come...

H-E-L-P.

Four letters. Not perhaps the four letters Dalton Rochester was thinking of when he witnessed one shapely calf dangling over the second-story windowsill of Rosewood Manor. No, his four-letter word of choice started with an F and ended with a K.

The note, the plea, hadn't required a signature even if he had not come to recognize the precise looping curve of the letter P as in: Please be discreet. Please come quickly. Please do not ignore this summons. Please. Please. Please.

He sorely wished to reply with: Please forget where I live, and I'll do the same. But he wasn't in the game of harming the tender regard or the budding feelings of debutantes. Although, at twenty-three, Evelyn Markham was hardly a debutante. It is, however, generally understood that a gentleman's best friend's little sister was and would always be as off-limits as any freshly minted young, innocent of the ton .

"What the bloody hell are you doing?" he yelled in a forceful whisper that she surely heard if the cheeky look she just threw over her shoulder was any indication. Thankfully, the light from the waxing-gibbous moon illuminated her virtual fall from grace. Watching her right foot poke about, searching for the trellis banked against the brick facade, something he wouldn't have put any trust in even as a child, his heart soon gave way to the near calamity, and he broke out in a nervous sweat.

“I should think it obvious,” she shouted back, the words bouncing off the exterior of the house now inches from her face as she fully hung on to the lattice frame.

“Don’t you dare take another step, Evelyn Markham. I swear to God if you fall and die, I’ll never speak to you again.”

“You’re being ridiculous,” she called to him from under her extended arm.

“Don’t speak. Just put your derriere back over that sill.” He moved into a better position, ready to catch her because he didn’t trust her to make it safely to the ground unharmed.

“If you’d had the good grace to come earlier, I wouldn’t be in this predicament.” She finally found a solid slat of wood and tucked the toe of her slipper into it.

Slippers? Damn it all. She wasn’t even wearing boots, the ninny. “I thought I made it perfectly clear that I have no stab of conscience wielding me toward being one of your victims of scheme and scandal. Now, hightail it back into your room or wherever it is you came from. And for God’s sake, do it right now.”

She ventured another step down the makeshift ladder, and he heard the weathered wood snap, pieces scrabbling down the side of the manse. “Oh!”

“Oh, God! Don’t move. I’m coming up.”

“No, it’s too much. We’ll both fall.”

“Then push yourself free of the wall and let go. I’ll catch you.” She was more than halfway there already, and Rochester trusted himself to catch her before she broke that lovely neck of hers. Curse him for ever having kissed it.

“I can’t,” she said while braced only on one foot, her other bobbing about.

If his heart hadn’t been pumping with worry, he’d have enjoyed the view.

“I’m afraid.”

“Fine time for that. You’re a helpless goose, is what you are. And a pain in my arse.”

“Rochester!” she yelped just before her other foot gave way. She lost her grip on the trellis—and on the evening.

With his arms full of skirts and soft womanly parts, his legs buckled from the force. Despite that, he managed to keep hold of her, cradling her against his chest even as the pain-in-the-arse woman made his backside hurt in reality. He blew out a ragged breath, and before he truly let her have it, he clutched her to him, stroking her hair with his palm and ignoring a twig poking him in the back of his head. His heart pounded with a combination of wild, uncontrollable fear and relief. With her breasts firmly pressed against him, he felt her heart answer with the same panicked rhythm. The position did nothing to calm him whatsoever. On the contrary, it made him rock hard under her soft derriere. Lord God, have mercy. This woman was to be the death of him. One way or another.

CHAPTER 1

Two weeks earlier.

Miss Evelyn Markham watched him through the open doors to the billiard room. She watched as he put his cue stick to every shot and made them all. She watched while men stood eagerly around the table, some throwing bets on the gold baize. And she remembered the wager she'd made with Mr. Dalton Rochester when she slipped a shilling into his pocket fifteen months ago at Lady Clover's Christmas party. "Make the shot, and I'll make your day." She'd told him then, whispering it provocatively in his ear just before he let loose the leather-tipped billiard cue.

Never in her life would she forget how he missed that shot. She couldn't decide whether she was disappointed or relieved. It wasn't like her to say such daring things, but she and her friends had decided to break a few rules of the beau monde. And break them they did. In fact, Miss Adeline Priestly had broken them right into a marriage with Evelyn's older brother, Winn.

Now, as she watched Rochester shooting billiards, making every single shot, she began second-guessing his performance at that Christmas house party over a year ago. Had he missed that shot on purpose? Did he do it to protect her or himself? He never did give her back that shilling. He and her older brother, Winn, were close friends, so perhaps he had missed it for the sake of friendship. She'd as soon believe that than to think Rochester hadn't found her attractive or engaging enough to want to win that wager.

With hair the color of rich ground coffee and hazel-brown eyes like caramel trimmed

in green set off with gold flecks, he was swoonworthy, no doubt about it. But it was his unaffected charm, the way he bantered with her, the way he had sported her around at that party where Winn and her friend Adeline Priestley first kissed. At the time, Rochester had made her feel as if she were the only woman who could bring about his devastatingly lethal, crooked smile. Hadn't he agreed to play draughts with her at midnight, all to keep her safe from the misguided fops who purposed to lure women under mistletoe and greenery?

Her brother was now married, and he and Adeline were expecting their first child in three months.

That party felt like ages ago as she stood in the middle of the drawing room at Lady Hick's ball, watching Rochester make sport of the men too foolish to know they'd been hustled. She could see the banknotes lying on the table, white against the gold felt baize. She chewed her thumb, then made a face when her tongue chafed against the dry silk of her dress gloves. With daydreams from more than a year past, she watched Rochester, baffled by his actions, until she caught his eye. He tossed her a sobering pause, gazing at her under his long dark lashes, his sexy mouth flinching into the slightest quirk of a smile. Then, without so much as a look toward the table, he primed the cue through his fingers and sunk another red ball into a leather pocket.

She raised one eyebrow before she turned on her heel and strolled off, her shawl slipping from her shoulders as she floated through the drawing room on her way to the terrace. Out into the night, the crisp spring breeze cooled her heated cheeks, and she pulled up the shawl, wrapping it tightly around her shoulders again.

"When did you arrive in London?" An aching familiar masculine voice asked.

Her pulse raced. Her heart fluttered, giving her ribs a little tickle, but she did not turn around. "Yesterday," she said, bracing her hands against the concrete balustrade, uncaring if the coarse barrier ruined her new silk gloves. To throw Rochester off-

balance was her only goal now.

“I thought you would wish to stay with your sister-in-law during her last months of confinement.” Rochester leaned his backside against the rail next to her, his face turned toward her with his arms crossed over his broad chest, his dress coat pulled taut over muscles she knew flexed against the superfine fabric. The scent of sandalwood and shaving soap drifted under her nose as her mouth watered at the pleasant aroma. It had been more than a year since she’d been in his company. She shivered. Gooseflesh broke out on her arms, which had nothing to do with the night breeze.

“Adeline said she’d call for me when the time comes. And Winn.” The words were a chuckle. “Winn is a nervous Nellie, and I think he’d rather that I not be there to see him worry and flail about like a fish out of water.”

“I suppose they have a good three months yet. No reason for you not to get in a few parties this Season, right?”

“Exactly.” But Evelyn knew better. Adeline, her beautifully sweet sister-in-law, was due in less than three months. She knew that because Addy was one of her best friends and had confided that she and Winn had conceived before their wedding. The babe would be here approximately eight weeks earlier than most expected if all went well. Evelyn supposed it was a good sign that Winn had not revealed that condemning information to Rochester. Her brother and Mr. Rochester were as close as two chaps could be. It would seem not all men were braggarts.

She and Rochester’s unique friendship—if one could call it that—traced back to that infamous house party. Lady Clover had invited her and Adeline. It was happenstance that brought Winn, Darrington, and Rochester to attend. Winn had been tasked to escort Evelyn there because their father could not. And Winn, in turn, invited his friends, Hugo Darrington and Dalton Rochester, to join them. It was there that she’d

made the shilling wager. Neither she nor Rochester had spoken of it since, and she dared hope Rochester had not mentioned it to Winn.

Gazing out over the gardens, she gave Rochester a knowingly coy glance. “Inside, just now, you made that shot without even looking.”

“Did you see that?” Turning a peg, he leaned his hip against the rail, keeping his eyes trained on her. “It would seem my game has improved.”

“Has it?” Giving him her full attention, she turned the full force of her gaze on him now. “From what I understand, you never miss a shot.”

“Oh, one or two. No one’s perfect.”

Did they reference the same incident? Was he playing games with her? Or flirting? The man was exasperatingly unclear. She changed her tact. With a daring sweep of her eyes, she looked him over and announced, “My father means to betroth me to the highest bidder. So, I thought to get in one more Season, a few more parties perhaps, before I’m swept off my feet and carried away in a drowning current of melancholia.”

He straightened, bending a puzzled brow. To his credit, he looked somewhat concerned. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I thought we were friends. And Addy’s not here, nor Clover, for that matter. And I’m not certain why I’m here either, to tell you the truth.” She bit back a sigh that stung with tears.

“Who is the man?”

“Does it matter?”

She saw his jaw working; his eyes were like ice. “No. Of course, it doesn’t.”

Her heart lurched sickeningly, and she felt the whole of it plummet to the pit of her empty stomach. Her chest hurt. It felt empty, like a hollowed-out sea cave battered by the wind and waves.

“He’s some simpering baron or some such. I can’t recall his name because my ears were ringing by the time my father reached that part. It’s of no consequence, anyhow. They’ll sign the papers without me, and if I refuse like an undutiful daughter, my father could face a fine. I feel as if I have no choice here. I’ve little doubt he’s from an excellent family. Papa wouldn’t marry me to a deranged lunatic. Just someone completely boring. He says that we’ll have an opportunity for courtship. But I don’t want it.”

“What if you meet him, and he’s everything you ever desired? A complete handsome rascal of a rogue.”

“How could he be when I don’t even know what that means? Desire. What is it? Can you say? Can you explain the complexities of an emotional connection so strong that you would be willing to die for it?”

“Well, let’s not go that far, shall we? Desire is easy. But forming an emotional bond is another story.”

“All I know is that Winn and Adeline seem to have it all without limit. Why shouldn’t I? Or you? Haven’t you ever thought about it? Marriage? Love? A family?”

He looked away, groaning under his breath. “You’re making this more complicated than it should be. Meet the man, at least. Then decide. They can’t force you. You’ve seen more than twenty-one years.”

“Thank you for the reminder. And I may be considered of sound mind and old enough to know it, but I won’t receive any funds until I’m twenty-five. Should I expect my father to continue paying my expenses if I refuse?”

“You’re thinking about this too hard. I know your father has enough wealth to take care of you for the rest of your days if you choose to be a spinster. Do you really suppose he’d force a marriage on his only daughter against all happiness?”

“Spinsters make their own money, I’ll have you know, so I highly doubt that will ever be me. On the shelf would be more like it. It sounds just awful. And how is it you know anything about my father’s finances?” The odd subject caught her off guard. Why would he mention that?

“It doesn’t matter how I know. He cannot possibly wish you off his hands because of your upkeep.”

“Why do men speak of women as if they’re cattle? Do I look like a horse? Don’t answer that.” She rolled her eyes, turning her back on him. “Papa says it’s time. That I should have expected no less since Winn married Adeline, and Addy and I are of a similar age. I think he’s looking forward to grandchildren, honestly. I just wish I had more time to argue the case. This will be my final Season as a single woman, and it’s already half over. I’m sunk if I can’t dissuade this union before a contract is signed. I’ll have to stow away on a ship to Calcutta and throw myself into the ocean.”

“Calcutta, is it? I’ve always liked your imagination. Why not the cliffs of Dover? They’re a hell of a lot closer. Why risk seasickness?” He smiled pleasantly as if humor could erase her reality.

“This is all funny to you, I suppose.”

He placed his hand on her elbow, causing her shawl to fall from her shoulder. Sliding

his warm fingers down the length of her formal gloves, he gently turned her to face him. He held her hand between his. "It's not funny. I simply don't see an answer right here."

She locked gazes with him, searching his eyes.

"And you don't see one either." He gave a pointed stare.

"Don't I?"

"What do you expect me to do, Miss Markham?"

"Don't call me that. I thought we were friends."

"All right, Evelyn. What do you expect me to do?"

She squeezed his hand before letting it go. "I have a plan."

"Hm. I'm all ears, against my better judgment." Once more, he leaned a hip against the railing.

"I need your help, Rochester."

CHAPTER 2

So, the chit needed his help. Rochester suppressed the urge to groan and let out a heavy sigh. He turned toward the gardens and leaned his elbows on the cold railing, thoughtfully contemplating his next move. He had a sinking feeling whatever he did next would make or break the fine thread of friendship he held with Evelyn. She was his best friend's sister, which made everything about her debacle problematic. He also genuinely liked her. Which wasn't helping.

When Evelyn pleaded with him for help, did she hope he'd make an offer of marriage? Probably. But she had to know he would never do that. What she didn't know was the reason why. It was no secret that someday he'd need a wife and an heir to secure his title of viscount. Evelyn wouldn't have been a bad choice. He thought her funny and her personality fresh and lively. It was impossible not to be enchanted by her shining dark-honey hair and sparkling green eyes that danced and laughed at him. Oh, he could easily get used to that. And her mouth. He'd wanted to kiss her since the holiday masquerade where she'd wagered a shilling on a shot of billiards. And then there was the rest of her, irresistibly alluring. She had the full shape of a woman grown. Wicked enough to tempt a saint if she only knew.

If her goal during any particular Season had been matrimony, she'd have won that race long ago. A woman as beautiful as Miss Evelyn Markham did not stay single until the ripe age of twenty-three unless it was her idea.

And now she needed his help.

She had a plan.

An idea.

His hands were sweating already. Even if he were in the market, her father would never have him. Not to mention, he was not in the market . Nor on the market, as it were.

But damn it all if he wasn't about to recklessly volunteer his help. "I'm not sure what else I can do, but I can try talking to Winn. Perhaps he might speak to your father on your behalf."

She sidled close, an easy touch away, and patiently waited for him to look at her. "Do you remember the game we played at the Kingsley ball?"

"Two Christmastides ago?" He raised a skeptical brow.

"Do you remember?" she asked with more fervor.

"Draughts?"

"No, not draughts. The game I suggested that first day of the house party."

Oh, he knew the game. He just ignorantly hoped she was not referring to it. "Remind me," he said, wiggling his toe in his boot, finding that damn shilling and reminding himself why he'd put it there. Evelyn Markham was like a pebble in his shoe.

She folded her arms and gave a tilt of her head. Her mouth pressed into an annoyed line. "I can't believe you don't remember. Are you that old?"

It was just those kinds of comments that he found charming. He chuckled at her daring.

“When we first came together at Lady Clover’s house party. You, Winn, Darrington, Adeline, Clover, and me. The six of us. And I said let’s do something fun.”

“Breaking the rules of the beau monde,” he finished for her. Of course, he remembered. How could he forget? And he could see the wheels turning in her pretty little head. A dangerous hope that somehow would cost him his sanity.

“Yes,” she breathed with relief. “Thank God you remember.”

“Why? Why do you thank God?” He thought he knew but hoped he was wrong.

“Because you can help me.”

This time, her green eyes were not full of fun and games like they had been before but were quite earnestly pleading with him. “Are your friends not available? I know Winn and Adeline aren’t here, but I believe I’ve seen Lady Clover this Season. Why not ask her? Perhaps she’ll have some ideas with merit.” A slight breeze picked up the tempting nectar of blooming honeysuckles and assailed his senses, attacking any wisdom he’d hoped to practice.

“I don’t need that kind of help. And I thought we were friends.”

“Miss Markham, we played draughts one Christmas.”

“And you rescued me from a seedy card game. Or do you not remember that either?”

He did. Evelyn had managed to jeopardize all three girls’ reputations by involving them in a game of brag with a shady, unscrupulous man. There they were, Adeline Priestley making bets at a card table while Lady Clover Dunhurst stood back with her hand pressed to her mouth. And then there was Evelyn, near enough to the table to watch the play. To her credit, she had looked afraid, as if she’d known they were over

their heads. He'd quietly grabbed her hand and led her to safety.

Now, he calmly straightened and turned to face her. "I remember it all, believe me. You should have never been in that game room."

"Who are you, Mr. Rochester? My father? Or my friend?"

"I believe your willfulness to cause trouble demands a father, but I confess to being your friend even though you think me old enough to be the former."

She rolled her eyes. "Then you'll help?" She sounded a bit exasperated.

He pulled a loose lock of her dark-blond hair, in utter disrespect of her neatly coiled coiffure, and watched it slide like silk through his fingers. "What's your plan, Goose?"

"Breaking a few more rules."

He pinched the place between his eyes, waffling.

"You promised. Besides, it might be fun."

"Or dangerous. Which rules, and how will it help?"

She absently slipped the errant curl behind her ear. Her hands were a marvel of animation while she explained. "Once the contract is signed, I cannot break it without consequence. I have a considerable dowry, and I can't imagine the young baron backing down just because his bride is only marginally interested in marrying him. And truth be told, I'm not at all interested."

"I can see that," he said unnecessarily.

“If he cries off first, then he’ll save face, my father won’t be fined, and I can go about as I always have. As if nothing has happened.”

“Why not invite him for tea and conversation? That ought to do it,” he said tongue in cheek.

“I could spill a scalding pot of steeped tea leaves in his lap.”

Rochester grimaced and mentally shook off the need to guard his groin with his hands.

“No good?”

He shook his head. “No imagination.”

“In that case, breaking the rules is the only option left. If I’m caught in a slightly compromising situation, perhaps the baron’s embarrassment would cause him to cry off before the betrothal can be agreed upon.”

“I’m certain there is no such thing as slightly compromised. But I’m dying to know what you’re planning even if it goes against all wisdom and good judgment.” He folded his arms.

“Well, I could put a hand on your arm like this.” She rubbed silk-covered fingers over his forearm and turned a coy smile on him. “And you can kiss me.”

“No. Absolutely not.” And as he said no, his heart palpitated at the mere idea of kissing those ripe, sweet lips until they were red and bruised with passion. His gaze fell to her mouth.

“You’re thinking about it.” She tugged on his arm.

“If I say Gaz, what immediately comes to mind? A chicken? The last opera you attended?”

“No. My dogs,” she said as if he were a numskull.

“Exactly. An Irish setter scrabbling across the tiled floor with silly ears flapping wildly.”

“Gaz is our beloved family dog. What else am I to think?”

“You have made my point, sweet. Thank you.”

Her hands went to her hips, and he could see the telltale sign of a foot tapping under the hem of her royal-blue gown.

He continued, “When you say kiss, am I to envision a duck? No. I am a man, and your lips are the closest image available. So, where am I to look? What am I to think?”

“Does it not matter that they’re my lips?”

“It certainly doesn’t hurt.” He shot her a dissecting glance, then grinned. “But I refuse to be your bait.”

Her lips puckered, and he kicked himself for not taking the prize she offered, which reminded him of the shilling in his shoe.

“Then I’ll find someone who is willing.”

She couldn’t be serious, and he couldn’t help but laugh. “You’re a goose, Evelyn.”

“If you aren’t going to help, then my name is Miss Markham.” To her credit, her expression did not waver. Her arms were tightly crossed against her chest like a dare. Unfortunately for him, the singular detail he saw was the daring cut of her gown.

“The only thing you’re liable to bring about is a ruined reputation, and your father will sign that contract before your simple baron has a chance to see the broadsheets.” He lost all humor. A dull throb pulsated in his cheek as he ground his teeth, waiting for a return of her good sense. Meanwhile, something akin to jealousy inserted itself under his skin with a raw, chafing irritation. “Might I suggest a dress that complements your eyes? The royal blue is pretty, love, but it won’t smoke out the imbeciles who will take you up on your offer.”

“You’re an idiot, Rochester.”

“Is that a challenge?”

She arched a brow.

CHAPTER 3

So, the imbecile didn't care for her dress? Wait until he saw the gown she'd purchased for the theater, a whisper of pale peach with a scalloped hem embroidered with poppies and trimmed along the neckline with spring-green leaves. She planned to get close enough for Dalton Rochester to glimpse the frippery that matched her eyes. But first, she must make certain he would be in attendance, and for that, she visited Lady Clover Dunhurst.

Lady Clover was in London for the Season with her brother, the Duke of Kingsley. Since the duke rarely went out, Lady Clover's entertainments were limited to places where no one waltzed or wandered into moonlit gardens. The theater anteroom and gallery were considered safe for mingling as long as unsuspecting young women stayed clear of visiting a gentleman's private box. Then the on-dits would report that a Miss X and a Lord Y had been witnessed in the balcony conducting themselves in a most compromising activity.

"I'm so happy you decided to join the Season," Clover said as she poured tea for them both as they sat in the quaint parlor that graced the front of the Duke of Kingsley's London home. "I've missed you and Adeline. Were you able to spend much time with your brother and sister-in-law at their new home?"

"I've made it a point to visit often enough. It's lovely there. A little manor house close enough to visit but far enough for a retreat. Father wishes they'd stayed at Rosewood Manor, but Winn wanted a place more private for Adeline's comfort. It has been a labor of love, so she says, but she appears at ease with it and happy." Seated beside Clover on a beautiful beige-striped sofa, Evelyn sipped her tea. The

parlor walls were not pretentiously decorated to flaunt wealth. They were clean and sported paintings supporting local artists. The theme of the green parlor beckoned bird lovers. She didn't know all the birds' names but easily identified a pair of peach-faced lovebirds.

"Have you managed to stay in contact with Mr. Darrington since the Christmas party we all attended at Kingsley Manor?" Evelyn dared to ask. Clover was a pretty thing with blonde hair and bright blue eyes. At the now infamous Christmas house party where Clover had played hostess, she had toyed with the idea of flirting with Hugo Darrington. But Clover was shy, as a rule, until one got to know her. And as Evelyn and Adeline found out, Clover had a knack for chess, which she amusingly played against herself.

"Since Mr. Darrington is acquainted with Kingsley, I've had some minor contact." Clover's scarlet cheeks said it all.

"Would it be too improper for you to message Mr. Darrington and inquire whether Mr. Rochester will attend the theater on Tuesday? I thought perhaps because they're friends, Darrington might be privy to his plans."

Clover regarded her with a skeptical tilt of her head. "I'm afraid Darrington and I are not that close. What are you planning? Something fun? Or something scandalous?"

"Something clever." Despite her disappointment, Evelyn smiled and mentally prepared to attend the theater with the hope of running into Rochester.

"Do you seek out company?"

Evelyn sputtered and coughed as she sucked tea into her lungs instead of her stomach. "Not exactly."

“I see. You thought by company I meant Mr. Rochester,” Clover said with a knowing smile just before it disappeared behind the rim of her teacup.

“Am I truly that obvious?”

Clover nodded.

“I would love for you to join me. I have something to prove to Rochester, and I’m hoping he’ll be there.”

“What a lovely, humble invitation. You have such a way.” Clover laughed. “I’ll have to ask Kingsley, but I imagine he won’t mind.” She sighed after that announcement.

“The duke is overprotective because he doesn’t want to see you hurt. It’s commendable, really.”

“It’s a nuisance. How will I ever meet a prospective husband if I’m only allowed to accept invitations that my brother will attend? He goes nowhere. If anyone needs protecting, it’s him. The wound of our parents’ death has been heavy on his heart for too long. In my opinion, he needs a bride.”

“And how does Kingsley feel about it?”

“Who can tell? He doesn’t discuss such personal matters, especially with me, and probably with no one, come to think on it. I believe he’s afraid for me to marry.”

“Because you’ll leave, and he’ll be alone?”

“No. Because Kingsley wants me happy, at all cost, to the point of smothering. I swear he’s worse than a broody hen.”

“Do you think he’ll approve of you attending with me? If so, I won’t need a chaperone.” Evelyn hoped so.

“He’ll insist I go, and then he’ll escort me and scare off any suitors. But how can I deny him when his heart is clearly heavy? Would you ride with us? It will be something to look forward to.”

“Sounds perfect,” Evelyn said, placing a supportive hand on Clover’s knee. With Clover’s brother as chaperone, Evelyn’s father would have no reasonable argument to send a companion with her.

For the next two nights, Evelyn barely slept, which was of no consequence since sleeping often eluded her. Yesterday her dress had arrived from the modiste, and today her heart pounded just thinking about wearing it. The delicate peach gauze looked bare next to her cream underdress, as if she wore the embroidered poppies and greenery painted on her skin.

She nervously dressed. With help, she carefully laced pearls through her hair and slipped on white silk elbow-length gloves, after which she examined herself in a mirror. Lastly, she grabbed a pearl-encrusted reticule, cinching the ties over her wrist.

“Evelyn,” her father called as she passed his study. He sat in his favorite leather chair with a brandy on the side table. His green eyes, so much like hers, had not faded with time, and she thought him handsome and a little sad. Why he never remarried, she’d never know except that he must have loved her mother very much. His salt and pepper hair had once been brown like Winn’s, and her mother’s portraits bore the same dark, dusky blonde as hers. The wood-paneled room smelled of sweet pipe tobacco. The scent soothed her.

“Papa, would you like to meet the Duke of Kingsley when Lady Clover arrives?”

“I’ve met him. I wanted to remind you to be on your best behavior.”

“When have I not?” she asked before kissing his cheek.

He smiled, something he’d been doing more frequently. She assumed it was the near betrothal he was planning. “You’ve always been full of mischief, darling. I want you to enjoy your last Season as a single woman, but I also want you to be mindful of your future responsibilities.”

“I look forward to being an auntie,” she purposely misunderstood.

“That’s the mischief I’m talking about. You know what I’m saying, and yet you pretend otherwise. I know you’re worried, but the baron is a kind man and will generously provide for you. You cannot deny me the joy of seeing you happy.”

She took care with her dress, checking the carpet for dog hair before kneeling next to her father. She leaned her cheek against his knee, her legs tucked under her. “No one is kinder than you, Papa.”

He carefully traced a finger through her hair. “Trust me, then, my precious girl.”

She looked up and smiled reassuringly, but she could not trust her father with something so important as a husband. Her needs would be met, but her heart would remain dormant.

The new Theatre Royal, built by John Nash, was glorious in its opulence. If Rochester were to follow the ton on their usual haunts, he’d surely be there tonight. Perhaps if he spied her in the Duke of Kingsley’s private box, he’d seek her out during the first intermission.

When they entered the vestibule, Evelyn’s senses reeled at the sheer indulgence.

Mirrors lined the walls, and she immediately looked for her target in the reflection.

Clover linked her arm with Evelyn's. "Now, let us find your Mr. Rochester."

"He's not mine."

"No?"

She gave Clover a look. "Did I give that impression? If so, I didn't intend it. I'm here to teach him a lesson, nothing more."

Clover bit her lip, the hint of a smile turning the corners. "I'll hold off on my opinion. Meanwhile, he's difficult to miss, especially when he's standing with Darrington."

Mr. Hugo Darrington stood almost as tall as Rochester, with brown hair a shade lighter and sea-green eyes. Both were handsome in their own right. Darrington and Rochester had followed Winn to Bath for those three years. The subject had been poorly received in her home, and to this day, Evelyn's father refused to speak of it, and Winn ignored her questions entirely. When she asked Adeline, she'd only referred her back to Winn, saying it was his story to tell. At some point in her crazy life, she swore to get the story from Rochester.

Afraid to move, Evelyn searched the mirrors for both Darrington and Rochester.

"Don't move your head, but they're behind you, maybe twenty paces. Here," Clover said, feigning a tweak to Evelyn's hair and giving her reason to tilt her head enough to catch a glimpse of Rochester's reflection.

"I see him," Evelyn whispered. Her pulse beat frantically. She nervously gulped half a glass of champagne. Between the heavy sip and the bubbles, it felt like a stone bruising its way into the clenched pit of her stomach. "Let's find our seats."

Nothing compared to the splendor of the Theatre Royal. A marvel of rich, luxurious color in rose pink and crimson velvet hues. The walls and accents were gilded, and marble pillars framed the stage arch with golden palm fronds at the peak. To dress for a ball was an excitement, and the gowns and headdresses, the superfine jackets and ornate waistcoats worn by posh theatergoers were a treasure to behold. And even in such company, Rochester stood out in his black finery and gold waistcoat.

There were those people whose clothes wore them. And then there was Rochester. In all his regalia, he was the ornament, the gilded frame, the marble pillar. Heartbreakingly gorgeous. No man had any business outshining every woman in the room.

She hardly heard a note of the musical play while she searched the balcony and even the gallery for Rochester. He had to be seated beyond her view, underneath, overhead, or to the side of the duke's box. During the first intermission, she searched through the crowded foyer but to no avail. The conversation never let up. The merriment continued during the play, and by the end of the second act, Evelyn began to wonder if he'd been an apparition.

Feeling as inconspicuous as an island, she stood in the vestibule, rubbing her thumb along her lip, her reticule swinging by the ribboned strings from her wrist.

"Are you waiting for me?" Like audible velvet, Rochester spoke from behind, turning her knees to jelly.

Evelyn stiffened as a glass of champagne appeared in front of her eyes. Her gaze narrowed in on his white shirt cuff peeking out from the edge of his black tailored jacket. The gold filigree cufflinks winked with square-cut diamonds in the center. She swallowed, pawing for composure as he rounded her side.

"I'm here with the Duke of Kingsley," she said, blurting out the first thing that came

to mind.

“And Lady Clover?”

“Naturally.”

“I wouldn’t count on Kingsley breaking any of your rules. He’s a bit of a stickler.”

“As are you, it would seem.” She hid behind a sip of champagne.

“Touché. I like your style, Miss Markham. Never neglect the chance to keep me on my toes.”

“I like your waistcoat, Mr. Rochester. It matches your cufflinks.” The conversation felt like a volley. Neither of them particularly invested in much else.

He shifted his shoulders back and lifted his chin. Little crinkles appeared at the corners of his eyes while he appreciated her gown. “And your gown? That’s more like it.”

Evelyn wanted to burst with a cynical smile the moment his gaze rested on the cut of her décolletage. “You mean this dress, Mr. Rochester? After my delicate womanly self-esteem took a rather stiff blow, I thought it best to purchase something new.”

“For me?” He put a hand to his chest with exaggerated appreciation.

“Your ego is a formidable power. But I’d just as soon you practice it on someone else. It only bores me.” She tried for indifference, but it was difficult to keep from sounding wounded.

His face changed from arrogant and cocksure to almost apologetic. “Evelyn, you

know I was not serious about the blue gown. It seemed we were making sport, a bit of banter, that's all."

Despite her determination to stay neutral and disinterested, she felt her eyes sting at his near apology. "I'm but a woman who doesn't know my own mind. Surely, I don't possess the sense to be offended by banter. My father chooses my beau, so why shouldn't another man choose my gown?"

His brow furrowed. "My sincere apologies. I truly did not intend to insult or hurt you."

She almost felt guilty. "Stop before you make me weep," she said sarcastically. "I'm sure you wrote the book on banter. I suppose I should have read it first."

He gave a sheepish smile. "Can you read, then? Astounding."

She tilted her head speculatively, then glanced at him aslant with a flirtatious smirk.

He reached out to touch the gauzy fabric of her puffed sleeve, but she stepped back. "Oh, no. We wouldn't want anyone to get the wrong idea, Mr. Rochester. I have my eye on someone who suits my needs since you have refused."

"Point him out." He called her bluff.

"I believe we established that you're not my father. You're not even my brother."

"I'd like to think I'm still your friend," he said absently, following her eyes as they swept the room.

"Only time will tell." She gave a wry smile, then lost it when a stunning woman with auburn hair approached him from behind and placed a possessive hand on his arm.

One eyebrow shifted up as he accepted the woman's company by covering her hand with his.

"Pardon me, but I believe I'm needed." Evelyn unforgivably walked away, or more likely fled, before introductions could be made to the mystery woman on his arm. In a fierce attempt to throw him off-balance, she eagerly scouted for an unsuspecting male to prey upon. She only needed the pretense of contact—something for Rochester to mull over while he lay in bed tonight. A cursory glance of the foyer turned up a man who, by chance, was looking at her. She didn't have time to scrutinize her plan, and neither did she stop to wonder how her little scheme had turned into a challenge of jealousy.

She smiled at the stranger long enough for him to stroll toward her. As he approached, she realized he stood two inches shorter than her five feet six inches. His features were not unbecoming. In fact, he was passably good-looking.

Having never met the man, he could not present himself, so she bowed her head, accepting his company without a proper introduction. This was the perfect tiny infraction of the rules. A good start.

"I'm Miss Evelyn Markham." She held out a hand.

"Uh, the honorable Mr. Victor Beasley, er Lord Beasley." He tripped over his own name. Not promising.

"How lovely to meet you, Lord Beasley. Are you here with friends?"

"No. No. I like to mingle, though. Don't you?"

"Very much." She surreptitiously glanced to the side, looking for Rochester, who stood sipping champagne with the hussy on his arm. "Are you enjoying the play,

Lord Beasley?”

“The play is delightful. And your dress is delightful.” He smiled uncomfortably, evidently plagued with shyness. “And your hair is delightful.”

That was a lot of delight. Evelyn was relieved when the call came for act three. She met Rochester’s gaze in the mirror, watching her like a hawk.

She shook her head to indicate that the stranger was not a good fit for her plan.

Rochester grinned. And the woman he obviously escorted there was no longer in sight.

He waited for her near the staircase. “Are you ready for act three?” he asked, and they both understood he did not speak of the play.

She sauntered past him and up the stairs, calling over her shoulder, “I’m ready for anything.”

CHAPTER 4

Rochester had been mulling over the problem of Evelyn since before her little stunt at the theater. He still couldn't manage his unbiddable feelings. Had he truly hurt her when he teased her about the royal-blue gown? The woman was lavishly seductive in any gown, which had become a problem since breaking the rules would eventually turn sour. No decent fellow in his right mind would turn down one of her lush smiles, especially one that came with an invitation.

"I've got a game on the hook." Rochester's cousin, Mr. Hudson Wright, announced, walking into the drawing room holding a file to his chest.

"Where and when?" Rochester reclined in a wingback chair, sipping Irish whiskey. The drawing room of his Mayfair home was just one of several rooms furnished and livable. Although the house was a work in progress, it was his house, and playing billiard tournaments and some private games helped to fund the renovations.

He'd chosen to live at his Mayfair address because living with his father on the entailed property of the viscountcy was intolerable. His younger brother, Noah, fueled by a jealousy that had lasted since boyhood, took no pleasure in the property or the house. Rochester's father also seemed to have no interest in maintaining the land, and as a result, the estate was in disarray.

If his mother had not died when he was a boy of five, perhaps his life would have been different. Perhaps his father would love him. Perhaps his brother and he would be friends. But his mother's accident and the fact that Rochester had been the first one on the scene when she fell had changed everything for them all. He didn't even

blame Noah. His brother had been so young at the time he had no memory of their mother and had been negatively influenced by their father's animosity.

His mother had died with her head on his lap. Rochester could still see her face when he closed his eyes, but her voice had been lost to him over the years. One of many losses in his life.

His father had made known that the liquid assets, whatever was left, would go to his brother, and Rochester would inherit an ill-tended entailment. As a result, he made it a mission to make his own money before being saddled with properties that had gone to waste. His father had never put the country estate to good use, and Rochester planned to hire a land steward who knew something about agriculture so that their tenants might make a decent wage.

Until then, he continued to invest with Darrington in projects and played in solicited billiard tournaments for blunt. He did fairly well on billiards alone. Who would have guessed his three-year holiday in Bath would turn into something lucrative? He'd gone there with a tarnished reputation and come home a much wiser man, not to mention a master at the table. Hudson, his cousin, managed the games, and Rochester hoped to see the sport become something more than entertainment.

Rochester offered Hud a drink. "Don't say it's tomorrow. I have an appointment with a ballroom and a dance or two if I can manage."

"The devil, you say. Since when did you start scheduling billiard matches around the Season's amusements?"

"Since now."

"It's a skirt," Hud announced, a smiling accusation behind his tone as he took the drink from Rochester.

“It’s a woman. A lady. And a favor.”

“Female favors for you? Bring her. It will be like foreplay.”

“Don’t be crass.” He scowled. “Not that kind of favor. She’s a proper lady, and I feel obligated to keep an eye on her while her family is away.”

“You’re like her governess or lady’s companion. How thrilling for you.” Hud laughed. “You’re not going to tell me who she is, are you?”

“There’s nothing to tell.” Rochester threw himself back into his chair, then pulled back the rest of his drink in one swallow.

“Hm. I look forward to meeting this mysterious, nameless woman.”

Rochester hissed a long sigh like a bull ready to charge. “I thought you said you lined up a game. So, let’s hear it.” He raised his eyebrows, resting an elbow on the arm of the chair, and cradled his head between his forefinger and thumb.

“You’re no fun at all.”

“I’ve heard. It would seem you did not invent the phrase.”

Hudson sat on the sofa and laid the file on the tea table, spreading it open, smoothing his palms across the pages. The dates, times, winnings, and losses were all meticulously recorded. His cousin made a slash through a date. “If not tomorrow night, what about the day? There’s a small match at the Dead Duck Pub. It should leave you enough time to make the precious ball. You can be fashionably late.”

When Rochester grimaced, Hud continued, “We’re sitting in the only room in the house currently available for company. There are two drawing rooms—one of which

is a ghastly mess, three parlors, and a library with high potential that needs furnishing. Then there's the little matter of bed chambers."

"Say no more. I'll be there."

"Oh, and this arrived sometime today with the post."

Rochester stretched forward, half-standing from his chair, and snatched the note from Hudson. "Be civilized, man. Use a damn napkin." He referenced the tumbler of spirits his cousin had set on the table.

Hudson made a show of licking his thumb and flipping a few pages before he wrote something in the ledger. "Rochester's birthday. Send doilies."

"Oh, you are a riot."

His cousin smiled unrepentantly, shut the ledger, and bid him a good day. "I'll leave you alone with your post."

Rochester waited for his cousin to leave the room, then turned the note over in his hands, looking for a clue. He found none, just pressed wax. He cracked the seal.

My dear Mr. Rochester,

To my great humiliation, despite the new gown, my ill-planned attempt to correct my situation was a complete failure. I need your strategic help.

You may find me at my family's townhome. I'll be sitting on a wooden bench in the back gardens where the flagstone ends. I've made arrangements for a private discussion.

Please do not ignore this summons. I promise to behave.

Your friend,

EM

EM—as if it were code and no one with half a brain could figure it out. Good God, a private discussion, indeed. Who would believe such drivel if they were seen together? It would be deemed a tête-à-tête. Foolish woman. Goose.

For precisely three seconds, he considered sending a message back, but then he feared it would encourage her reckless behavior, and she'd send more. The note alone was reckless, and he couldn't begin to imagine what she had planned for him.

Unfortunately, he did envision her waiting for him on that bench, prim and pretty, biting her thumb as he'd seen her do several times this week alone. His heart gave a little squeeze. Let her believe he'd either never received the note, or he stood her up because the cost of caring for her wellbeing would be greater than the humiliation when her father had paid his gambling debts.

He, Darrington, and Winn Markham all but ruined their reputations on a drunken whim that had cost them three years of exile to Bath. Admittedly, not a bad place, but Winn's father would have preferred they'd gone to America and possibly never returned.

At first, Bath had been amusing, like one long party. And then they'd matured, growing tired of the consistently unprincipled amusements. Besides, Winn and Darrington missed their family. Rochester was the only one who had nothing of value calling him home.

Now, he had this house—a fine project to keep him busy. Work was good for the

soul, and he'd just begun to feel like a better man when Evelyn came along. The shenanigans they shared at the infamous house party had been for fun. But this was something else, a dangerous and desperate scheme to prevent a proposal and contract of betrothal before it could happen, which made the game emotionally lethal.

Time would tell—an idiom he prayed worked better than time heals all wounds.

The following morning began with the requisite push-ups. This was particularly important to Rochester's routine, especially on game days. They weren't so much for the exercise of body as for his mind. Twenty-six, twenty-seven, and somewhere around fifty, the fog receded, and calm determination bled from his pores in little beads of sweat. The small staff he kept were privy to his obsessive habitual activity. He supposed growing up in a life of chaos had paved the way for the compulsive need for order.

On days like today, when his first meeting was a game of billiards, his valet, Mr. Jessup, had a bath prepared before Rochester woke. Sometimes, the bath cooled by the time his head cleared, but he considered even that to be part of the process. Then Jessup would lay out several waistcoats for Rochester to choose from in the dressing room.

This morning's principal fog had everything to do with Evelyn Markham in a pretty dress, a breeze picking up a tendril of golden-brown hair kissed with cream and a decidedly mischievous grin. Not to mention her eyes—as green as spring foliage with eyelashes shone golden brown in the sun. This is how he imagined she looked this morning.

When she was younger, her hair had been blonde, but time had turned it into the shade of butterscotch, a description he avoided because it only made him want to taste her.

Another dozen push-ups, and he felt more in control of his faculties. He blamed his mental folly for the tepid bath. With towel-dried hair, he donned a robe and strode to his dressing room.

“What have we here today, Jess?”

Mr. Jessup stood next to three choices, bowing over each one and explaining its finer points. “Red paisley with gold thread. Red is a distracting color, making it a fine choice.” He moved to the next. “Yellow damask, also a fine distraction. Simple but an eye-catcher. And then there is the light-green satin luxuriously embroidered with Birds of Paradise flora. But the best part among the floral deep purples and orange is the hidden Greater Bird-of-Paradise itself with a spray of yellow flank feathers in full plumage.” Despite the description, Jessup stood back without any facial expression. Part of Rochester’s ritual included picking out his clothes, which heavily depended on his mood or the mood he hoped to influence.

The green satin reminded him of Evelyn, and if he couldn’t drive her from his mind this morning, he might as well take her mentally along. “The green satin,” he said blandly.

CHAPTER 5

Evelyn had waited more than two hours in the garden, but the horrible Mr. Rochester never showed up. The question now was whether he'd done it to teach her a lesson or had she overstepped her bounds this time. She should have never written that note.

Or sent it.

But yesterday, when her father mentioned that the baron wished for an informal visit and then suggested a stroll through the park, she felt sick, and in a feverish moment of desperation, she'd penned the note to Rochester.

And he didn't come. He didn't even send a reply. Friends? Bah, humbug.

This was to be her last Season as an unmarried woman, and she found it dull without her friends. Addy, of course, had a good excuse, but Clover had been virtually absent because her brother, the Duke of Kingsley, rarely allowed her out of his sight.

Now, Evelyn stood among acquaintances at yet another ball, making small talk and hiding her dance card, wondering if one of these men was her almost betrothed. She had meant to ask her papa again for his name, but after Rochester's rejection, she'd simply forgotten.

"Mr. Dalton Rochester." The call went out, drolled in a monotone worthy of any good butler.

She barely heard the announcement over the chattering gaiety. In the same way that

one is prone to hear one's own name whispered in a hurricane, so too did she hear Rochester's proclaimed in a sea of finely dressed men and women whose conversations hummed and hissed like a constant buzzing in her ear. She tried not to look at him. She didn't want to give him the satisfaction of her continued humiliation. Perhaps she should take his advice and marry the baron. It certainly couldn't be any more humbling than this.

Turning her back to the stairs where guests entered the ballroom, and ultimately ignoring Rochester, she nodded to Lord Sullivan, who took that as an invitation for convivial dialogue, which quickly turned into a dance. Not much older than Evelyn, Lord Sullivan stood several inches taller, with fair hair and compelling blue eyes. She smiled up at him warmly and even enjoyed his attempt at banter. The young lord thought to amuse her with exaggerated stories of racing phaetons and proper gentlemen sliding in horse manure along Pall Mall. She allowed him to bring her punch when the sets were done and purposely lingered overlong in his company.

When the scuff of slippers and the tap of heels passed beyond her in a mingling frenzy, she thought nothing of it until Lord Sullivan nervously smiled, shifting his gaze between her and something just beyond her shoulder. Though she tried not to take offense, her curiosity could not be squelched. She glanced behind her to see what had stolen his attention and almost dropped her punch as she desperately tried to whip her fan into submission. She'd have given the interloper the cut if not for Lord Sullivan, who greeted Mr. Dalton Rochester with a smile and a bow.

"May I introduce Miss Markham," Sullivan said.

And just like that, Evelyn was forced to play nice with the man who had ignored her request and abandoned her in the garden.

"Miss Markham," Rochester said, coming to stand in front of her, his hands behind his back because she'd busied herself with a fan and punch, avoiding the clutches of

the proverbial feigned kiss. He raised his eyebrows like a taunt. To her detriment, she took in his height over Sullivan's and the stark difference in their appearances. Both were handsome, yes. But Rochester's devilishly dark hair, his rakish sunbathed complexion, and the sheer breadth of his shoulders were like a scream in a quiet theater. His presence echoed in her beguiled brain. Bathed in good looks and heart-palpitating proportions, she could naught but curse the heavens for his presence. She had work to do, and he was an unacceptable diversion.

"Mr. Rochester, what a pleasure to see you. I'd heard that you left the city."

He cocked his head as if he might believe her.

She took no pity on him. "Not that I keep tabs on you, but the broadsheets aren't always stuff and nonsense."

"The broadsheets have me leaving Town? How odd?"

"Isn't it?"

Lord Sullivan interjected as if she were unschooled in seasonal affairs. "I would not give the broadsheets any credit, Miss Markham."

"Alas, I am reduced to rumor since my father hardly allows me the Times," she said with a vapid air.

"Women need not bother with nasty news. I should think your father protects you against unforeseen reports that may cause a young lady undue distress," Lord Sullivan expressed with a hint of real worry for her mental health.

"We wouldn't want that. Would we, Mr. Rochester?" she asked pointedly. "We women are so easily outmatched and our esteem so fragile." She turned her gaze on

Sullivan and touched his arm. "You are a wise soul, Lord Sullivan."

"Undoubtedly," Rochester said, unblinking, his gaze riveted on her, his grin failing. "I trust you are in good hands. Good evening." He snapped his shoes together at the heels and bowed.

Her heart felt heavy when he left. Had she hurt his feelings or just his ego?

"I would champion your esteem, my lady."

Her head snapped back to the fair-haired Sullivan, and an idea took root. A little gossip might be the thing, and if Lord Sullivan proved as upright and gentlemanly as he seemed, then he might be harmless enough for a private conversation in an out-of-the-way alcove. But not too out of the way. She wanted a little scandal. Not a lot. Not enough to ruin her, but enough for the baron to hear of it and realize they would not suit. She'd consider it after another dance.

Rochester walked away, fighting the urge to throttle her or drag her from the ball and toss her in a cab. But if Evelyn was old enough to play games, then she was old enough for the consequences, his conscience be damned. The guilt he felt for leaving her with Sullivan died when he saw her sweep up the train of her lavender ball gown and waltz into the arms of the man he now dreamed of maiming.

True, he had said things he knew hurt her pride, her ego, her feelings, but he rather thought himself responsible for saving her virtue by not indulging her clear, reckless desire to destroy it. Wasn't he something of a hero for that, at least?

Lord, God. Did he want her? Yes.

Could he have her? No.

Mrs. Brummel, the matriarch of matchmaking, waylaid his clean escape by laying a hand possessively on his arm. “Mr. Rochester, I am so pleased you graced our little ball this evening.”

“I wouldn’t have missed it,” he put on his kindest charm, knowing what was coming.

“Have you met this year’s diamond of the first water? Miss Palmer has the loveliest manners. Her posture is perfection, and her dancing divine.”

Rochester half listened while he watched Evelyn accept her second dance with Sullivan. The impudent ass held her too close, and she laughed at something he said. Thankfully, this was their second and last dance. It would be unseemly to accept another. Although, he wouldn’t be surprised if she tried. The infraction wouldn’t destroy a reputation, but the room had eyes, those ready to feed the gossip sheets and the rest of London with their drivel. Even a minor indiscretion could be blown into a full Season of mindless gab and garbage.

Ruthless scandalmongers, and those looking for a quick shilling, greedily collected information they might sell. Diamonds of the first water were especially targeted for this. Rochester always thought them overrated. Those girls elevated to such a pampering pinnacle were either prey for rakehells or fodder for a column in *The Female Tatler*.

In Rochester’s opinion, women with several Seasons behind them were more interesting and made for better company. But perhaps that had something to do with the pebble in his shoe.

“Mr. Rochester, it is a waltz, and you’re not dancing. Such a shame.” Mrs. Brummel pouted.

“And who did you have in mind?” he asked conspiratorially, giving Mrs. Brummel an

attentive pat on the hand that still rested on his arm as if she'd claimed his evening for him.

"I believe Miss Palmer has an opening for the next reel."

"I'd be delighted," he answered, glancing over Mrs. Brummel's head to watch Evelyn and Sullivan whirl about the floor. The man's hands on her waist made him clamp his jaw. He held her too close, and when Evelyn looked away, a laugh on her lips, Sullivan took the brief opportunity to visually feed on her charms.

He really couldn't fault Sullivan, but neither could he fault the overwhelming desire to grab the man by his collar and cuff him a half-moon.

He didn't stop to wonder if it was jealousy.

Mrs. Brummel introduced Rochester to Miss Palmer as the polished marble floor cleared in her wake. The Season's brightest hope, it would seem. He smiled, bowed, and poured on an extra measure of charm. As the sets formed, he kept an eye on Miss Markham, who foolishly accepted another dance from Sullivan. When their gazes collided, he mouthed, "Three." Then backed it up with a swift smile for the delicate, fragile debutante to his left. He gave a fashionable tug of his waistcoat and bowed as the music swept through the little group.

Without difficulty, he cultivated the steps he'd done so many times that he needn't think about them anymore.

"You're on shaky ground," he hissed through a smile when he and Evelyn crossed paths.

She gave him a jaunty lift of her brows.

“Three,” he said again at their subsequent frolicking encounter.

She returned a smile, a well-practiced illusion of warmth that failed to reach her eyes.

Evelyn challenged his typically easygoing personality as he fought back a scowl for the sake of his partner. He could see in Miss Palmer’s mildly terrified gaze that she counted the steps. Rochester reassured the poor girl, “Your steps are lovely.” Miss Palmer blushed.

When the reel ended, Rochester pondered why Evelyn’s actions agitated him beyond reason. It wasn’t like him to act surly, picking away at a woman’s esteem. He was better known for leaving women highly satisfied and not just in bed. He was a gentleman. The kind that appreciated women with his words, his actions, his general respect. But when it came to Evelyn, he seemed to have lost all his charm, his good sense, and his place at the table.

He considered whether the society of wallflowers would accept his application. For the first time in his adult life, he felt outgunned by every other male in the room. And just like that, Sullivan took his shot. Rochester intensely followed his progress, watching the dullard lead Evelyn into an out-of-the-way alcove. As long as the curtain remained open, he’d hold his place while his sustained gaze held sentry, and he itched for an excuse to interrupt the dangerous game she played.

When he saw Sullivan hovering near the arch, Rochester couldn’t take the game another minute. If the woman wanted a scandal, then he’d just as soon it be with him. When Rochester reached the arched nook, he grasped the tassel holding back one burgundy velvet paneled drape, flipping the gold silk fringe easily from the jaws of a gilded lion. The panel fell, covering half the entry, and he checked his movements.

“What have we here, Sullivan?” An undercurrent of menace radiated from the words if not his tone. “Miss Markham, are you in need of rescuing?”

“How dare you,” Sullivan accused. “Miss Markham is in the best of hands and was quite winded.”

“Keep your voice down, Lord Sullivan. Or do you employ the raving journalists of The Female Tatler ?”

“Now, see here.”

“Mr. Sullivan,” Evelyn interrupted. “Mr. Rochester’s intentions are good. He and my brother are close friends, and he’s practically a guardian, like a brother to me. I had not anticipated a third dance. What a ninny I am to forget we’d already danced the requisite.” Her eyes were innocently wide, and her hand pressed to her chest. “You understand that I’m not blaming you. It’s me. Women naturally aren’t encouraged to study mathematics. One plus one and all that.”

Sullivan audibly swallowed with an apologetic wrinkle of his brow. Rochester could feel his cheek twitch irritably and watched as a nervous Lord Sullivan shifted his body weight, leaning toward an escape.

“I look forward to our next engagement, Miss Markham.” Sullivan bowed, then turned on his heel, swatting the curtain, in danger of tangling himself into a scandal or, worse, a duel. Rochester was that mad. After the other man left, Rochester took a moment to quell his anxiety-ridden frustration, repeatedly rolling his fingers into a fist to calm his stammering breath.

The alcove, a cozy little den, sported a red brocade chaise, a small bookcase and was outfitted with a table for drinks, which he was happy to see held none. It shouted: come have a smoke and a dalliance. Evelyn stood with the chaise between them, stroking the mahogany curve of the backrest with a light touch and trying to look brave.

“You’re a fool, an absolute fool.”

“And I thought I was a goose.”

“You’re a bloody pebble in my shoe, is what you are. Do you have any idea what you could have done here tonight?”

“You’re here. I suppose it can still be done, except scandal with the infamous Mr. Dalton Rochester would certainly make the papers. Shall we give it a go?” she said caustically.

“Shall we give it a...” He shook his head to clear it, placing his hands on his hips. “Seriously, Evelyn, are you trying to kill me?”

Both her brows rose. Her mouth curved into a stifled grin. “Kill you? You’re so dramatic. Half the curtain is open. And might I add that you are the one who did that?”

“Only because I didn’t want anyone to see me throttle you.”

“So, you are my father, after all. Sly devil.”

“I am not joking.”

“Nor am I. You want to dress me because I apparently know nothing about fashion, and then you ignore my desperate plea for help. And now? What? You’re here to pounce on my beau?”

“Sullivan’s not your beau, and you knew exactly what you did when you accepted that third dance.”

“And there you were dancing with Miss Palmer after sporting your mistress about at the theater. Tsk tsk .”

“Lovie?” Lord, this woman baffled him.

“Oh, you already have a pet name for her, do you? How sweet.”

For an instant, he stood there frozen in place, staring at her, bewildered, and then broke into a grin. “Lovie is my cousin.”

“What a convenient ruse you play.”

“Excuse me? You’re bothered because you think I have a mistress?”

“I’m bothered because you keep dashing my best-laid plans.”

“If those are the best, I hate to see the worst.” He strolled to the other side of the chaise. She turned away from him but didn’t move, drumming her long, tapered fingers on the lounge’s rich fabric.

One small step, and he stood at her back, close enough to smell the lavender in her hair. With his mouth close to her ear, she flinched. “Is it a scandal you want? Or do you truly wish to discourage a marriage proposal?” Without stopping to think, he pressed a kiss on her nape. She sucked in a shaky breath, her body stiffened, and she clutched the chaise.

He had never kissed her. He’d never tried, not that he hadn’t thought about it since that house party when he saved her from midnight mistletoe madness. They’d played draughts instead, and he fulfilled his promise as a friend to Winn, keeping an eye on her. She had kept his hands full then, and now he only wished to fill his hands with her. He rubbed his nose against her smooth neck, breathing her in, and snuck an arm

around her waist. He pulled her back against him and opened his mouth over her nape once more, tasting and sucking just before he let her go. Gooseflesh popped up over her exposed skin. He knew this was trouble for them both.

“Go home, Evelyn. And stay there. Do not make a decision that will affect your life before you meet this man.”

She pivoted. “What’s wrong with me, Rochester, that you should humiliate me at every turn? You cannot know what it is to have every decision made for you, for your life to be in someone else’s hands.”

“You’re wrong. My entire life was planned for me the moment I was conceived.”

“But you’ve been places. You go on holiday. You misbehave, and no one cares. In fact, they applaud you, drink with you, and celebrate with cigars over your foibles.”

“That perception is from a distance and not reality.”

“My reality is to marry a man I’ve never even met and then let him bed me without a protest.”

He closed his eyes, rubbing his forehead, trying to drown out the image. “It doesn’t have to be that way.”

“No, it doesn’t.” She pinned him with a dissecting stare as if she were slicing through his defenses.

He gazed at her mouth.

“Isn’t that interesting? You’re looking at my lips, and this time I didn’t even mention the word mouth, or was the word kiss?”

Oh, he most certainly wanted to kiss the smug smile from her soft lips. He wanted to teach her a lesson about playing with fire. But he knew it would cost him sleepless nights. His pulse already answered the call, as if he'd made it. Standing this close and virtually alone could not happen again. He would not allow it.

CHAPTER 6

Rochester knew that Clover Dunhurst and Evelyn were good friends, so when the Duke of Kingsley invited him for a billiards match with a few chums, he almost turned it down. At first thought, he couldn't imagine Evelyn showing up or Kingsley allowing his sister, Lady Clover, to invite her friends as spectators. But then, it was Evelyn Markham he was thinking of, and the woman would dare anything. She'd created a hurricane and set herself on a mission to hurl him into its catastrophic gusts. A force to be reckoned with. He half expected to find himself in the storm's eye, fooled by the deceiving calm, the smell of her hair, and the taste of her neck on his lips. Damn, had that been a mistake? Yes.

He hissed a sigh, looking at the dark reflection in his coffee cup. His eyes shone like a specter in the deep, rich, seemingly bottomless cup of brewed beans. He needed the jolt because, like most nights, he hadn't slept well. Not since his mother died had he felt safe closing his eyes at night, and drinking himself to sleep only made his nightmares more shockingly vivid. He never asked God or the universe why his mother died in his arms. He only knew he felt guilty for it. A child's mind could not contain the grief or the blame his father put on him. As an adult, reason told him how unfair it had been that his father should practically disown him, not to mention his brother, who had fallen in with his father's thinking. And why shouldn't he? Noah was only three years old when it happened. He had no memory of their mother at all. And no nightmares either, Rochester imagined.

He pushed away his breakfast plate, having picked through maybe two bites of buttered eggs, and settled for the coffee.

“My lord, a message just came for you.” The butler brought the correspondence on a small silver tray.

Rochester picked it up and held the rectangle to his brow like a salute. His house was not yet done up properly, and it just seemed silly to adhere to such convention. Although, he would admit that the small staff knew him well enough to understand his idiosyncrasies. He was a creature of habit.

Recognizing the wax seal, he sighed and broke it. He unfolded the paper and then flicked it with his wrist, throwing his right leg over his knee and settling back in his chair, the brass finials bumping his head. He rubbed his neck and read.

Dear Mr. Rochester,

No longer, my dear Mr. Rochester, apparently.

It is no secret that we share acquaintances, and no surprise that we should attend the same affairs. I do not take offense at your appearance yesterday but wish to warn you of an event that lies ahead.

Please be discreet when visiting with my precious friend, Lady Clover Dunhurst’s brother, whom you may know as the Duke of Kingsley. It has come to my attention that a game of billiards is to be hosted by the duke this evening, and I cannot imagine you will not be there. Of course, unless my presence frightens you away. I should understand if you make other plans accordingly.

I wouldn’t like for the duke to know of our arrangement. Discretion is the better part of valor. If, for some reason, you misinterpret my behavior again, do not hesitate to walk away. I do not require your attendance nor interjection in my affairs.

Please adjust your opinions suitably.

If you find yourself fretting over this inappropriate correspondence, you may visit your principles upon me in private.

Regards,

Miss Markham

“I suppose I deserved that, Goose,” Rochester murmured to the empty room. He refolded the missive. One couldn’t call it a note. Between the first plea and this one, he’d been demoted to plain Mr. Rochester and she to Miss Markham. The real question was: Did she hope he refused the invitation, or was this a game?

The Duke of Kingsley owned a magnificent estate in Mayfair, larger than Rochester’s and better equipped. He and Darrington spent a good deal of time interacting with men of influence and business, and Kingsley was both. While they wouldn’t be discussing politics or investment opportunities that evening, competitive gaming bonded men in a way that conversation could not.

“Rochester, I hope you find our table to your liking,” the Duke of Kingsley said with a friendly, unaffected smile. In a crowd, the duke was a bit aloof, but in the nonthreatening atmosphere of his own home, he appeared more relaxed, which in turn put Rochester at ease.

“It’s a bit of a hobby, I admit. An obsessive one, perhaps,” Rochester said, accepting a tumbler of what smelled like Irish whiskey, a comfortably familiar sting of malt and vanilla. He took a sip. “Could it be that we know the same whiskey vendor?”

“Strong’s club?”

With a sound of tasty appreciation, Rochester gave a salute.

“Since our first meeting, I’ve heard a great deal about your success at the table. I appreciate you accepting the invitation, and I’ve little doubt we have other interests to keep us besides billiards.”

“I look forward to finding them.”

As if that were the primer for the evening, two other well-known men of business arrived: Silas Torrent, a prominent landowner in West Sussex, and Viscount Bastion. Both men were an integral part of the Belgrave development, which Rochester and Darrington had been trying to break into for the past three years. This casual gathering proved that Kingsley saw Rochester as a potential partner. Or, he was simply the evening’s entertainment, but to believe that would be to say Kingsley was not a man of honor, and Rochester knew that he was.

The billiard table was a brilliant mastery of artistic design. Curved legs stood on lion’s paws for feet, and the walnut edge, just below the felt, was carved with scrolling acanthus leaves flat without any pointed tips to jar the shooter. Rochester examined the cue sticks, having left his at home in lieu of a friendly game. The four men drew lots for teams, and Rochester partnered with Mr. Torrent.

“Now that Rochester and I have been teamed together, I say we wager,” Torrent said as he picked a stick, making a jesting mockery of skeptically examining it for warping.

“Nicely done,” Kingsley said. “Of course, you’d wait until you had a sure thing. That is your way, Torrent.”

“Blast it all, Kingsley, you’ve bled me freely. Let an old chum take advantage. Luck of the draw and all.”

Rochester licked his lips and enjoyed the attention while he took in the smell of wood

polish and relaxed against the dark, paneled wall. Kingsley was tall enough to be foreboding with dark-brown eyes that agreed with the usual intimidating countenance, but it was softened by the streaks of gold in his light-brown hair. Either way, he could come at an opponent with good humor or daunting darkness. Rochester preferred good humor.

Lord Bastion added, “And it would seem we’ve been brought to the point of establishing ourselves worthy, Kingsley. Do you think they’ll lay us low?”

“Not a chance. I’ve been practicing in anticipation of putting one over on Rochester, here.”

“Then money it is,” Rochester said, palming a white ball from the gold baize, then circling the table. “We’ll play for first blood.” Rounding to the head of the billiard table, he placed the cue ball, centering it between the sides, and then sighted down the cue stick. With a smirk, he leaned over the table, the stick belted by finger and thumb, and said, “Let mercy have no place between men.” The object of the shot was to strike the cue ball, sending it as close to the farthest edge without touching, at which point the men would try their shot, and the winner would set the scoring.

Rochester rooted for a game of twenty-one points, usually played in vividly brilliant daylight. Although it was evening, the table was well-lit with oil lanterns suspended over the top. The odds were in his favor since he’d learned to shoot accurately in shine or shadow. For the first match, though, he decided on a quick twelve-point game.

“I say we set the foul at two points instead of three.” Rochester shrugged. “To make the odds even.”

“Well, gentlemen,” Bastion said. “Let it begin.” He threw down a five-pound note.

Leaning against his cue stick, Rochester grinned heartily. His first shot might have scored him ten points, but he played slowly, allowing some measure of handicap for the sake of the game. It wasn't a match. Tonight, the money was for fun; there would be no fancy shots with a mountain of notes fluttering onto the table. Rochester planned to enjoy himself.

With the last two points well within reach, Rochester took another drink and leaned a negligent shoulder against the wall. Torrent had it. He'd proved to be a worthy partner, and although Kingsley's game had room for improvement, he showed promise.

Above the quiet that had fallen for Torrent's last shot, there was a scratch at the jib door. The shuffling sound drew his attention, but just before he looked away, in waltzed Lady Clover, followed by Miss Markham. Lady Clover held a finger to her lips for quiet, and Miss Markham nodded excitedly, practically tiptoeing behind her friend. Or hiding there, Rochester couldn't be certain.

Kingsley, surprisingly, waved them in. "Excuse me, Torrent. My sister Lady Clover and her friend Miss Markham had asked for a peek. Do you mind?"

Rochester willed Evelyn to look at him, but she avoided him with all manner of silent communication, like shying away with a turn of her head.

Torrent straightened. "Please, ladies, it's our pleasure, I'm sure." He gave a little bow, as well as Bastian, and of course, Rochester followed.

Still, she did not glance his way, but she did ask, "Mr. Torrent?" With a finger to her sensual lips, her eyes alight with what Rochester could only surmise as feigned interest for the sake of what? Her rule-breaking game?

Or was it for him? From the moment she'd made that blasted wager fifteen months

ago, he'd been second-guessing himself. He consciously found the shilling in his shoe. The one she'd slipped brazenly into his pocket. The one he never returned.

She continued, "What do you hope with this shot? Does it have a name?"

Torrent looked completely pleased, puffing out his chest and holding his chin high. "Firstly, I hope to win the game for Rochester and myself."

"Oh, you're partners, then?"

Torrent nodded. "Yes. And the shot is a losing hazard."

"Losing?" Miss Markham exclaimed. "What's to gain from losing?"

Lady Clover interjected, "It's part of the scoring. If he hits that white ball and bumps into another before... Hm, potting?"

Kingsley nodded, his arms crossed.

"Potting it," Clover continued. "He'll score two points. Or whatever the gentlemen decided at the start."

"In this case, by me." Rochester pointed a finger over his crossed arm to his chest.

Evelyn had to look at him for that. He tilted his head regarding her with a flicker of admiration.

Without taking her eyes from Rochester, she asked Torrent, "And will you make it?"

"I plan on making a good go of it, Miss Markham. A good game is one of challenge and unpredictability. Thus, the hazard. It can go either way. A winning hazard and a

losing hazard. These are simply shot terms.” Torrent patiently explained and looked to enjoy every second of it, and Rochester couldn’t blame the man. Evelyn could be very engaging. At the moment, she watched Torrent with her lips parted in perfect awe. The expression so authentic Rochester hadn’t a clue whether she contrived it or not.

“But, Mr. Rochester, I’ve yet to see you miss a shot. Not that I’ve been privy to many games, mind you. Is it still a game when your talent for the sport is so tried and true?” She quickly put her fingers to her mouth. “I apologize, gentlemen. I didn’t mean to intrude. Please, Mr. Torrent, continue, and I shall be the perfect spectator.” With her finger and thumb pinched together, she ran them over her sealed mouth in a mesmerizing gesture of silence.

Rochester’s pulse was anything but silent. It roared in his ears. He scratched his brow. “Miss Markham, your faith in me is noted, but I assure you we all miss our mark on occasion.”

Kingsley stood stiff-necked during the conversation, but his gaze volleyed between the players, his chin resting on his knuckle. “Ladies, this is why teams are chosen to make the odds as even as possible.” He gave a speaking look to his sister, Lady Clover, who then took the hand at Miss Markham’s side.

Evelyn lowered her lashes, then shot Rochester a glance through the feminine, golden-brown fans.

Torrent cleared his throat; his mouth pulled into a measured line as if his concentration had been challenged. The man looked at the table with intensity and took a focused breath, almost making Rochester feel sorry for him. But a good player learns to play smartly through all manner of distractions. Even with a most distractingly beautiful woman in the room.

Torrent leaned over the table, lining up the shot, then stood and stepped back for another look. He balanced the cue stick on the floor and held the upper end in the crook of his elbow while he pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his hands, then repeated the process of lining up the shot once again. With a squint of his eye, Torrent leaned in and miraculously, despite the interruptions, made it. After the white cue ball clacked into the red one, the cue sank, two points were awarded, and the game won.

From the opposite side of the table, Rochester heard the fluttering rhythm of a woman clapping, surprised to find it was Lady Clover.

“Bravo, Mr. Torrent.” Clover then turned to the duke. “Kingsley, can you beat that?”

The duke actually smiled at his sister’s outburst. “Gentlemen, I give you my sister, who has trounced me at this table several times. What she does not know is that I allowed it.” Kingsley grinned a definitive sibling gesture.

“Is that often done?” Miss Markham asked with all eager innocence. “Do you mean to say you miss shots on purpose?”

“Only for the fairer sex, Miss Markham. And for sisters.” Kingsley winked at Lady Clover.

“How fascinating. I suppose we women offer inadequate competition for honing the skill. What do you think, Mr. Rochester? Do you know any women who play the game better than you do?”

Her presence charged the atmosphere. The others found the addition of ladies charming, but Evelyn did more than challenge the game; she challenged his ability to play in the undertow at serious risk of peril. He felt himself already drowning with no lifeboat in sight.

“I believe it possible that I’ve met only one.”

“Who?” This question came from Lord Bastian.

“My cousin,” he answered without taking his eyes from Miss Markham, his mouth crawling into a lazy grin.

One honey eyebrow lifted, and she folded her arms. “Perhaps it’s because I don’t play.”

“Well, I do,” Clover said. “And I’d be happy to teach you sometime.”

Miss Markham licked her lips. “I’d love that,” she said, staring at Rochester, then turned a smiling gaze on her friend before they quit the room.

CHAPTER 7

Evelyn had a grand time watching and learning more about the sport that Rochester played daily. She thought about the competitive diversion of words they played every time they were in the same room. And she considered the rule-breaking game she'd asked him to play almost a week ago.

But no matter how hard she deliberated over the wisdom of her actions or the reasons for his, she still could not vanquish the feeling of his mouth on her neck. The moment his breath grazed her skin, she was lost. And when he kissed her, she wanted to die, to lean into him and turn around in his arms so he could kiss her true. He wanted her. She felt it. But since the night at the theater, the vision of this Lovie on his arm haunted her.

Was she too close to the problem, or was it jealousy? And who names a woman Lovie? Rochester might look to keep her at arm's length, but the game he played with his eyes and his mouth kept her guessing. She hadn't asked for that kiss. Certainly, she'd tried to enlist his help, but kissing her was not a game. So why, then, didn't he fix this? She could understand if he wasn't ready for marriage, a wife, children, and all the responsibility that brings. Truth to tell, she wasn't so sure about it herself. But he would inherit a title that demanded an heir. The man would have to marry sometime, and he wanted her. Her. Perhaps he thought he could do better. She was not so delusional to believe he loved her.

Mayhap, this Lovie was indeed his mistress, and he didn't wish to give her up. The thought put her stomach in a sickly knot. And he'd said the woman was his cousin. Bah.

Yesterday's failure was tomorrow's fuel.

Evelyn hopped out of bed, inked a quill, and wrote.

The Honorable Dalton Rochester,

Please come quickly. I have found myself in a most awkward position.

Lady Clover and I had planned a night at Vauxhall where the duke had agreed to champion us, but alas, he has other plans, and neither of us care to miss out on the festivities. If this should be my last Season as a single woman, I'd like a taste of everything.

I expect Sullivan to be there and anticipate a rescue at dusk in the Pleasure Gardens. One tiny scandal should do it, don't you think?

Do not delay.

Respectfully,

Miss Evelyn Markham

Since he had failed to answer any of her correspondence, she did not expect him to answer this one. But he did seem to show up in all the right places at just the right time.

By dusk, the Pleasure Gardens were lit. Some paths were darker than others, and Evelyn knew the risks of fading into any of them. She and Clover braced themselves for fireworks, and Evelyn's father, who had agreed to act as escort, took a seat and bid them be careful while they enjoyed a night out. He allowed them a tiny escape to visit the acrobats and stroll the Grand Walk. But they were expressly forbidden to

converse intimately with any man without an ample crowd of friends, and they mustn't enter the dark serpentine paths.

Evelyn soon realized why when she met the man whom she'd spoken with at the theater a week ago. The one who'd fumbled through his name.

"Mr. Beasley."

The gentleman bowed over her hand and grappled through an introduction to Clover. Unfortunately, the bungle wasn't quite so incomplete as at the theater when Mr. Beasley became Lord Cumberland, as in Baron Cumberland. The one Evelyn referred to as the simpering baron.

"I apologize, Miss Markham. I seem to have found myself in the devil's own scrape, haven't I? I've newly inherited and flailed about between exclamations of my presumptive name and the title."

"Mister and honorable are a far cry from lord. But understandable, Lord Cumberland. No harm done, I'm sure."

"You are the kindest of souls. Your father has spoken so well of you that I almost feel I know you."

"My father?" She felt disoriented, and an awful realization hit her. "How long ago did you speak with my father?"

"Well, if you'll excuse me, Lady Clover," he addressed Evelyn's friend, then turned his adoring gaze on Evelyn. "I've requested the... the time for us to get to know each other."

"Courting?" Clover burst out.

Evelyn bit her tongue to keep from groaning out loud.

“That is my hope.”

“Excuse me, Lord Cumberland, I’m feeling faint.”

“Yes, let’s find a seat.”

“No.” Evelyn put a hand on Clover’s arm. “Lady Clover has promised to take me home. I fear I’ve not been at my best all day.”

Clover nodded, her bright blue eyes wide circles. “Yes. We had a rather large piece of cheesecake and rum pudding.”

Evelyn would have pierced Clover with a speaking look for that comment but for her desire to depart immediately.

“I anticipate, with great pleasure, our meeting at Rosewood Manor next week.”

Rosewood Manor? Her family’s country seat? This did not bode well at all. Evelyn’s throat convulsed, and she wobbled a sickly smile, making the idea of fainting appear more real than she’d meant.

“Clover,” she said when they were out of earshot. “You must tell my father that I’m spending the evening with you at your home. That your brother has come to retrieve us.”

“I can’t. How should I explain that?”

“We sent Kingsley a note”—she looked wildly about— “because we wished to spend more time together since Adeline is in her confinement.” She searched the outermost

dark shadow of trees with her eyes, almost hoping to see Rochester there. “We’ll hail a cab. My father wants to keep me happy for this ridiculous betrothal.”

“What betrothal?”

“I’ll tell you later. Just do this for me, please.”

She nodded. Between the three women—Adeline, Evelyn, and Clover—Clover looked the most innocent but was perhaps the most keenly aware and wily. She could lie her way out of a flour sack in a wheat field. On more than one occasion, her innocent blue eyes had been the door to mischief when they were girls.

“Thank you,” Evelyn breathed.

Rochester rolled his eyes when he found another note had been delivered earlier in the day. After returning from a meeting with Darrington concerning Torrent and Bastian, they’d gone out for a drink and to watch a fight at Strong’s Club. It was well past dusk, and a part of him thought she deserved whatever trouble she made. But his heart could not allow her to make a mistake so significant that it would change her life, her very character. He knew how that felt.

He threw on his coat, grabbed his hat, and left for Vauxhall.

In between smiling kindly at passersby and avoiding lengthy conversations with the slightest acquaintance, he searched for Kingsley. He could not imagine the duke would allow his sister, Lady Clover, out of his sight. His height would make him easier to see, but the greatest giveaway would be the crowds and young ladies looking for his favor. Eligible dukes were always in vogue.

But her note must have been correct because he did not see Kingsley, Evelyn, or Lady Clover. Of all the persons to catch his eye, it was Evelyn’s father he almost fell

upon, literally. He walked the aisle of the little theater where a mediocre orchestra made a hash of Mozart and clipped his leg on the back of a bench.

“Excuse me, sir,” Rochester said before his brain registered the older gentleman seated alone.

“Mr. Rochester,” Evelyn’s father said, looking up in a moment of surprise right before he settled into a bland expression of little consequence.

“Mr. Markham, a pleasure seeing you here.”

Markham stood and met Rochester at eye level. His greeting came off a bit gruff, mayhap a little put out, but otherwise friendly. “You like Mozart, Mr. Rochester?”

“As a rule, but not perhaps this,” he said, smiling comfortably, doing his best to instill a measure of cordiality.

“It’s not good, is it?”

Rochester caught a whiff of toffee and craned his head over the crowd as if the very stuff reminded him of Evelyn. “Are you here alone, sir?” he asked, distracted with his search.

“Oh, I wasn’t. My daughter and her friend, the sister of the Duke of Kingsley, had been here for a while, but they’re gone now. Back to the duke’s address for a bit of girlish mischief, I imagine.”

Rochester swallowed. Oh, if her father only knew. “Yes, Lady Clover, I believe. Have you heard from Winn and Mrs. Markham? And how are they?” Small talk couldn’t be further from his mind, but he must maintain a normal veneer.

“Oh, quite well. I don’t imagine you’ve had time to visit them while they are living so far from the city. You and Mr. Darrington will be on your own from now on.” And there it was. The cold goodbye, with a brush of propriety for civility. It had been clear for a while that Winn’s father did not care for Rochester to remain friends with his family. It was true that Rochester had all but dragged Winn down, and no doubt Mr. Markham wouldn’t abide him anywhere near Evelyn. What a damn inconvenience to run into the man, but at least now he knew of her whereabouts. Or did he?

Evelyn tempted fate by a fine line. Whispers and unconfirmed rumors were one thing, but scandal had the power to ruin her. As for the two of them, a complicated relationship it may be, and one he could not clearly define, but she’d called him a friend, and he’d called her a goose. And he couldn’t deny he cared for her.

At least now, he knew her father still held him in contempt. No use wasting time working that angle. It’s not that Rochester refused to help her with her convoluted plan. It was his apprehension and fear of getting entangled and caught—knowing her father would never agree. If he were to act on his feelings, Evelyn would be hurt beyond reason. Whether he could sit by and watch her marry another man was something he couldn’t afford to dwell on.

He had a mind to pay a call at Kingsley’s no matter the hour to make certain the goose was there. But from what he knew of the three women, Evelyn, Adeline, and Clover, the most sensible, quiet, cautious, and maybe honest one was Clover. If Clover had accompanied Evelyn as per Mr. Markham’s words, then it was likely that both of them were currently at Kingsley’s.

That’s what he told himself thirty minutes ago, so why was he now standing on Kingsley’s doorstep?

Because he refused to rest until he saw her with his own eyes.

He handed his calling card to the butler and hoped he hadn't been too presumptuous. After a short wait, he was shown to the drawing room.

"Rochester," Kingsley stood. "What brings you at this hour? Looking for a game? Or just bored?"

Rochester breathed a little sigh of relief that the duke sounded almost glad he'd dropped by unannounced. "Or perhaps I'm simply rude. I apologize for the hour, Your Grace." He faltered for a moment.

"It's not that late. And please, it's Kingsley. I hope we've come to at least that much."

"I'd like to think so."

"A drink?"

"No, thank you. The truth is that I've been tasked to keep an eye on Winn Markham's sister, and I've failed to meet that obligation and hoped she might be here. Markham and I are close. If you recall the masquerade at your home two Christmastides past, I had helped Markham then as well."

"Of course. And you're still on the hook?"

"In a way, yes. I happened upon her father at Vauxhall, and he suggested they were here. Since I hadn't seen her there, I was hoping to make..." His words fell away, knowing how absurd they sounded, and Kingsley simply watched him, a bewildered expression knitting his forehead.

The duke held up a hand. "You needn't say more. They're here. I wouldn't like to call them to task, though."

“No, please don’t do that. Miss Markham would not take kindly to what she refers to as hen sitting .”

Kingsley chuckled at Rochester’s description. “Would you like a game while you’re here? I don’t think you’re in a position to say no.”

After Rochester stepped off the ledge, he was more than happy to trounce Kingsley in a game or two of billiards. He didn’t, however, look for Evelyn. If she discovered that he had implied he was her caretaker, it would not bode well for him, and his life wouldn’t be worth a shilling.

Not even the one in his boot.

CHAPTER 8

After Lord Cumberland revealed their meeting at the theater, Evelyn's father had thought it a grand idea if they spent a few days of peace in the country with no other intrusions. Evelyn had begged her father to leave it be, but his head was so wrapped around the idea that she'd had no argument against it, except that her brother and her close friend were about to bring a babe into the world, and if she could convince her father to allow her a visit with Winn and Adeline, she might put the baron off for a week.

She'd gone on ahead to Rosewood Manor, having hurriedly despatched one last note to Rochester before leaving London. He had to come. She had to believe he would. This was an emergency. And whereas she'd sent letters full of sarcasm and banter, with a serving of nonsense, this one, she only had time for one word.

Rochester,

HELP

And that was as complete a cry as she could give. She didn't bother signing it because if he didn't know by now who sent it, then he never would.

That had been two days ago. Clearly, once again, Rochester was not coming. With her father scheduled to arrive at Rosewood in the morning, she was gripped with desperation, anxiety, and overwhelming distress. This time, she composed a note for her father.

Papa,

I apologize for writing and not waiting for your return, but I was in haste to see my best friend and dearest sister-in-law before she becomes a mother. I know you understand my desire for this, and I will return in a week.

Your loving daughter,

Evelyn

She knew it wasn't fair to use the circumstances of her own birth to convince her father to accept this trip, but she felt there was no other way. At Evelyn's birth, her mother had been lost, and she was certain her father would understand the need to see Adeline before the babe was born. He would forgive her for this trip because of his love. She planned to use the week to come up with a solution.

However, she also knew that the housekeeper and the steward would not allow her to leave in the dead of night, so she chose a more reckless solution, like climbing out of her window and bribing the night stableboy to hitch a horse to the phaeton.

As soon as the night maid left, she slipped on a dress that needed little fastening, pulled on her shoes, and headed out the window. She did not bring a cloak or wrap because the climb to the bottom was hazardous enough without added clothing, including petticoats.

Burying her inner voice from distracting her with anything as outrageous as common sense, she shakily swung a leg over the windowsill. With her skirt bunched and hiked above her knees, she found the trellis with her other foot and then foolishly released her grip with one hand to press her skirt back down.

"What the bloody hell are you doing?" came a forced whisper. Just beneath her stood

Rochester.

She peeked under her arm to see him standing there, his feet braced apart and his hands on his lean hips, his coat pushed aside like a pirate. She felt dizzy. "I should think it obvious."

"Don't you dare take another step, Evelyn Markham. I swear to God, if you fall and die, I'll never speak to you again."

Why should she start listening now when he'd failed her at every turn? Instead, she continued her tentative fall from grace. No doubt the man could see the garters on her stockings. She tried to concentrate on her leverage. Breathing heavily and shivering with anxiety made it difficult to maneuver the lattice, not to mention her serious doubts about its ability to support her weight. The slats were too thin, and ivy pricked her fingers, but she was committed now. There was no stopping, no matter how many times Rochester ordered her back to her room.

She inched her way, one frightening foothold at a time, until she heard the first crackle like a twig and then a sharp snap.

"Rochester!" she yelped, her hands scraping the brick facade for purchase, grappling with the broken evidence of her ill-conceived plan. And then she was falling, her stomach lodged in her throat. She half expected to break a leg or to dreadfully injure herself. But then arms like steel crushed her. She heard a mighty groan as her body jolted to a hard stop against Rochester's chest, and then she bumped her chin on his head as he dropped to the ground on his backside. She anticipated him railing and yelling, but instead, he cradled her head in his arms and combed his fingers through her hair. He rocked forward, sitting on the ground in a pile of her skirts, and she felt his heart hammering against her chest as if he'd been as frightened as she.

Her rapid breathing made her feel faint, and tears burned her eyes. With her cheek

lying against his shoulder, she wrapped her arms around his waist and gave in to the comfort he offered. The scent of him was like peace and assurance enveloping her.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t know what else to do. You haven’t answered one note, so I didn’t expect you to answer this one. I was so scared.” She didn’t mean to sound desperate, but she couldn’t help it.

“Well, you managed to scare the hell out of me, Goose. And though you may have failed to notice, I have shown up for your every concern, just not in the way you hoped.”

“Except for today.” She tilted her head back to gaze at him. “What took you so long?”

“I was fighting with my conscience, and I never imagined you’d do something as outrageous as this. Not to mention, it took a good day and a half to figure out where you’d gone.” He moved to set her aside and then helped her stand. “Are you hurt anywhere?”

“I don’t think so. My hands are scraped, but I count myself lucky.” She swept the dirt from the bricks off her hands as she watched him with concern. Her palms stung. “Are you alright? I didn’t mean to fall on you.”

He brushed at his breeches. “I’m fine. Let’s get you back inside.”

She grabbed his arm as he turned toward the front of the house. “No, I can’t.”

“Why not? What is this about, Evelyn?”

“I’ll explain, but first, I must leave.”

“Where’s your father?”

“Not here. Not yet. He comes tomorrow morning, and I can’t be here. Please, I’ve money to bribe the stableboy to harness the phaeton. I know you can drive that.”

“But I won’t.”

“Why?” She wanted to scream, but their hushed voices were enough for someone to overhear. “Why did you come then? I can’t stay, Rochester. I just can’t.” She looked about, exhaling her fear in a foggy mist. “I’ll drive myself.”

She started for the stable house. He trailed, catching her quickly with his long stride.

“I brought my coach. Let’s at least have a sit and talk.”

“Were you seen by anyone?”

“No. I thought it best to douse the lanterns and park away from the drive since your note consisted of one desperate word. I knew something was terribly wrong when it didn’t include your bantering tongue or acerbic wit, which I’ve grown rather accustomed to.”

“If I were in a better mood, I’d consider that a compliment.”

His mouth made a little quirk, and his gaze softened. He reached for her hands, checking the palms for splinters and her arms for injury. A drop of water fell on her head, and then another trickled through her hair, drizzling cold against her scalp. Of course, it would rain. Why not? Her luck only begged for this.

Rochester traced a finger across her cheek, then bent to retrieve his hat. With one hand, he flipped the hat onto her head and tugged at the brim just before the coming

rain turned from drops to sprinkles. She looked at the sky, catching the hat before it fell, pressing it back onto her head. She should be laughing at herself for wearing a man's beaver hat, but instead, her throat convulsed on a whimper because, for the first time this Season, she felt like someone cared. She brushed her wet cheek. Whether rain or tear, it didn't matter; they both felt equal to the moment.

Shrugging out of his greatcoat, Rochester gripped it by the collar, then swung it like a cape around her drooping shoulders. He pulled her up against his side, calling out over the rain. "Let's get to my coach before the sky truly opens up, and then you can tell me what happened."

She nodded silently, hoping in her pained heart that he'd take her from here and not deposit her back on her front stoop drenched with rain.

Hunched over, he slid a hand into hers, held tight, and quickened their pace. His warm touch was the essence of compassion. The coach was up the drive behind a hedgerow, far enough from the house not to be seen, especially with no coach lights. The moon lit their way until Rochester helped her into the cab and shut the door. It was darker inside the cab than out in the night, and it took her a moment to get her bearings.

As her eyes adapted, she saw him sitting opposite her with his elbows resting on his knees and his hands clutched between them. He stared intently at her, silently demanding her to speak.

"Is it possible to move on while I explain?"

He shook his head. "I can't steal you away, Evelyn. You have to know that. Give me the condensed version of tonight."

She let her eyelids shut out everything but the sound of her breathing. She swallowed.

“Do you remember the man at the theater? When I tried to make you jealous?” She peeked at him.

He raised a shocked brow.

“Don’t look so surprised. You know me better than I do.” An owl screeched, and she leaned her head to see out the window. “His name is Lord Cumberland. He’s the baron I’m to wed, and my father is ready to sign the betrothal papers. I saw him again at Vauxhall three days ago.”

“That’s why you left the gardens early.”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“I didn’t know about Cumberland, but as I said, I have shown up for all your concerns, and I knew you’d been there. I spoke with your father, and he told me you left with Lady Clover.”

She allowed that remarkable story to sink in and then remembered the hat. She gazed at him with a weak smile and pulled the hat from her head. “Thank you.” After handing it to him, she brushed her limp hair from her temple.

He accepted the hat and tossed it onto the seat, but his gaze remained fixed on her. “And?”

“And, since I’d already met the man, my father thought to invite him here so we might get to know one another.” She leaned her head back against the padded wall as if a burden had been lifted.

“Is he here now? Without your father?” Rochester looked aghast, this man who’d dared to kiss her neck in the middle of a ball.

She almost smiled at the irony. “He’s not here. Not yet. Papa comes tomorrow and then Cumberland after that. I have a feeling that he means to have us wed before the Season is out.”

Rochester sat back. He pulled a hand through his thick, wavy hair that always looked a bit unruly and sensually heart-swoony. Searching for answers in the dark corners of the cabin, he breathed in deeply. “Where did you think to go in the rain with your little phaeton?”

“I don’t know, except I did leave a note for Papa that I wished to see Adeline and Winn before the babe comes. He’d understand that because my mother was lost when I was born.”

His gaze swept over her. He was working through something. “Then that’s where I’ll take you. If you left a note, he’ll expect one when you arrive at your brother’s house. We’ll send one from there.”

She shook her head.

“No? Which part?”

“I can’t go there. He’ll come for me there.” If Rochester had not come, she would have had no other choice but Winn’s. However, now, perhaps Rochester had a better idea. Maybe a hotel or an inn.

“What do you expect me to do?” His voice rose with agitation but not cruelly. He seemed as distressed as she.

“Just drive. I don’t care where, just get me from here, and we can discuss the strategy on the road.”

He shook his head, blowing out a loud sigh that fogged the windows, then rapped on the ceiling and shouted, “Horley.” It was Winn’s home.

The coach lurched, sloshing through mud, and then it was grinding through the gravel beneath its wheels as they drove away from her home, away from the fear and distress she’d been holding inside her for days.

CHAPTER 9

Evelyn pulled the greatcoat tight, folding her arms against the cold. Rochester refused to take it back. By the time they reached the first hamlet, a few errant drops had turned into a bleeding downpour. The lamps were now lit, and the guttering light made it feel more real.

She occasionally looked across the seat to find Rochester staring at her as if she were an anomaly, a mystery to solve, and then he'd blink her away in favor of watching the road again.

"You understand if you take me to Winn's, I'll have to explain all this to my friend, who should not be bothered with emotional baggage when she's about to be a mother?"

He watched out the window at the falling rain and then looked at her askance.

"You do understand?" she asked again when he said nothing.

"Then I suggest you do your damndest to put on a pretty front if you care for her at all."

"Rochester, sometimes you say horrible things." She refolded her arms and turned away.

"I know I do. And I don't mean them most of the time." He ran a hand through his hair. "You exasperate me as no one can, and I think you know it. But tonight, I'm

quite right-minded when I say to pull yourself together for the sake of your friend.”

“How can I when I can hardly breathe? Can you not see that I’m terrified? Perhaps if my mother were alive, it would be different. She’d talk sense into my father. Surely, you can understand that since we both lost our mothers as children.”

“I watched my mother die, Evelyn. It’s not the same.” His cheek twitched. His fists burrowed in the crease of his crossed arms. She didn’t know if his tense demeanor was caused by the cold or because of angry grief.

“I didn’t know you wrote the book on pain and sorrow. You must have a yardstick to measure it. How thoughtful. I should have considered that before I trusted you.”

He sighed heavily toward the ceiling with a look of frustration rounding out the whole display. “I’m sorry.”

“Are you? I saw my mother die, too. I just don’t remember it. In fact, I don’t remember her at all. Would it be fair of me to say to you, at least you have that ?”

His nostrils flared. His lungs deflated, and he looked a little lost. “I am sorry. I don’t mean to be insensitive, and I never stopped to consider what it might be like to never know one’s mother. I still remember my mother’s face, although her words are foggier now.”

“That must be difficult.”

“Evelyn, I’m not uncaring of your plight. Truly, I’m not. I know you consider me a friend. But what kind of man cultivates a friendship with his best friend’s little sister?” His eyes darted between hers.

“A foolish one?”

He chuckled at that. “Bravo. I do think you’ve hit the nail there.”

“Are you my friend?”

He tilted his head, then grabbed the strap when the coach rocked through a pothole. “I’m very much your friend, which is why this is so hard.”

A crack of thunder shuddered through the cabin, and they both leaned to see out the window. The weather did not let up. The coach made another lurch, this one throwing them at a steep angle, and then, as quickly, it came to a jerking halt. The back corner listed as she braced her hand on the seat to keep upright.

Evelyn heard the driver shout something.

“Stay here,” Rochester said just before he opened the door and disappeared into sheets of rain. She looked down and realized she still wore his coat. Why had she left her room without even a cape?

She was a goose. Rochester was right. But to go about with a man who didn’t call her silly names was unthinkable. She’d grown to love the way he said it, all ruffled and exasperated, often with his hands on his hips, throwing back his jacket like he’d done tonight. He looked like a pirate barking orders on a windy deck. His hair had a forever windswept look that made her wish to run her hands through it.

Outside, she heard the coachman and the postilion shouting above the rain as it pelted the roof. She listened as the howling wind made the coach springs bob like a rocking boat. If it kept up, she could only hope that the darn vehicle could float.

She opened a window. “What’s happening?” She forced the words out, but they came back to her like someone far away. The wind blew her hair and eyelashes while rain drove into her cheeks like tiny spikes.

“Shut the window!” Rochester shouted. “We’re stuck.”

“Stuck?” As much as she enjoyed sparring with him, she did as he commanded.

The coach shook, rocking forward without any progress, falling back into the rutted place it began. She scooted herself to the middle of the seat, her cold hand braced against the russet-brown leather. She hadn’t even donned gloves.

The door blew open, rattling the glass, and Rochester leaned in, opened a drawer under the seat, and retrieved a spare lantern. Holding the post, he lit the wick, closed the case, and then shut the door, but Evelyn stretched out a hand to stop it from latching.

“Can I help?” she yelled at Rochester before he got too far. Thick drops of water fell from her hair, her nose, and her lips sputtered water when she spoke as she lifted her shoulders to protect her neck.

“No! Stay in the coach where it’s dry.” He blinked, squinting through the soaking rain, and the unrelenting weather cast the moon in shadow with thick thundering clouds.

“We need to back up. There’s no room to turn around,” Rochester said from somewhere near the back of the vehicle.

Evelyn sat forward, gripping the narrow windowsill, her ear pressed to the cold glass, trying to make out the voices.

“There’s a gravel drive ahead. If we can move the team forward, I think we might accomplish an about-face.”

“Not unless there be a circular drive there, sir.”

Voices came at her through the dark, but Rochester's rich tone was the only one she could distinguish for sure. His voice she'd know in a whisper.

When she saw him head toward the coach, she backed away. His mouth was set in a line of grim determination as he struggled through the elements, opened the door, and threw himself into a seat.

"Are there blankets in here? You need to dry off." She told him, searching for calm.

"Not yet. The coachman is checking a gravel drive ahead. We don't have enough manpower to turn the coach around, nor the time or a good place to remove the wheels. So, we either make it to this drive, or we're stuck here. There's no going through now. We need to get back on a well-maintained road."

Someone pounded the door and shouted through the glass, "We can do it, but part of the drive is in six inches of water. Needs checkin' afore we drag the horses through. Ain't no tellin' what's what in them rocks."

"Stay here and don't move," Rochester said. He shifted to leave and then turned back as if he'd forgotten something. A serious crease formed a wave across his brow. "Are you scared, Goose?"

Between the genuine concern and the pet name, she felt tears spring to her eyes. She swallowed and shook her head. "I'm worried for the horses, though."

"We won't move unless it's safe for every creature. Let us hope we don't have to spend the night." He disappeared through the haze of rain again while she watched out the window, her breath frosting the glass with every anxious exhale.

Jolting shivers worked through her from the inside out. She had Rochester to thank for the greatcoat. However, that left him in the rain with nothing to fight the weather

but his daywear jacket. Thankfully, he wore boots. The coach bounced with a heaving motion and then fell back into its rut. Then she felt her stomach roll over as the cab began to rock back and forth several times.

Clearly, the men were doing their best, one coaching the horses forward while the other two pushed the vehicle from behind. She felt like ballast. Without stopping to think, she carefully opened the door, hanging on to the edge so the wind didn't take it, and stepped down, her slippers sinking into what felt like a bog. She gripped her toes in order to keep her shoes from being sucked off her feet by inches of mud. With her hands, she felt along the smooth lacquered facade toward the rear. There, she found Rochester and the driver.

"Madam, take yourself back inside instantly," Rochester yelled into the gale.

"I can help," she sputtered through the rain, shouting over the moan of wind whipping the trees, feeling like she'd just walked under a gushing spigot. She pulled off the coat and shoved it forward for Rochester. "At least take this." There was no use trying to save her apricot gown. Even with the coat, she was drenched, so what could it matter to keep it on when Rochester needed it? She stood there helpless to attend them as the men went about their task, shoving with all their strength, their shoulders and hands pressed against the coach, their feet planted, and their legs braced against sliding mud and gravel. With their heads down, they growled against the strain.

She heard the coach frame groan as the wheels miraculously cleared the rut.

Their predicament created such an emergency that Rochester passed her without comment, rushing to help the postillion pull the team forward.

Evelyn shouldered back into the greatcoat and trudged ahead.

“I think we’re there.” One of the men bellowed over the sound of tack and springs. The coach rolled forward, the horses no longer sunk in mud, turned into a drive. With the situation seemingly under control, Rochester appeared in the haze, striding toward her, his head bent against the elements. Water distorted her vision, so she had no idea of his mood.

He grabbed her hand, lacing her fingers with his, pulling it under his arm. He forged ahead, steering them until they stood on even graveled ground out of the mud.

The coach had pulled ahead and seemed to be leaving them behind. But she didn’t question it; she trusted Rochester. His countenance was set on the task, and he hadn’t even tried to scold her for disobeying his order to stay put.

He pulled her into his arms, hunching over her for protection with his cheek resting against the top of her head.

“We’re safe. The coach got through.” The sound of his muffled voice over the roar calmed her. His heart beating under her ear soothed her while her whole body shuddered from the cold and fear.

Winn’s house could not be reached successfully tonight, possibly not tomorrow either, and she wondered what Rochester planned to do with her. Whatever it was, she would hang on to this moment of peace and rejoice in the safety he offered. Standing in the middle of a hurricane, he was her rock.

“Are you alright?” he asked against her ear.

Wrapped securely in his embrace, she nodded, rubbing her cheek against his chest. He briskly ran his palms up and down her coat-covered arms, his chest rising and falling rapidly. Then he draped her in a hug. He smelled of rain and earth.

Cocooned as she was, she wriggled her shoulders, making herself smaller under his protection, and he answered with a squeeze, his arms like bands of steel. He cradled her cheek with one hand against him.

In this storm of a place, not just the rain and howling wind but her life too, she finally felt safe, protected, cared for.

Were they friends?

She wanted more than that.

She'd always wanted more than that.

For just a little while, showered by freezing rain, she imagined that he wanted more, too. The thought warmed her and blocked out everything but him.

When the coach rattled into view, obviously having found a place to turn around, Rochester led her to the door, and without bothering with the formality of the steps, he lifted her easily off the ground and steadied her in the coach. Then he hopped in, jolting the springs and landing her off-balance, unceremoniously tossing her on her seat while Rochester leaned out the door to speak with the postilion.

She heard the other man ask, "Where?"

Rochester yelled, but his words were lost in the gale. "Posting... horses. Home." That was all she heard. But then it was all she had to hear. A post stop to change the weary horses, and then she'd be returned home.

She faced the window despite the lack of visibility. The lantern in the cabin flickered, and the ride, though they were thankfully moving forward, was still rough. The coach swayed, and more than once, she'd braced a hand on the back of the seat to steady

herself.

“How drenched are you under that coat?” Rochester’s question startled her from the exhaustion of coming up with a believable explanation for her father.

She looked down at the charcoal-gray wool. The weight of it multiplied by the volume of water it absorbed. She gazed up at him, pulling the lapel open, intending to give it back. “I imagine I’m soaked through like you are.”

His gaze faltered, and he bit his lip. Reaching forward, he grabbed the coat and crossed it over her chest. “Leave it on. Your clothes are indecently wet.”

She peeked beneath the coat to examine the apricot gown. She hadn’t bothered with petticoats that might impede her climb out the window. The skirt plastered against her legs outlined them perfectly, and the apricot color blended in as if she wore nothing at all. Her chest looked almost as bare as her legs, saved only by the short stays that covered her nipples, although they were clearly erect from the cold. The outfit as a whole, soaked as it was, left little to the imagination. She looked up, shocked, her mouth agape, and found Rochester’s brow cocked.

“I tried to tell you, but I shall, regardless of my manners, never forget the sight. I’d say thank you, but I’m afraid I’d just sound like the rake you think me.”

“I doubt I’d be wrong.”

He rolled his eyes, but his smile teased her into comfort.

She smiled weakly, suddenly remembering the where and why of the evening. “You’re taking me home, aren’t you?” She fought to keep her voice from quavering. The cold alone would make it so, but it was fear that possessed her now.

He looked at her solemnly and nodded. "I have no choice. The roads are impassable."

Her breath rushed out, and the morsel of energy she had hung on to fell away, evaporated by reality. Her shoulders drooped. She hung her head, defeated.

They rode in silence after that as if Rochester understood her devastation. But when she swiped a fist over the steamy film on the window, she noticed they had passed the fork in the road that would lead them back to Rosewood. She looked across at Rochester. His eyes were closed, his head leaning against the backrest. Should she tell him they missed the turnoff?

After everything he'd done, it was only fair. "Rochester?"

"Hm?" he grunted a reply.

"I believe we missed the turnoff."

He scrambled to straighten, blinking fiercely, then swiped a palm across the window. He looked in both directions, the outside too dark to see all the landmarks, but Evelyn had been this way so often that even a tree trunk was familiar.

"I believe we're good," he said with a relieved sigh.

"But my home is that way. Are you taking me back to London? I can't go to the town house, not at this hour."

"No. We're going to my home." He laid his head back again. "In Mayfair."

"Your home?" she whispered, but he didn't seem to hear.

He was taking her to his home. Not to hers. Not even to Clover's. She should have

felt panicked, but her relief was so complete that her eyes welled with tears, and her throat ached. Exhaustion, inclement weather, her father's determination to see her wed. It all caught up. She gasped, sniffled, and looked for something to dry her eyes since every piece of fabric on her person was damp while thick drops fell from her lashes and her stomach wrenched with uncontrollable sobs. Though her heart melted with the warmth of his decision, she shivered.

"Evelyn?" Rochester asked, a quiet tenderness about him.

Women were often blamed for their absurd reactions, including crying, and Evelyn felt humiliated by her real tears. "I'm alright." She fanned a hand toward him.

He brandished a damp handkerchief under her nose because there was nothing dry on either one of them. She accepted it and made it work.

"What is it, Goose?"

A weeping giggle escaped at his familiar address, and she knew she sounded hysterical. "I'm tired." She looked up at him. "Are you truly taking me to your home? In the middle of the night?" She could hardly believe he would chance such a thing.

"Yes. I told you I don't have another choice."

"I thought you meant my home."

"And why would I do that?"

"Because I begged you not to take me to Winn's, and you set out for there anyway."

"I can't take you home. Winn's place would have been a nice reprieve, giving you time to think through this thing. The destination may have changed, but your need for

time has not. The roads are clear to London, and my staff is a small one. You'll be safe there."

She nodded, sniffing. "Thank you, Rochester. You can't know what that means."

"But I am beginning to understand."

His words were like a gift. Her heart felt a pang of joy while her gut trembled with tears of the same emotion.

CHAPTER 10

After her tears and the panic in her lovely eyes, Rochester's heart twisted painfully.

His first thought when he witnessed her crawling out of her second-story window was a terrified memory of holding his mother when she passed away. He'd been all of five years old at the time, and yet the memory was as vivid as yesterday. He understood fear. Unlike the other notes Evelyn had sent, this one, spelling out help, held the sharp edge of desperation. That one word—just HELP—and he knew something had gone wrong. Memory kicked in like a well-worked muscle in a prize fight.

Although thankful he'd answered his gut instinct, he was not thankful it cost him two days to locate her.

Now seated across from him in the coach, he studied her closely, her eyelids heavy with exhaustion, her teeth chattering against the cold. They still had awhile yet before they reached Mayfair, and as a result of the inclement weather, he expected a six-hour trip rather than the usual three to four. And they were both drenched.

The vision of her in that wet dress, molded to her skin, owned his mind. It was provocatively translucent in some rather indecent places.

The laces of her stays had shown through the thin apricot muslin, and the stays were the only thing that kept her breasts from bleeding through the fabric, but it hadn't kept the crest of her nipples from view. Although he appeared unaffected, the sight of her had sent a rush of heat throughout his body. Her legs might as well have been bare for the thin veil and the color of the skirt plastered against her skin, wet and

virtually transparent. His gaze had trailed up the line between her thighs, and he dared not look higher for fear her titillating nether curls would have been the next thing on display.

He shoved the erotic picture from his mind and wordlessly reached across the expanse, grabbed both sides of the coat, and shoved the damp cloth-covered buttons through the tight holes. Not an easy task with frozen fingers.

“I think I could wring out my dress,” she said absently.

“The coat, too. There should be a blanket somewhere in here.” He wedged himself into a kneeling position on the floorboards, taking a blow to his kneecap when they hit an uneven stretch of highway. In the storage where the lantern had been, there was a gray wool blanket. Not as thick as the coat, but at least it was dry.

He held it out. “You have two choices. Leave the coat and cover it over with the blanket. Or take off the coat and cover the wet dress. I’m not sure which is better.”

“Why don’t you use the blanket.”

“Because your teeth are chattering, and I’m not quite there yet.” Just a little lie. He was indeed chilled to the bone.

She nodded, the motion slow and lethargic. “Then we’ll share it.”

Despite the cold, he paused for one dangerous moment to contemplate the sanity of sitting next to her in that wet gown. The warmth of her smile alone could melt him, and he had no right to any of it. But the shiver shooting up his neck in a wave of spiking gooseflesh made the decision for him. He changed seats and pulled her against his side. He unfolded the blanket and tucked it around her and then himself.

By the time they reached his home, she was asleep, and her usual delicate petal pink lips had a bluish tint. If he hadn't been checking for signs of extreme exposure to the cold, he might have been more worried. As it was, he was desperate to get her warm and in bed.

It was still dark out; the sun wouldn't be up for another two hours. Evelyn's head lay against his shoulder while he ushered her inside. The first person he saw was Lovie.

"Who do we have here?"

"I'll explain later. Find the housekeeper and have a maid sent up. Tell them I need a warm bath. Not hot. She's too cold for that." He spoke of Evelyn but wasn't ready to provide her name. "And then have a bath set up for me in the kitchen."

"I'll have it sent to Hudson's room," Lovie said.

"In the kitchen," Rochester repeated. "Argue with me later. And don't do anything past finding the housekeeper. You need your rest, too."

The housekeeper, Mrs. Nithercott, came running, a white lace sleep cap on her head. "Holy fire, what is this?"

"A freezing woman."

"Well, I can see that."

Reluctantly, Rochester allowed Mrs. Nithercott and a maid to take over for him. From his room, he grabbed a change of clothes and his robe, then found the kitchen. He helped get the kettles going. He even took them upstairs, but he left them at the door for the servants to manage for modesty's sake.

An hour later, he was warm, dry, and sitting in the drawing room with a brandy and a roaring fire. Mrs. Nithercott informed him that Evelyn had been bathed, warmed, dressed, and put to bed. He needed sleep. He'd plot and plan what to do with his little captivating goose later. He sent a note to Evelyn's father as if it came from Winn's staff, so Mr. Markham wouldn't worry. Even if her father tried to recover her from Winn's home, he would assume the roads had become impassable after Evelyn had arrived safely. That would buy them some time.

No doubt he was in over his head. He couldn't ignore the pebble in his shoe any longer.

As he passed the note off to a footman, Rochester's cousin strolled into the drawing room with his usual adornment—a planning ledger under his arm.

“How is she?” Hudson asked.

Rochester held his hand over the top of his brandy glass, turning it clockwise against his knee, watching the lamplight spark the amber liquid like twinkling glitter. “Who told you?”

“Lovie. She said you brought home a woman half-frozen and that you didn't look much better.”

Rochester set his spirits down and spread his arms wide. “What do you think? Was your sister correct?”

“I think you look exhausted. Why don't you take my room? I'll sleep down here.”

Rochester shook his head. “I doubt I can sleep.” With his elbows propped on his knees and his head bent, Rochester looked up under his brow. “It's Miss Markham. We were caught in the storm south of Caterham. I swear there were moments I

thought we would have to spend the night in the coach, both of us soaked through, not a dry stitch between us.” He motioned for Hudson to take the opposite wingback chair.

“If you need to talk, you know I’m here.”

“I don’t know what I need, Hud. I was taking her to Horley to see her brother when the storm hit. One of the coach wheels hit a mud pit and sank. Thank God the horses missed it.”

Hudson went to the bar and poured himself a drink, his back to the room. “Why were you the one taking her?”

“That damn note, the one you threw in my lap two days ago. It was a plea. The note literally had one written word. Help. That’s it. But I knew who sent it. I just didn’t know where she was. Turns out she had gone to her family seat. So, I went there to see her. By the time I arrived, it was late evening, and she was in a predicament.”

“What kind?” Hudson threw a napkin on the tea table for his glass, then sat, elbows to knees and his fingers folded, knuckling his bottom lip. It reminded Rochester how much they looked alike and how Hud was more like a brother to him than his own brother was. They trusted one another. Better than family, joined by pain and survival.

“It doesn’t matter why I went. What matters is she needed help, and I didn’t know what else to do. I couldn’t think of another safe option.”

“Her father already hates you, so I suppose it can’t get much worse.”

Rochester laid his head back, his gaze pointed toward the ceiling. “He could call for a duel and shoot me. After all, my talent is billiards, not pistols.”

“Besides the household, who else knows she’s here? Her brother? Isn’t she close to her sister-in-law?”

“No one else knows. Not her brother or her friends. Just my staff. As small as it is, I can’t imagine it will be an issue.”

Hudson grabbed the ledger, spreading it open on his lap. He pulled a short pencil from his pocket and jotted a few notes. “I’ll speak to the staff and make certain they understand.”

“Hush, hush, and all that?”

Hud smiled. “A real mystery.”

“A bloody blunder.”

“You sorry you brought her here?”

Rochester shook his head, his fingers steepled. “No. But I need time to consider what to do with her.”

“If you be excusin’ me, sir,” the chambermaid tapped the open door. She was a pretty thing, with red hair, blue eyes, and a bit of an Irish temper. She looked nervously between Rochester and Hudson. Hud twisted to see her over his shoulder.

“You can speak freely. He already knows,” Rochester said.

“She’s sleepin’ and warm. I thought you’d like to know now.”

“Thank you, Miss Margaret. Would you mind accompanying me to check on her?”

“Not at all, sir.” She smiled shyly at Hudson. “Excuse me, Mr. Wright. Didn’t mean to interrupt.”

Hudson stood. “Not a problem.” Then he turned his attention to Rochester. “We’ll talk tomorrow.”

Rochester wanted to take the stairs two at a time but held on to his reserve. Besides, there was every chance he’d trip and tumble straight to the bottom from pure exhaustion alone. He nodded for Miss Margaret to open the door, and he tentatively poked his head in like someone who might be unwelcome or as if he entered a sick room.

There on the bed, Evelyn lay deathly still with blankets pulled to her chin. She looked far too peaceful for comfort. He turned a worried gaze on the maid.

“She’s only restin’ like she ain’t gettin’ up again.”

He flinched, feeling the blood drain from his face. He nodded and smiled uneasily. “If you would stay by the door. And leave it open,” he added for propriety’s sake. “I want to check on her for myself and see that she’s all right. “

“O, course.”

As in most houses, the staff would see through the eyes of Miss Margaret, which is why he asked her to stay and to leave the door open. Thankfully, they were a trusted lot. Good people, as far as he’d met and spoken with them. Most households ran with a hundred servants, sometimes more. He made it work with a half dozen on the inside and another six for his team of horses and conveyances, not to mention one or two for the gardens. It wasn’t enough, and honestly, they all pitched in at some point, but until his and Darrington’s investments began paying by all accounts, he’d settle for the skeleton crew.

In slumber, Evelyn's lips were back to their petal pink perfection and her complexion warm and rosy, but he felt her head for good measure despite hearing her soft, even breathing. Her hair, now mostly dry, felt soft against his palm, and she smelled of lavender soap, thanks to Lovie. He had to chuckle at that because Evelyn had thought Lovie was his mistress. Lovie and Hudson were his cousins, his friends, and his house companions most of the time.

Little did Evelyn know, but Lovie was married and early with child. Her husband had just inherited a manse and was busy making sure it was ready for his new family to occupy it. Lovie had stayed with Hudson and Rochester for the most part before she wed and so was quite comfortable with the arrangement now. Perhaps she'd be a nice ally for Evelyn.

He smoothed the royal-blue counterpane over her shoulders, tucked her in as if she needed it, then without caring what the maid thought, he placed a kiss on her warm brow, breathing in the scent of her at the same time. With a sigh, he straightened.

As expected, he slept very little, but at least he was warm. Lounging on the sofa, his knee bent, he watched the fire, trying his damndest to conjure up a plan but finding none. His actions were unforgivable. They were grounds for a young lady's ruination and grounds for a duel, a beating, or public flogging. Well, perhaps not the flogging, at least not in public. But he had little doubt her father would disagree with his actions. He would see it as ruination. Beyond Mr. Markham's wrath, Rochester knew this little stunt might also cost him Winn's friendship.

But how could he dismiss those tears? Real tears of relief, as if she had fought so hard for a morsel of sympathetic understanding and finally won. He knew those feelings well. They were the same ones he'd had when Hudson had taken him on as a gaming partner. Their mothers had been sisters, and with both of them gone now, he and Hudson shared the pain of loss. Hudson had lost both his parents, and Rochester had lost his mother. Their shared experience was the glue that bonded their friendship and

trust.

Then there was Winn and Darrington, also like family, and he couldn't be certain how Darrington would take the news either or if their partnering would survive a falling out between him and Winn Markham. So much of his life rode on this erratic decision all because he couldn't bear to think of her with anyone else.

And Lord knew he had no right to think of her with himself.

CHAPTER 11

After taking inventory of her surroundings and the luxurious bed she'd apparently been sleeping in for almost two days, Evelyn decided to put things to rights partly because she needed the distraction and partly because she expected to be shipped out posthaste. So far, she'd seen a maid named Miss Margaret Kelly and the housekeeper Mrs. Nithercott, who looked at her with questions but never voiced them. She barely remembered being bathed, dressed, and put to bed. Still, she did have the odd memory of Rochester hovering over her, the scent of his clean hair, the feel of his night beard, even though she had no memory of seeing him since he essentially carried her into the house.

His house.

The thought brought no comfort as it had in the coach when she'd mortifyingly bawled like a baby. Except Rochester's treatment had not been parental, he'd paused with concern and spoken with aching regard.

In her haze, she had heard another woman's voice and had a foggy recollection like she'd recognized it or her. The memory was a phantom blurred by her sleep-starved mind; it could have been anyone, even a man, for all she knew. But for some reason, the idea conjured a vision of the woman at the theater. She prayed to God the woman was indeed Rochester's cousin as he'd said she was because Evelyn's heart had melted in that freezing rain, and she couldn't abide it if the beautiful redhead were his mistress.

Since Rochester, without complaint, had chosen to bring her safely to his home, she

put the whole idea of a mistress from her mind.

Evelyn washed her face and cleaned up with the lavender soap and toiletries that someone had the good graces to leave for her, like hair pins, combs, and lotion for her wind-parched skin. On the chaise lay her peach gown, ironed, clean, and wearable but for the unremovable stains and the somewhat tattered hem. Someone had left her a new chemise, and she was eternally grateful regardless of where it came from.

Refreshed and ironically feeling better than she had in weeks, she straightened the bedclothes and began folding the extra blankets. She spread out a beautiful quilt at the end of the bed, something a loving aunt might make a bride, and marveled at the stitches.

She heard a scratch at the door.

“May I?” Rochester’s muffled voice permeated the closed door.

She hurried across the thick blue carpet, her heart pounding an extra beat, and took the door handle, opening the polished oak to find him standing there.

He took a step back, a concerned frown between his brows. His soulful eyes, usually so full of spark, looked as tired as she felt even after two days abed.

“I wasn’t sure you’d be awake.”

“It’s been two days, so I understand,” she said as she motioned him in. She turned her back, strolling to the bed, and sat upon the quilt she’d just laid out, the stitches a comfort under her fingers.

He gestured toward the open door. “Do you mind if I close this?”

“I can’t see what difference it makes at this stage, can you?”

“Hardly,” he answered while shutting the door softly as if that were less condemning.

Honestly, she didn’t care a whit. Neither could she know what Rochester meant to do with her. She supposed he’d take her home or at least deposit her at her father’s town house. To some extent, he looked harassed, with his hair tousled like he’d been randomly combing his fingers through it.

“I’ve been worried about you. I’m not often confronted with a weeping woman in my arms or sharing a bitter cold coach ride through the country in a hurricane.” Nervously, he shoved his hands in his pockets.

“I’m sorry for acting like a ninny. I think I was just exhausted.”

“I’ve no doubt that’s so.” He walked to the bed and then sat beside her.

She avoided his gaze, pulling her hands into her lap. These past weeks, she’d schemed over which rules to break and begged him to participate in her downfall, but she’d never dreamed of anything quite so scandalous, and she wondered what he thought of her now.

“It’s obvious you needed the sleep. I’m glad you took the two days to recoup. My housekeeper, Mrs. Nithercott, tells me you’ve eaten very little, so I’ve had her prepare a tray of meat, cheese, fruit, and broth. A bit of everything. You’re welcome to take it here if you’re not ready to leave this room.”

She nibbled her thumb, her mind racing through options and finding decisions difficult. Although she was grateful for his help, she felt befuddled sitting next to him on a bed she suspected might be his.

“If you don’t mind.” She looked meaningfully at the place between them. “You’re not my brother, and I wouldn’t wish anyone to assume the wrong thing.” Honestly, she allowed that the staff might have already come to their own conclusions. Her statement made little sense after all they’d been through, but her nerves caused her to play out the formality.

“Of course, you’re right.” He stood without delay and retreated to the other side of the room.

“Did Winn ask you to watch over me for the Season?” she asked hesitantly while his back was turned, afraid she’d see the truth on his face when she’d rather believe a lie.

He pulled the chair from the secretary, pivoting it on one leg, and then sat facing the ladder back. He regarded her with his chin propped on his arm resting on the top rail. The picture of him was so roguishly charming she almost forgot her question.

Extending his thumb, he rubbed his eye. “Absolutely not. I’ve had little contact with him these past months, and I assume he’s rather preoccupied.”

“What about the house party at Kingsley’s two Christmastides ago?”

“Yes. Out of brotherly concern, he did ask me to keep an eye on you there.”

“I wasn’t a child then, nor am I now.”

“I never said you were.”

“No. You just call me goose. And I’m not a ninny.” When she first mentioned being a ninny, he hadn’t disagreed with her. She wanted to hear him disagree with her now.

“I never said you were a ninny.”

“You’ve called me foolish,” she countered.

“No, Evelyn, you’ve called me foolish.”

She couldn’t dispute that. She shrugged a half smile. “I concede. You’re correct.”

He tilted his head slightly. “I’m sorry if goose offended you. I meant it as a pet name. Nothing else.”

She shrugged, sorry that she’d brought it up because, in truth, she loved it. The conversation was merely a distraction except for the part about him watching her like a nursemaid. She sighed. “It doesn’t offend me. Not when you say it.”

“Who else calls you goose? I’ll hunt him down and call him out for his opportunistic boldness.”

That made her giggle. “Is that what you are? An opportunist?”

“Never say it.” He sat straight as if insulted, but his eyes shone with teasing sincerity.

She wet her lips as he watched her. “I’m just nervous.” She willed her hands to be still. “I feel silly because I broke down in tears, and women are often blamed for using tears as a weapon. But that’s not me.”

“Is that what you assume I think? Because I don’t, Evelyn. Men cry, too.” His gentle answer plucked at her heartstrings.

“I can’t say I’ve ever seen a man cry. Not Winn, or my father, at least.”

“I cry when I’m sad. Our hearts break as easily as yours. Perhaps not as often.”

She watched him for a long minute, deciphering what he hoped to gain from such a personal confession. “Apart from your childhood, you’ve been that sad before?”

“Of course.” He spread his arms wide. “I ask you, am I less of a man?”

She felt tears behind her eyes and a thickness in her throat. That he should trust her with such things beat away at her unease. “I think you more of a man for it, and to admit it is even greater.”

He gave an exaggerated sigh. “Well, that is a relief, Miss Markham.”

And there he was, the flippant Rochester she knew. Except now she knew another side of him. The side that held her close, protecting her with his body against the rain. The man who concerned himself with her tears. Who’d stolen her away instead of taking her home just because of her desperation to escape a fate as large as her entire life. She couldn’t imagine anyone else who would do that. Not even her brother, Winn.

No coddling words, no selfish demand that she stop crying; instead, he had simply listened. She assumed he hadn’t heard her these past two weeks, but he had tucked away her every word until she spelled out the one that saved her.

“Miss,” the chambermaid called just before she kicked open the door with the toe of her shoe. She balanced a tray that bore several covered dishes.

“Let me help you.” Rochester bolted from his seat.

The woman hurried past, allowed Rochester to help her, and then left so quickly that Evelyn hardly had time for embarrassment at being caught privately entertaining a man in a boudoir. The maid’s quick glance held no condemnation, but it didn’t stop Evelyn from feeling a crush of judgment sponsored by her own conscience.

Rochester began uncovering dishes with meats, cheese, and even the broth he'd promised. "Come sit." Bent to his task over the tea table, he patted the settee behind him.

"Only if you promise not to spoon-feed me, too." She joined him on the settee while he prepared a plate and set the bowl of beef stock in front of her. With a dubious lift of one eyebrow, he snapped a pristine white napkin on her lap.

"If there were strawberries, I believe I'd have to ignore your request. No one should eat a strawberry from their own fingers."

She smiled around a bite into a slice of apple. "Sometimes you say just the right things."

"And sometimes I'm an ass." He said that while filling his plate, ignoring her snort of laughter.

"I don't know any other man who would dare say the things you say to me."

"I should hope not." He gave her a half smile.

She wiped her hands on the napkin and shyly asked, "Rochester? What's to become of me here?"

"I'd tease you with a, what do you want to become of you , but I think it's too serious a question and one I can't answer. Not yet. But we have a week to work it out."

"How have you managed that?"

"Because if your father minds the note you left him explaining your trip to Winn's for a week, and he believes the note my footman delivered of your safe passage, then I

can't see him encroaching on your time with Adeline."

"I am fighting the guilt. I wonder how Adeline is doing."

"You have nothing to feel guilty for. I sent the note, and I'll be the one to catch hell if it comes to light, not you."

"Knowing my feelings on the matter of birth, Papa shouldn't send for me for at least a week." She bit her lip. "How will I get to Winn's after such a taradiddle?"

"You've lied to no one. Remember that. And I'll escort you back. Until then, you'll stay in this house and won't so much as peek out a window."

"I think I miss the sun already." She teased but felt more relaxed than she had in weeks.

"I exaggerate but only a little. The back garden is safe enough, but we can't chance you being seen in London for fear of a real scandal, one I sense that not even you would accept considering your earlier penchant for breaking some rules."

"Fear not, I am still on the side of breaking the rules, Mr. Rochester. My plan has not changed, but I am not feeble-minded enough to consider a scandal such as this. And with you."

He gave her a solitary look of disbelief. "Aren't you the one who begged me a week ago to minorly assault you in an alcove?"

She rolled her eyes. "If you'll remember, you did minorly assault me in an alcove. Unfortunately, there was no one to see it since you scared off Lord Sullivan."

"No, you are mistaken, my lady. That was not me in the alcove. And Lord Sullivan is

a sod.”

“Sounds like a dare. I’d wager the shilling you owe me that it was you who assaulted me. But we’ll need a scientific test, and I’m not certain what or whom we might use for a control subject.”

“Hm.” He sucked in a breath, squinting his eyes at her. “Let me consider it. We have a week, after all.”

If for a moment she thought his teasing had a hint of reality about it, she’d have run from the house straight to Clover’s. Or perhaps not. She stole a look at him, but he didn’t appear concerned or serious. Or interested in kissing her again.

She moved the broth away. “So, do I get a tour of your home? Or will your servants be scandalized as if they’ve never seen you bring a lady home before?”

“A true lady, no.”

“I never know when you’re teasing.”

“Assume I’m always teasing, and we’ll avoid much trouble. Besides, the staff already knows you’re here, and they’ll bury their questions behind their bread and butter.”

She hoped he was right because the gossip mill was as thick between servants as it was with the aristocracy. Everything was news. Everything was fair game. And she didn’t intend to be the goose who got caught.

CHAPTER 12

Rochester felt relieved when he found Evelyn awake, but he had not anticipated what her presence in his room would make him feel. True, his libido was no match for his concern while she slept off the storm, but he identified a battle brewing beneath his thinly controlled attraction for her, and he was as unprotected against that as he'd been against the rain.

God, must he remind himself again she was Winn's little sister?

She argued with him, insisting that he lacked good sense when he suggested they begin the tour of his home with the entry hall. Her bold proposal would have them starting with the room she'd stayed in. Which, of course, was his and the reason he didn't start there.

"I give you the foyer." He stretched his arms in a grand gesture. It was beautiful, the one saving grace when he'd purchased the house. He watched her as she stretched her gaze about the arched hall. An impressive gallery lined three sides. The light-blue medallion central to the ceiling in the foyer had a painting of the Tree of Life at its heart, and the marble floor boasted the same shade of cloud blue. But the walls, painted a warm dove gray, were beautifully simple without a muss of portraits, except for the mirror that hung over the mahogany entry table.

He liked simplicity.

"It's beautifully understated, truly." Her adoring gaze slowly perused the ceiling and walls. "Just a mirror?" She shook her head, her mouth parted in awe. "When so many

homes are covered in gaudy portraits and gold filigree, you've left us to look nowhere else but that amazing ceiling."

"Thank you." He held his shoulders back, internally shaking off the unexpected emotion that bloomed from her appreciation of his home. "I can't take credit for it, though. It was like this when I purchased it." He wet his lips as he looked at her profile, then cleared his throat and threw himself into the gallant role of a gentleman. He leaned close, sliding his fingers from her dainty wrist to her hand, lifting it to his mouth for a kiss.

She gave a startled jerk but smiled at his performance. "Now, I am certain that it was not you who kissed me in the alcove."

"Should I be offended by your remark, madam, or did you find this kiss better?"

She clothed her face with the severe look of a scientist and brazenly proclaimed, "Not better."

"Then offended it shall be."

"Not to say it wasn't pleasant, Mr. Rochester. You shouldn't compare yourself to Casanova."

"Do you think he was truly that good? Hm, I don't see the appeal."

"Casanova? It's the legend that's appealing. When you achieve such notoriety, let me know."

He slanted her a wry, crooked smile while worshiping her mouth with a gaze.

"Oh," she exclaimed, feigning a swoony sigh complete with the back of her hand to

her forehead. “I didn’t know your eyes could smolder that way. But you still owe me a shilling.”

“Miss Markham, you are proving more difficult to please than I first anticipated.”

“I hope not.” She favored him with a genuine smile.

Perhaps she did not know how strong his attraction was for her after all. He thought his effort to keep her at a distance had been obvious. Nothing good could come from courting her when her father would never agree, and she deserved someone honest, better, more reliable than a man who irresponsibly gambled away a fortune in one night. Such foolishness had all but ruined him and Darrington and did ruin Winn for a time. During their three-year hiatus, they’d all matured. Winn even married. But it was Winn’s father—her father—who kept him down now. It would take a phoenix to rise from that ash.

“Your smile gives me hope, madam.” He’d never tasted her lips, and now he couldn’t stop thinking of them. He took a cleansing breath. “Moving along to the drawing room.” He led the way through the foyer, past two closed doors.

“You’ve forgotten these rooms,” she said, halting between the doors.

“What if it’s a broom closet?”

“It’s not. Not off the foyer. It has to be a salon.” She broke free from his gaze and turned the latch on the second door.

With his hands clasped behind him, he followed her into an empty salon.

She stood in one spot, rolling her head in a slow arc, while her gaze danced over the walls and windows before meeting his eyes. “What a cozy parlor. What’s wrong with

it besides the lack of furniture?”

Little by little, her presence drew out his truest self, and he found his voice, something he rarely heard. “It’s a hideous shade of puce.” His mouth turned down, and he scrunched his nose.

“Puce is a dirty mauve. This is green.”

“This is puce green, and it’s ugly as sin. Not at all to my taste.”

“Neither is royal blue, apparently.” She absently traced a finger along the wainscoting, rubbed a smear of dust against her thumb, then brushed her hands together and turned toward him.

“What makes you think I hate royal blue?”

“My royal-blue gown? The one I wore at the ball where you first refused me?” Her eyebrows shot up as if that said it all. And just like that, the game was on again.

“Miss Markham, in case you weren’t aware, that royal-blue bedroom you’re sleeping in is mine.” He placed a hand on his heart.

She turned to hide the stunning blush that rushed her cheeks. “Then it’s just me you don’t care to see in royal blue?”

His mouth went dry, and the truth caught in his throat. He couldn’t tell her that watching her sleep, her hair the color of rich butterscotch toffee lying against royal-blue crushed velvet made him want to press her beneath his body, his touch, his mouth. He forced down a swallow. “I believe we’ve discussed this before, and I explained that my only goal in saying such a dreadful thing was to discourage your preposterous plan to fool a baron.”

She shrugged, haughtily fanning her eyelids closed. “Well, I burned it. So, no matter.”

“The deuce, you say.” His hands went to his hips. Teasing or no, he felt a surge of fresh guilt every time she brought up the subject, and it began to grow in him like an ache. “No one’s opinion should mean that much to you, Evelyn. Least of all mine.” He sincerely meant it.

“Least of all?” she asked, hiding behind sarcasm and banter. She passed him to the door. With her back to him and the room, she mocked him in good humor. “You know your opinion is the only one that counts.”

Next, they visited the drawing room, where inviting summer-green wallpaper accented the half-paneled walls. She twitched an eyebrow, hinting at the color.

“Not puce,” he emphasized. He wanted to walk up behind her, draw her close, and sample the silky skin of her nape. He had a sudden urge to suck the sweet spot behind her ear until he marked her with it. His mouth watered. His hands made fists, and he returned her innocent grin with a forced smile.

“All right, I concede, it’s not puce. You may unclench your hands now, Mr. Rochester.”

“My apologies. I was planning the next test.” He returned her blush with a smile, feeling his eyes crinkle at the edges with it. “Not to worry, I don’t think I should try it here when this is essentially my boudoir and that red sofa my bed.” He looked about without moving his head, placing his hands behind his back. When his gaze fell on her, she was blushing again.

“Where to next,” she said a bit too breathlessly as if trying to convince him that the comment didn’t move her.

“A very special room.”

“The broom closet?” she asked in a charming, musical tone.

He held up a finger. “Not quite.” She followed him, passing more closed-off rooms. Then he stopped, braced his hands against two ornately carved oak panels in the wall, slid them apart with a well-oiled whoosh, and revealed the billiard room. It was as large as the drawing room but with fewer chairs, no sofas, a more complete bar, and a high sideboard table specially built to leave drinks on or lean against. He rubbed his jaw, smiling fiercely. His heart hammering like a young fop’s first tumble between the sheets.

Her mouth parted, and her eyes shone with awe as they’d done in the entry hall. “Now, this is a room, Mr. Rochester. And it smells rich and wonderful. What is that?”

“A special blend of wood polish scented with sandalwood and musk. Do you like it?”

She nodded, that same perplexingly awed expression on her face. She opened her mouth to speak and then sighed, running her fingers along the deep burgundy baize of the billiard table while scouting out the rich mahogany paneling and the unique lanterns he had made to hang over the table for night play. He didn’t generally care for anyone to touch the table, but he’d allow her almost anything. Besides, he’d just as soon lay her on it and make love to her. Pleased with her reaction, he felt his lips curl into a generous grin.

“I had the baize specially dyed because green and gold are too ordinary for billiards. The windows face west to take advantage of as much sun as possible before the oil lamps need lighting. Daylight is best for play, but a good player can shoot blindfolded.”

She whipped about, her hair coming to lie over her shoulder. “Can you shoot

blindfolded?”

“Some shots if I have a good even lay, and I know the table.”

“Will you do it for me?”

He scrubbed a hand thoughtfully back and forth across his mouth, then licked his lips, and reached for his neckcloth. Her face beamed; her smile infectious. “Bring me that cedar box.” He pointed to one of several polished boxes that held the billiard balls. “Open it, if you will, and hand me a white ball and a red one.” With his neckcloth hanging loose, he chose a stick, chalked the end, and looked down it like the barrel of a gun.

“What is this? Practicing during the day?” Hudson bellowed from outside the opened door.

Rochester fanned a hand, indicating he wasn’t needed. “Go away, Hud. I’m busy.”

As expected, his cousin ignored the command and strolled into the room with an open ledger. “And who do we have here?” Hudson snapped the log closed, placing it under one arm and bowing toward Evelyn.

“Miss Evelyn Markham, this is Hudson Wright, my illustrious cousin. He lives here sometimes.” Rochester flared his eyes at him, hoping he’d make himself scarce for the afternoon.

“My pleasure, Mr. Wright.”

Hudson tsked , shaking his head. “No, no, no. You mustn’t Mister me. It’s just Hudson. I’m not a proper aristocrat like this nob over here.” Hudson hinted with a tilt of his head toward Rochester.

She looked between them. “You could be brothers.”

The comment hit Rochester’s heart. Hudson was more a brother to him than his own.

Hud smiled, and Rochester found himself at a loss. He’d never truly felt jealous before, but Evelyn seemed to like his cousin. She regarded him with ease, her hands demurely clasped in front of her.

“Rochester, you haven’t told her about me? For shame.”

“For shame, nothing. I haven’t had a chance.”

“I have a feeling that knowing one of you is as good as knowing the other.”

Hudson roared with laughter. “Bravo. She’s correct on all accounts.” He raised his eyebrows daringly. Then he caught sight of Rochester’s cravat and waved a hand toward it. “Rochester is almost always impeccably dressed, so I’m guessing he’s about to share with you his talent with a blindfold.”

She nodded eagerly. “Can he truly do it?”

“Well, madam, I am his account keeper, bet taker, and overall steward of his businesses.” He winked. “So, yes. I’d say he can do it. I hope you haven’t wagered with him. If so, I’ll force him to pay it back.” Hudson smiled outrageously at him, and Rochester almost suspected his cousin of knowing about the shilling, though he’d never told anyone.

Evelyn eyed him as she spoke. “Oh, but he does owe me a shilling for missing a shot some time ago.”

“Does he?” Hudson made a show of checking the ledgers. “When would that be, my

lady?”

“Two Christmases past, I’m afraid.”

Rochester tapped the toe of his boot against the waxed floor, feeling for the shilling.

“Did he tell you he never misses? And then hustle your bet?”

“Nothing so scandalous as that, I’m sure. In truth, he said nothing, just pointed that stick at a ball and missed.”

“Completely?” Now Hudson actually looked confounded.

“Unless, of course, he did it on purpose,” Evelyn said, a teasing accusation behind her tone.

Rochester ignored them both, lined up the shot, whipped off the neckcloth, and blindfolded himself. He groped about for the cue stick, then ran his hand slowly over the baize, careful not to disturb it, locating the ball. Next, he leaned his thigh gently into the side of the table and made a slight adjustment to his angle. Feeling for the ball again, steady on his feet, he slid the stick through his finger and, without waiting another second, struck the cue ball, instantly hearing the satisfied sound of ivory clacking ivory. He heard Evelyn’s delightful squeal even before he removed the blindfold.

“I would not have believed it possible if I hadn’t seen it for myself. You truly are a master at this. It should be an official sport.”

“It will be someday,” Hudson said with assurance. More assurance than Rochester felt. “Nicely done, Rochester. Seriously, I mean it.”

Rochester resisted the urge to roll his eyes, smirking instead because what else was he to do? He felt that compliments on his talent should be reserved for gameplay. This was a setup, a trick, something he practiced for show.

Hudson sighed dramatically. “You’ll have to excuse him, Miss Markham. He’s bashful when it comes to praise.”

“Is there something else I can do for you, Hudson? Anything? Now?” Rochester emphasized the now, throwing him a speaking look before racking the cue stick.

“And I believe that is my invitation to leave you to your game. It’s been a pleasure, my dear.”

“All mine, Mr. Wright.”

Hudson stopped in front of her, his chin pressed to his chest.

“Hudson,” she corrected with a solemn bow of her head.

Rochester watched his cousin retreat, and when he was clear of Evelyn’s view, Hudson turned his head and gave a thumbs up. Rochester didn’t need his approval, but it made him glad all the same.

“I like him,” she said. “Will you answer a question for me?” Her gaze was serious, and she appeared worried.

He thought he knew what it was, but he nodded and allowed her to ask anyway.

“Does he know I’m to stay the week? And what does he think of me after two nights in your bed?”

Lord, hearing her say his bed lit a fire in his groin. His thighs flexed involuntarily. “Hudson is special. He’s not swayed by propriety’s rules, nor does he pass judgment. And he cares enough for me not to ask questions. But if you’re uncomfortable, I’m open to suggestions, even to the extent of asking him to leave for a time.”

The worry lines on her forehead softened. “I trust you. I suppose it’s too late even if I didn’t.” She moved to the window, her profile beautiful and serene. She folded her arms. “Rochester? Why did he say that praise distresses you?” The question sobered him more than her trust.

“I’m not opposed to praise when it’s deserved.”

“Your talent is deserving,” she slanted him a glance over her shoulder. “And if you think otherwise, then you’re a fool.”

Listening to her say that he deserved anything meant everything . This thing he did, smacking red and white ivory balls around a table with a stick, was more important than an idle hobby. It provided an income in part and a place to feed his portfolio with business deals and information. He thought of it as collecting people. It wasn’t just a game, not to him. His father didn’t understand that, which added to the man’s hardened heart toward Rochester. His fondness toward his eldest son was coarse and jagged. Which is perhaps why Evelyn’s opinion was so significantly powerful. It felt like a caress to his soul.

He needed to regain control of the moment.

“I’ll make you an offer. Either you stop provoking me with accusations about the blue gown, or you stop calling me a fool.” He said it with a smile in his voice, using humor to distract her.

“That is a difficult choice. What happens if I don’t comply?”

“I’ll give you a real kiss, nothing like your phantom Casanova, I promise you that.”

She bit into a smile. “That’s not much incentive, is it?”

“Trust me when I say it should be. I’m not as honorable as I look. Don’t let the fancy clothes mislead you.” He moved to put the billiard balls away and found he couldn’t let the subject of praise go.

The cedar box felt smooth and cool. It had been a gift from his cousin when they first began working together on this project. “About the accolades,” he said, his back to her while he shut the lid and slid the gold hook into its eye. “Complimenting a real game of billiards is appreciated, but not when it’s a contrived shot. It’s all tricks and nonsense.”

She strolled toward him, stopping just short of the table. “Are you saying you could see through the blindfold?”

The untied cravat still hung loose about his neck, and he yanked it with a snap. They stood feet apart, and he closed the gap with one stride. He took her by the shoulders, turning her about with her back facing him. Holding the pristine cloth between both hands, he covered her eyes, making sure to keep the fold wide enough that she couldn’t see from the side or underneath. He tied it, adjusting her hair around her silky neck.

“Now,” he whispered in her ear, satisfied to see gooseflesh prickle where he touched her like a ripple in the water, fanning out to cover every exposed inch of skin. “Can you see anything?”

“You’re waving a hand in front of my eyes.”

Putting both hands on either side of her upper arms, he turned her partway, tilting his

head to see her face, checking the neckcloth in case it had fallen loose.

She giggled, crossed her arms, placed her hands over his, and gave him a pat. “I cannot see you,” she said. “I could feel the fanning wisp of air. And you smell delicious, by the way.”

His pulse quickened. Before she could reach up and pull the blindfold down, he leaned close, brushing the tip of his nose along her neck. “You smell like fresh lavender and heat.”

She fluttered. The slightest little shudder.

He smoothed his lips lightly over her skin, a tickling erotic pleasure, and she relaxed ever so slightly against his chest. His heart beat hard enough that it felt like an echo against her. There was little hope that she didn’t feel it, too. She was like silk under his palms as he slid his hands down her arms and wrapped his fingers around her wrists. He crossed both their arms in front of her, pulling her into an intimate embrace against him, their arms entwined just under her breasts. The soft swells resting against his forearms were forbiddingly delightful.

His actions were too much, too far, and equally not enough. He blew out a soft sigh on her shoulder and then kissed her nape. But not like the alcove. This time he savored it, drinking in the scent of her skin, opening his mouth to taste her, gently sucking and fighting the urge to increase the pressure and hear her whimper. Little sexy sounds. Womanly sounds. The kind that created their own oxygen and life. The kind that made him tight and hard.

Just the thought thickened his need, and she had to know it. He wanted to rub his hips against her derriere, but this had not been his intent. He hadn’t expected one taste of her to feel like an erotic storm. He released the draw on her skin, gave her one last kiss, and then drew his mouth up her neck and nipped her ear lobe.

“Miss Markham, let me know when you’re finished with your analysis of that kiss.”

Her throat bobbed, and he realized her chest rose and fell in little pants.

“I’ll need to get back to you on that.”

“After you catch your breath?” he dared ask.

She nodded.

“And will I need to debate you on your findings?”

“While I still wear the blindfold, I couldn’t say who you are, could I?”

He knew the statement had more to do with the fallout of that kiss and how it affected their friendship. This was a side that neither had ever explored. Not together. But all the banter, all the times in her presence when she’d teased him, stroked his humor, he’d always known it led here.

She was dangerous to his freedom and to his friendship with her brother.

She gave him hope—the most dangerous thing of all. She made him believe in dreams that he could be what he wished. He was more than an heir to a viscountcy, even one that held his surname as the title. In her presence, he wanted more from life.

He wanted her.

CHAPTER 13

Elvelyn thought she might never sleep again for reasons so clear her chest ached with it. She had suspected from the beginning the room belonged to Rochester. It looked like something he'd decorate, even the royal-blue color down to the luxurious velvet bedspread. So decadent, just like him. Too beautiful to look at and too wantonly reckless to look away.

Confidence bloomed in her when she first woke, saw the color, and realized his explanation hit the mark, just as she had hit the mark wearing that blue dress. She imagined him lying in this bed and thinking of her, the sheer color alone reminding him of her every day.

She remained in her room the next day, and Rochester did not come. Margaret, acting as her chambermaid, announced that his lordship had stepped out, that Miss Markham was to be made comfortable in the house, and that no room was off-limits if she took up wandering except, of course, the bed chambers belonging to Hudson and the staff.

But she never left the room. At noon, she relegated herself to watching the front drive for signs of him, and with her face partially hidden behind the sheer curtains, she watched the people, too. Carriages, some coaches, hacks, and a bustle of activity the Season brought to London. The city did not sleep. Not in the spring.

Thankfully, it hadn't rained again. She looked down and sighed at the peach dress. It was the only piece of clothing she had, besides the extra chemise. Poor planning, she supposed. But who escapes through windows with carpet bags in tow?

Rochester was right; she did feel free and at peace. That is until yesterday afternoon when he'd kissed her in the billiard room. With her eyes covered, her senses had come alive. She could smell him, sandalwood and man mixed with the scent of wood polish that smelled every bit as good as he did.

With his arms crossed underneath her breasts and her back against his chest, she'd felt lightheaded, dizzy almost. But when he molded his hips to hers, feeling the branding length and hardness beneath his trousers, she lost all train of thought. She may not be well acquainted with the marriage bed, but she wasn't ignorant either.

More than anything, he made her feel things like longing and passion and desire.

She left her position as sentry and took up pacing instead. If only a book would do, she'd have gone downstairs and searched the library. But her body was hot with the memory of his skillful mouth on her. She felt foreign to herself, out of sorts, and overwhelmed, and she knew the staff would recognize her odd discomfort immediately. The anxiety of wondering what his reaction in the light of day might be ate away at her peaceful, calm reserve.

She pulled the sheers aside and looked intently at the park across the street. No faces, only top hats, and parasols were evident, but she'd recognize his swagger anywhere.

"I have to be somewhere tonight, and I'm not leaving here without you," Rochester's voice echoed in the hallway before she heard the hinges on the door, sending a jolt of pulsating panic through her already anxious state. "But first, you need a change of clothes." He strolled past her into the room.

"Wait," she rushed, taking several hurried steps. "We're going out in public?"

He's been gone all day, and he thinks to leave her with that confusing plan? Not a chance. She stopped him as he reached the dressing room.

“Don’t be a goose. You’ll be hidden behind the clothes and a coach.”

“Like a stowaway?” She advanced on him until he disappeared behind the dressing room door.

He leaned out the doorway of the wardrobe. “Trust me, for a change, will you?”

She threw him a dubious look for all his passing indifference.

In record time, he emerged clutching riding breeches and a white lawn shirt. “Put these on.” He tossed them on the bed.

“Are you mad? I’m all for an adventure, but besides being men’s clothing—your clothing—they will never fit. You’re a head taller than I am, not to mention your body.” Her hands swept the air in front of him like someone pointing out details at an analytical conference. And then that reminded her of the analysis. Her face warmed, and she crossed her arms.

His brows went up at that as he gazed at the length of her body. That was, however, the extent of his pause. He turned to leave, then shot back, “Do you need assistance with your dress?”

She regarded him in stunned silence. What she needed was assistance with this plan. What was he doing?

He slanted a wolfish smile. “I’m happy to help.”

She picked up the shirt and threw it at his retreating backside.

After the door clicked into place, she took inventory of the clothes, picking up the shirt and shaking it out in front of her. The shirt had promise. Large, yes, but at least

the length would not be an issue tucked in. However, the breeches were out of the question. She reached behind her to work at her dress, curious now about the shirt.

“I’ve answered the problem of the breeches,” Rochester burst on the scene again without so much as a knock, which he didn’t seem to notice. “These are from a young footman, still too large but manageable with a cord or thong to shore them up.”

Before she could utter a word, he tossed the footman’s clothing onto the bed, turned her about by the shoulders, and, with some nimble knowledge, made quick work at the buttons down her back. He worked so efficiently that she had no time to ponder a proper protest. She felt her skin twitch with every touch of his fingers, although he didn’t seem to notice that either.

Before he reached the bottom, she regained some sense and turned about, swatting his hands away. “I think I can manage it from here. I’m rather resourceful that way.”

“Yes, of course,” he said, flustered, finally. “My apologies. I got carried away.”

“And yet you’re as quick as a tailor.”

“They are just buttonholes, Evelyn. Do you see a valet? I am also resourceful when need be.” He waggled his eyebrows. Then snapped his fingers. “One more thing.”

With her mouth agape and one hand holding her dress to her chest, she watched helplessly as he disappeared into the dressing room again, this time returning with a pair of shoes. And then surprisingly, he sat on the settee by the fire, bent down, and pulled off his Hessians.

“What are you about, Rochester?”

He looked over his shoulder. “You need shoes,” he said, rising. “And these will cover

the baggy breeches. We'll stuff paper in the toes. A little cloddy to walk about in, but they'll serve the purpose." He put the boots by the bed and studied her standing there, her dress loosely held to her chest. But his eyes held no mischief or passion, just a thoughtful vee between his brows. And as before, he didn't leave, just returned to the wardrobe and emerged with a great coat.

"Brilliant," she said, a little befuddled, now pinching her dress together in the back.

"I know you're teasing, but it is quite brilliant."

Befuddled, she blinked rapidly and shrugged, then said mockingly, "What self-respecting gentleman would appear without a cravat?" She hardly meant it, but that sent him for another trip to gather a pristinely white silk cravat.

"Rochester." She demanded his attention. "Don't you think you've rather forgotten yourself?"

"And all this time, I thought that's what you wanted." He grabbed the shoes. "I'll be back to help with the cravat."

She had no living clue as to what he had in mind, but half afraid he'd return while she stood in her chemise, she made fast work of it. She swam in the shirt. The bottoms weren't much better. But with the long tail of the white lawn tucked in, and after getting the buttons fastened on the fall of the breeches, she surveyed the transformation in the mirror. She didn't for a moment think she'd pass as a man if that was his proposition, especially in daylight.

He knocked, this time stopping to tilt his head this way and that when he saw her standing there in men's clothing, the cravat whipped over her shoulder. His gaze worked back and forth over her body. Then he sighed.

“Not good enough?” She almost felt slighted. How ridiculous was that?

He came back with a stunning waistcoat. Evelyn recognized it from the Christmas house party two years ago. Ruby-red satin, intricately embroidered in a filigree pattern with gold thread. And it poignantly reminded her of the shilling she’d wagered over billiards—make the shot, and I’ll make your day is what she’d whispered to him as she slipped a coin in his coat pocket. The idiot had missed the shot, and to this day, she still wondered if he’d meant to.

She was nearly out of breath by the time he hurried her into his coach. The greatcoat had no hood, so Rochester had replaced it with a cape. He pulled it fully over her head, covering her hair and shading her eyes.

“You couldn’t look like a man if you tried, Goose,” he said, joining her.

“Are you going to tell me where we’re going?”

“I’m obligated to watch a boxing match for a friend, and if I miss it, he’ll wonder why.”

“So, you’re bringing me? How does that work?”

“Strong’s establishment has private rooms with balconies for viewing fights on the floor. It won’t be an issue getting you in because I use a special entrance for, shall we say, special guests?”

“Ladies?” she sounded aghast, but her heart pounded with excitement.

He scratched his head, looking at her sheepishly. “Correct.”

“To watch men brawl?”

He nodded.

“And how many times have you done this?” Then she corrected herself. “With ladies, I mean. Not that it’s any of my concern, mind you. I’m simply curious what kind of ladies would follow a man to watch fisticuffs.”

He wet his lips. “Well, Goose, you are right now. So, I’d say that’s at least one.” He ducked his head when she struck his knee, which wasn’t untoward if you considered that she’d have done the same had she been holding a fan. He looked gratifyingly uneasy.

She smiled at his discomfort, which gave her courage. “Are you at all curious about my analysis of yesterday’s kiss?”

He looked up under his lashes, his hazel eyes dancing and the shadow of a smile at the corner of his mouth.

She braced her elbows on her knees, propping her chin on her hand. Not quite as vulgar as a man, she did keep her legs together. “Not Casanova.”

“No?” he asked mockingly but with genuine surprise. “Well, damn it all.”

She chuckled, feeling a good measure of joy because what she thought would be an embarrassing conversation had been completely turned into a teasing normality. And, in truth, he sounded disappointed. This also gave her courage. “Mr. Rochester.”

He looked up, chewing his lip thoughtfully, and sighed.

“It was better than Casanova. Did you ever doubt it?”

He rubbed a knuckle under his chin, watching her with amazement. “I never know

what to make of you, Evelyn.”

“I should hope you never figure that out because any woman who isn’t a complicated mystery is not worth the time. I imagine.” She tilted her head, cradling her cheek.

He appraised her. “I can appreciate that. Your challenge is accepted, my lady. I shall seek to unravel the mystery.”

“Careful, it might cost you.”

“I always keep a shilling for such gambles.”

“I hope it’s not the one you already owe me.”

“We’ll see.”

CHAPTER 14

She was a delight. Rochester could not deny that. And if he weren't careful, he'd find it difficult to deny Evelyn Markham anything.

After she had climbed out of that window, she'd done nothing but argue with him about their destination. He'd grown accustomed to her input, so when she didn't complain about the disguise or try to dissuade him from dragging her to a men's boxing club, he didn't know whether to be pleasantly surprised or disappointed that she hadn't debated the sanity of it. She climbed into a coach, dressed in his clothes and one of his favorite waistcoats, then sparred with him, daringly confessing that she thought him a better lover than Casanova. Or at least a better kisser. Except he hadn't truly kissed her, had he?

He smiled to himself—a cat's smile, complete with yellow canary feathers sticking out of its mouth.

He reached across the seats, pulled on her hood, practically covering her face, then left her there while he made his case with the steward at the side door.

Avoiding the lobby where men joined in drinks and friendly games of cards, Rochester led Evelyn up the narrow back staircase. It was not lavish. Strong had saved every inch of the building for sparring rings, a full gymnasium, a men's club out front, and, best of all, balconies with private rooms for viewing games from above. This is where he took Evelyn.

Wearing his boots, which were obviously too big, she nearly tripped over the last

step.

“We’re finished with the stairs but keep the hood on.” They made their way down a hallway and into a private room with an indoor balcony. After he shut the door, he turned to her. “Now, you may remove it.” He helped her shrug out of the gray wool cape that swallowed her whole and draped as far as the floor.

She brushed her hair back off her forehead and pulled the pins out because they were no longer doing their job. Then she shook the long tresses in a waterfall of silk butterscotch brandy. She took a cleansing breath. “I thought the whole building would smell of sweat.”

“We’re two stories above the ring. Like tiers at the theater, there are rooms underneath us. Some for gaming, some for billiards, and some for relaxation. Like this one.” He smoothed out his lips, drinking her in. The clothes may not have fit, but they did outline her legs enough to captivate, and he knew the shirt would freely fall open without the cravat to hold it in place.

“Remind me why you had to be here?” While she talked, she strolled the room. It was the size of a small parlor with a table and chairs for gaming, a bar with spirits, and this one had a sofa. His favorite had a billiard table, but he wanted her to feel comfortable.

“I promised a good friend I’d be present for the bout. If I miss it, he’ll know and ask questions I’m unwilling to answer, which I’m sure you’ll appreciate.”

“Will he look for you?”

“No, I sent word with the doorman that I’m here.”

“If I guess who it is, will you tell me?”

“No.”

“Rochester,” she exclaimed.

“I keep my friend’s secrets, Miss Markham. That includes yours.”

“What harm is there in knowing?”

“Because the next time you see him, you’re liable to say something that will get me in all manner of trouble.”

“Like the pebble in your shoe?” She smiled eagerly, sat on the sofa, and yanked off the clunky boots. She pulled the paper from the toes and then shook both boots upside down. The ringing clatter of a coin dropping on the floor got his attention, and he watched it rolling on its side for a second, then warbling into a circle before chiming flat.

And there it was, his whole existence laid out in a shilling on the floor.

She scrambled to pick it up. “Aha! Now I have something to wager with.”

“Darling, you have many assets to wager with. But that one is worth a great deal to me.” Palm up, he waved his fingers toward himself.

“It is mine now.” She held it to her breast, and he had to admit that she might look better in his waistcoat than he did.

“When I say it will be a pleasure to take it from you, I mean it with all my heart.” He pressed his mouth into a straight line. He couldn’t be more serious. He’d grown quite accustomed to that damn shilling in his shoe, so when she ventured toward the open balcony, his heart stuttered. And when she leaned over it with her hand out, the coin

pinched between her fingers, his stomach dropped, but not because of the shilling. It was the sight of her recklessly leaning over the balcony.

“Evelyn, Goose,” he soothed. “Be careful, and back away from the railing.”

She chuckled, closing her fist around the coin, turning her back to the solid rail edge. He practically dove forward and grabbed her wrist, pulling her to him. Holding her too hard.

“You want it that badly, do you?”

His breath labored in competition with his driving pulse. “I’m sorry.” He let her go. “I clearly overreacted.” He suddenly felt embarrassed, his face burned.

She pulled back, perplexed, still holding the shilling to her breast. “You’re frightened, shivering with fear. What is it?” She took his sweating hand, and he angled his face away, closing his eyes, concentrating on his next breath. If she weren’t there, he would have bent over at the waist, held his knees, and sucked in oxygen until his head cleared.

“It’s nothing. I didn’t want to see you stumble over those breeches and fall over the balcony.”

She looked down at her stockinged feet. “That’s not it. You’re thinking of your mother’s fall, aren’t you?” She held his hand to her cheek. “It’s all right. I understand. But the balcony rail is solid, and it’s too high for me to tumble over.”

“Yes, but not the trellis that broke under your feet.” The memory was too fresh.

“This isn’t a trellis.”

“And that’s not your shilling.” He felt his anxiety wane. He shook his head, taking in deep breaths, disgusted with himself; he closed his eyes. “It’s not your fault. Keep it.” He walked to the balcony edge. He had never feared this place before. He’d leaned over the edge countless times, enjoying a match, roaring with the crowd, drinking, and gambling in this very room. But he couldn’t stand seeing her in peril. Not that this qualified.

What the hell was he doing?

He watched the floor below as Darrington stepped into the ring. He banged his hand on the outside balcony wall. Then turned to see her watching him. “Come here. Let me show you.” He spoke softly.

She measured her steps carefully, walking toward him, reaching out when she got close enough. He grabbed her hand, pinning it under his arm as if they were stepping out to dance.

“Do you want the shilling back?” Her voice shook, her eyes shone with genuine concern.

He smiled at her and shook his head. “No. We’ll deal with it later.” When she kept watching his profile, he said, “I’m alright, Evelyn. Truly. You just scared me, and not many can do that, so consider yourself remarkable.”

“I am, aren’t I?” She teased him.

“Very much.” He leaned in, placing a chaste kiss on her cheek.

The boxing ring pulled her attention, and he could tell she was cautious not to lean over the edge, although he could sense her enthusiasm. “That’s Hugo Darrington,” she said, smacking her left palm against the ledge excitedly.

The clang of a gong sounded, and he kept a close eye on her for an appalled or womanly reaction like fainting, although he couldn't imagine that from her. Punches were thrown, grunts echoed in the distance, and dust danced in the light of the gas lamps.

He gave her hand a little squeeze. "We haven't spoken about your plan in days."

"Must we, now? Darrington just landed a hefty cuff to the other man's jaw." She turned to him. "Do you really like this?"

"You don't?"

"I don't mind it, I suppose, but it seems silly to put oneself in the way of broken bones and crooked noses."

"These chaps play with rules that keep them fairly safe. They fight for the sport like I play billiards for sport. Perhaps like you vex me for sport."

"That's not a sport, you fool."

"And there you are again calling me a fool, Miss Markham. I swear to you that I pulled very high marks in school."

"I never said you weren't smart." She smiled brightly like she'd won a round. He almost heard the winning herald of the gong.

Without a trace of frustration, he purposely took on a casual tone. "Tell me again why you refuse to consider this baron?"

She pulled her hand from his, turning sideways. He faced her, resting an elbow on the balcony while she stared at him as if he were daft.

“Must I say it?”

“Yes.” He nodded for emphasis, needing to hear the truth from her luscious lips.

“Because he’s not you. Don’t you know that?”

He did. Or he thought he did. A rush of heat and pleasure flooded his veins. “Are you saying you have tender feelings for me?”

When she shook her head, his heart skipped. “No. I am saying I have more than tender feelings for you.” She held his gaze without a hint of guile.

Although he had suspected it, he never allowed himself to believe it. He stared at her, stunned by her honesty.

“So now you know all my secrets. And Rochester, I do hope our friendship doesn’t suffer for that truth. I am not requesting an account of your tender regard, but mine has been set for some time.”

He captured her wrist and pulled her away from the view below and back into the room where they would not be visible. His palms felt warm against her flushed cheeks, and he brought his mouth down hard on hers, feverishly crushing her lips to his while desire answered the call.

He’d wanted this for so long. Good sense had kept him in check, but his heart had been damaged by that shilling, by midnight draughts, by a masquerade that neither of them cared to join when each other’s company was far more enticing. He understood the calamity of this brazen exchange, but right now, he could only think of her sweet tongue in his mouth.

He pulled back. Her eyes were owlsh, her gaze sobering. When he opened his mouth

to apologize, she slid her hands around his neck, gripped the edge of his hair, and brought him back into sweet contact. Her tentative kisses belied the little gasps hinting at the ardor beneath. He licked her lips, sucking at the plump bottom one, feeling her inexperience and her desire all at once. It was sweet, decadent, brazenly forbidden, and he wanted it all. She clung to him as he placed feathery kisses along her jaw.

“Tell me what to do,” she pleaded, an aching whisper that made his heart beat madly.

“Oh, Goose, just kiss me back. That’s all I require from you but not all I want. You can be sure of that.”

She lifted her fluttering gaze to his, her beautiful green eyes dark with passion, and looked at his mouth as if she were as starved for him as he was for her. She stretched to meet his mouth, parting her lips over his. She copied the dance, a nip, a lick, and when she tasted his bottom lip, he growled, opening his mouth over hers, coaxing her with his tongue. His arms held her tight against him, an unbreathable space between them, her breasts soft against his chest. She tasted like euphoria and freedom, redemption, and peace.

The kiss turned more erotic as she mingled his tongue with hers, an exploding sensation building from need and desire. He wanted to fill her. He wanted it so badly.

He released her, his fingers in the knot of the cravat. “Damn me for tying this right perfect.”

She looked at his hands, making a mockery of the knots. “Would you like some help?” She teased him, and his frustration fell away to something more sobering as if his oxygen-starved brain finally caught up with his gentlemanly good sense.

With his index finger hooked in the folds of knotted silk, he sighed. “I can’t,” he said.

“We can’t.”

She pulled his hands away. “You don’t speak for me.” She studied his face. “I can.” With that, she loosened the double knot, slipping the silk through the loops until both her hands worked it free, holding out the ends. All that was left were the two buttons that barely held the shirt together.

With his hands at the back of her head, he pulled her in, kissing her fiercely, tearing away all defenses with a drugging kiss, the kind that says now, and yes, and everything. He popped the two shirt buttons free so his palms could spread the fabric wide over her shoulders before he realized the waistcoat was in the way. But oh, her skin was so soft. He enfolded her against him, kissing her neck, and every time he sucked her skin, she moaned.

He wanted to hear her moaning under him, her soft whimpers as he nipped and teased her nipples. He cupped her buttocks, driving her hips into contact with his erection. No amount of fabric could deny his need, and he seized a pleasurable moment rubbing himself against her.

And then the little minx did something that razed him, undid all the promises he’d made to himself. She traced her finger down his chest, his stomach, right over the ridge of his cock. He pressed her hand to it, showing her the rhythm and cursing his clothes. A husky moan came from his throat, and he could have spilled it all right there.

She bit her lip and said, “I think I did something right.”

“Too right, my love.” His arms went about her shoulders while he caught his breath and willed his cock under control.

An arm under her knees, he swooped her up and laid her on the sofa. With one snap,

he whipped the cravat from her neck and made quick work at the buttons of her waistcoat. With the fabric spread wide, he stepped back. The vee opened well below her breasts. He'd seen the soft swells above her neckline, but he'd never seen this. The edge of the white shirt stopped short of her nipples, and the dusky points showed through the fine cloth.

“No stays?”

She grinned. “Are you complaining?”

“God, no.”

When Rochester laid her down, Evelyn lost all wisdom.

She abandoned her conscience for his drugging kisses. She absorbed his growling, uncontrolled moans when she touched him. For a moment, his need was in her hands, quite literally, and she discovered a power she didn't know she had. It made her bold. It made her wish to explore more of him.

He leaned a knee on the sofa beside her hip and bent his head, kissing her throat and leaving a wet chill in his wake. A wayward curl of dark hair fell across his forehead, and she smoothed it back.

“You're so perfectly put together, and then there's this reckless hair, like its purpose is a rebellion against your fastidiousness.”

“Is that good?” He kissed her nose.

She nodded.

He held her gaze, licking his lips. His throat convulsed, and she smiled inwardly that

she could create such intense feelings in him.

“I don’t know what to do with you.” He breathed hard like he’d been running a race.

“What do you want to do with me?”

“I want to lose myself. I want to make love to you right here.”

“Is it all right that I wish the same?” She smoothed that unruly curl again. “Dalton Rochester, I love you. I have for a long time.”

He opened his mouth, but she placed a finger against his words.

“I don’t hold you to emotions you don’t have. It doesn’t matter. All I want is a week of not thinking about every proper thing. I don’t want to be a part of someone else’s plans. I just want to be me for a while, and you’re the only person I feel safe enough to try.”

With his arms braced on either side of her, he bent his head and kissed her softly, with tenderness and control. She preferred him out of control, like his wild hair. His arms were solid, bunched muscle under her palms, and she wanted to pull off his shirt. She loosened the cravat at his throat, and he took it from her and finished it. He sat back and removed his waistcoat and then pulled his shirt over his head while she watched intently.

His body was a masterpiece; the sight made her mouth water. She still lay there with his shirt pulled wide, the waistcoat open, and the edge of the lawn fabric barely covering her breasts. Holding the fabric between her fingers, she gave a stirring look and pulled one side down until her nipple popped free. His beautiful eyes laid her to waste, like he dared not touch her, but he’d certainly take his fill.

He subtly shook his head. "Why? Why for me?"

"Because I'm yours, Rochester. And I don't want to be anyone else's."

"I can't finish this."

"You better." She began unbuttoning the fall of his trousers. But he held off her hand, giving her a lazy lift of his brows.

He pulled the tail of her shirt from her breeches, then slid his warm hands up her torso. She would have offered to completely undress, but then his fingers grazed her nipples, and she couldn't speak. He kissed her belly, he nipped her ribs, and then he closed his mouth over the peak of one nipple, drawing it in like he'd done to her neck, only this was different. His tongue was a torment of pleasure, and his teeth made her wild with wanting. She wanted to part her legs; she wanted him there. As she struggled between moans, he unbuttoned her breeches and pulled them free of her legs, kissing his way back down, parting her thighs, he licked the center of her, and she gasped, wanting more of the same, the exquisite torture of his tongue inside her. She had no idea that this erotic pleasure existed between a man and a woman.

Was it right? She faltered, reaching down, cupping his cheeks, and bringing his mouth back to her. He lay between her thighs, his trousers still on, pressing against her. She reached for the buttons again, and this time, he let her do it. And when she reached to stroke him, he felt like silk. Hard, hot silk. Groaning sounds of pleasure against her lips, he moved against her hand, and her hips raised to meet his.

"No." He shook his head. "Not that way. Let me show you how." He placed his hand over hers and taught her how to run her thumb up the middle to caress the head of his erection. Then he let her go, and she explored him with her hands while she measured the good of it by his uncontrolled growls.

His hands were between her thighs. She felt wet and on fire, thrusting up to meet his fingers that played the same game that his tongue had. He lay over her, kissing her deeply, and she continued stroking him. He sat back, held her hand to his shaft, and with the other, he pleased the very core of her until she was panting and writhing. As he held her hand against him, she reached between her legs, holding his hand there, while his fingers were deep inside her until she shuddered with a quaking wave of pure ecstasy. He rested with her until it subsided, and then she began stroking him again, now with both hands. His guttural sounds so contentedly loud in her ears made her wonder if they echoed in this place, and then he reached behind him, grabbed a shirt, and held it over her hands.

She was in awe of the way he so freely gave up himself without a stitch of embarrassment. There was great trust in this intimacy they had shared, and it felt like it belonged to only them. His cock pulsed against her fingers, a steady beat that felt familiar, like her heart. And there was warm, sticky messiness, too, and she wasn't quite sure what to do with that. As his face relaxed and he breathed out a long sigh, he gazed down at her, a sheepish grin across his handsome face.

“Don't move. I've got this.” He wiped her hands before he wiped himself, then went to the basin, poured water over a bar towel, and gently washed her hands, smiling into her eyes the entire time. “I don't think I'll ever look at that ruby waistcoat quite the same again.”

CHAPTER 15

It felt as if she'd gone away, not just to Mayfair, but far away into a fantasy. Their little adventure to the boxing club had opened Evelyn up to all sorts of pleasures, and Rochester seemed eager to accommodate everything except one. He would not fully consummate their union. He refused to break her maidenhead, but despite his stubborn determination to torture her, she couldn't refuse him anything. She loved him. She had loved him for so long that she couldn't remember feeling any other way.

Today, he'd gone out after Hudson had chided him for his lack of interest in his usual pursuits, like work. He and Darrington apparently were in cahoots over a possible business deal that involved Belgravia.

Evelyn wasn't privy to the details, but she'd been reading about the progress and the promises of turning the square into something lavishly decadent for the elite. The cost would be astronomical, and investors were needed. That's where Darrington came in. He found the deals, and Rochester invested his winnings with him. The yearly stipend he received from his family estate was barely enough to keep his house in Mayfair together. His true income came from business and billiards.

She sat in his study, which doubled as his library. There were bookcases but not enough to store the books stacked on the floor. She suggested refurbishing that room before the dining room, which he disagreed with. They acted as a married couple, and Evelyn avoided thinking otherwise. She'd pushed aside reality and the fact her week was almost out. Time was passing too quickly.

“Miss Markham,” Mrs. Lovie Hawke, Rochester’s infamous cousin, appeared in the heavily framed doorway. Evelyn stood from her cross-legged position on the floor. She had been sifting through a pile of books on economics and was happy to move on to something else.

The wrinkles in her only dress and an embarrassingly tattered hem preceded her until she was sure that Mrs. Hawke would judge her as lacking. Until today, they hadn’t properly met, although it was her chemise that Evelyn wore. She felt the need to curtsy. The woman was truly beautiful. Auburn hair with gold streaks, green eyes, and a figure to rival the diamonds of the first water.

“Excuse me, I was trying to help Rochester make room for more books.”

“I’ve been there myself. I keep reminding him he needs a proper library.”

Evelyn smiled because she’d said very much the same thing to him yesterday.

Mrs. Hawke held out her hand. “I’m Mrs. Lovie Hawke. Rochester’s cousin and Hudson’s sister. I believe I saw you at the theater some weeks ago.”

“Yes. I was there with a friend.”

“I was there with my cousin. Isn’t that dreadfully pathetic?”

Evelyn didn’t know what to make of the woman. Should she ask her to sit or wait for Mrs. Hawke to extend the invitation? The house belonged to neither of them and then to both of them at the same time.

Mrs. Hawke broke the uncomfortable spell by taking her hand and sitting with her on the only settee in the room. “I thought you might need some feminine company for a change. This lot can be rather shortsighted.”

“Conversation often comes around to billiards, but Rochester has spoken of you fondly. He tells me you are expecting.”

“In about six months.” She smiled kindly. “Although, between you and me, my husband and I have not been married long enough for the mathematical scholars to approve.”

Evelyn didn’t know what to make of that admittance, except she had the notion that Mrs. Hawke was trying to make her feel comfortable under the seemingly condemning circumstances. “Congratulations,” Evelyn finally said.

“Hawke is ecstatic. Currently, he’s doing his best to make us a home. He lived abroad for most of his life but inherited his grandmother’s manse, and he says it isn’t quite ready. I think he just doesn’t care for the Season and less for the theater. That’s why Rochester kindly agreed to escort me.”

Evelyn buried a thin layer of unease beneath a smile. She appreciated Mrs. Hawke’s honesty even if she was not quite ready to give up her own. “I wanted to thank you for the chemise. I don’t know what I’d have done. Mine was in ruins after we were caught in the downpour. That’s why I’m here,” she said a bit too quickly. “I couldn’t make it to my destination, and Rochester was kind enough to put me up. He and my brother, Winn, are old friends.”

“Will you be here long? What I mean to say is I could lend you another dress if you’d like.”

“I don’t wish to put you out, but I don’t think this dress has another day left in it, I’m afraid.”

“Good. Because I went ahead and brought one regardless. I took the liberty and had the dress sent to your room. I wasn’t about to let you say no. By the way, Hudson

tells me Rochester seems very happy.”

The comment puzzled Evelyn. She would have never described Rochester as unhappy. He was always in good humor, bantering, jesting, smiling. How odd. “Let me order refreshments. Unless you’d like to do that? I’m not sure what’s customary since I don’t really live here.” Evelyn grimaced. “Do I look as awkward as I sound?”

“There is no need. Why don’t you wait right here, and I’ll go speak with someone in the kitchen. Cook isn’t always around. This house is sorely understaffed if you haven’t noticed.”

“I’m rather relieved it is, under the circumstances.”

Mrs. Hawke knew the house better than Evelyn, and she nervously sat on the settee, trying to manage her skirts into submission and work up some story or plan that would sound believable. Except she had no idea what, if anything, Rochester had told his cousin. She had a faint recollection of Mrs. Hawke here the night she arrived.

“It’s all settled,” Mrs. Hawke said as she strolled back into the study. She seated herself at the opposite end of the settee so they could see each other.

“You said that Rochester seemed happy, but I’m not sure I’ve ever seen him unhappy. Unless you count the times he’s been miffed with me for one reason or another.”

Mrs. Hawke forced a smile after looking as if she wanted to say something but shouldn’t.

“I imagine Rochester said little about me. He’s not only my brother’s friend but mine as well.”

“I thought as much.” Mrs. Hawke’s words were warm and full of understanding.

“He actually rescued me from my home before I was to be betrothed to a horrible man.” Evelyn sighed heavily, feeling guilty. “Not horrible. Just not...”

“Rochester.”

“Not the man I wanted to marry.” She finished lamely. “But, yes, also not Rochester. I do find myself in a bad way.”

“I’m not here to judge, Miss Markham. I’m also not here for gossip. But I am here to listen if you need it.”

“I’m not sure what I need. Rochester’s given me a week-long reprieve from the twisted knot my father has made of my life. But I must return before anyone knows I’m missing. That time is coming very soon. I wouldn’t ask, except I can’t get Rochester to satisfy my questions.”

“I’ll answer whatever I can.” Mrs. Hawke dipped her head to see Evelyn better.

“He’s told me almost nothing about the three years he was away, but I know whatever happened there keeps him imprisoned from a life he might choose.”

“He’s shared very little with me as well. But you’re right. I do think it’s something that troubles him deeply.”

Evelyn chewed her thumb, wondering how big a hole she chanced to dig. “If not that, then can you tell me about his home life? Why doesn’t he live on his family’s estate? Is it because of his mother?”

Mrs. Hawke bit her lip and nodded. “Partly, yes. He’s told you about her? How she

died?”

“In his arms as a boy.”

“Oh, dear. Yes. Our mothers were sisters. My mother passed away from illness when I was very young, and we came to stay with my uncle and cousins for long stretches during the summer. My father said we were a handful, and I’ve little doubt that was true. We, at least, were there to keep each other distracted. And then my father died in a hunting accident. At least that’s what they tell me.”

“I’m so sorry.” She automatically reached across the cushions, her hand flat to the red-striped settee.

Mrs. Hawke paused; the air in the room seemed to thin, and she breathed rapidly until a maid brought tea and broke the spell.

“There’s little else to tell except our collective childhood was survivable because we had each other. I’d say we’re more like siblings than cousins.”

The subject matter was too personal, and Evelyn didn’t ask Mrs. Hawke any more questions. Clearly, Rochester battled more skeletons than she anticipated.

Somewhere around eleven that night, Evelyn heard the front door groan, then the unmistakable sound of two men shouting, and then boisterous laughter. She threw one of Rochester’s robes on and crept from the room, backing against a wall when Hudson bounded up the stairs toward the gallery opposite her and down the hallway, presumably to his room. She walked to the ornately carved rail and looked at the foyer. She saw a light burning in the drawing room where Rochester now slept.

In her bare feet, she padded down the stairs and tapped lightly on the half-open door to the drawing room.

“What is it, Hud?”

“It’s me.” Evelyn stepped in and shut the door behind her.

He blinked several times.

“Have you had enough to drink?” she asked, a smile in her voice.

“Almost. Have you come to invite me to your boudoir?”

“I would if I thought you’d comply with my wishes.”

He rolled his eyes dramatically.

“Are you tired?”

“Not anymore, my dear. Not with you standing there in my robe. What’s underneath?”

“Guess.”

“What do I win if I’m correct?”

“A kiss.”

“Where?”

She giggled. “Here.” She pointed to her cheek. “Worth it?”

His gaze spanned every inch of her, an approving smile on his lips. “Every bit,” he said seriously. “You’re wearing the only chemise you own.”

She pointed to her cheek again, and he followed with a chaste kiss, then he wrapped his arms securely around her and kissed her throat. “Before you get too carried away, I have a proposition.”

He pulled back, scratching his forehead. “Will I like this, or will it exhaust me?”

“It might make your day.”

“Or night?” The upswing in his voice matched the gleam in his eye.

“For me, they are all the same since I rarely leave this house.” She hadn’t intended to guilt him into compliance, meaning nothing by the remark, but he grimaced and nodded. “The challenge of the wager happens in the billiard room.”

“Lead the way.” If his boyish grin were any indication, he considered this a win before the competition began.

Before Rochester closed the door, she had a box of billiard balls open, placing two on the baize. One red, one white.

“Are you setting up my shot?”

“No,” she said as she picked a cue stick from the rack. “I’m setting up mine.”

“Yours?” He chuckled, not uncomplimentary just astonished.

“I’ve been practicing. Now, the wager is a bit of truth if I sink a ball.” She placed the red ball in line with a corner pocket and grabbed the stick rest because she wasn’t tall enough for the reach.” She placed both the rest and the stick on the table while she cinched the robe tighter.

“If you remove the robe, I’m not likely to care if you miss the shot at all.” He leaned an elbow on the high bar, his head resting on his hand. A man of arrogant leisure, watching her as if she were the sport.

“I’d be happy to if I thought it would help my game.”

“Remind me what the wager is.”

“A bit of truth.”

He looked wary and challenged her with a cocked eyebrow.

“I want to know why this little trip to Bath destroyed all chance for us. Unless, of course, it’s a convenient excuse.”

He straightened, crossing his arms. “No, not about Bath.”

“Then it’s an excuse?” She knew it wasn’t. He needed baiting.

“You know it isn’t. But it’s not my story to tell. Not completely.”

“Winn told his wife, I’m sure of it.”

“You’re not my wife, Evelyn.” She would never get used to his brash remarks.

She picked up the white ball, balancing it in her palm and examining its weight.

“Don’t you dare throw that ball.”

She tossed it back and forth between her hands, a stern, determined stare boring into him.

He hissed a sigh, dragging his hands through his hair. “All right, for God’s sake, but you’re giving me back my shilling. And if you miss the damn shot, I say nothing.”

“Deal.” She began setting up the shot again.

“The shilling first.”

“You don’t trust me?”

“Should I? You’ve tricked me here, darling.”

She left him alone, flew to her room, and brought back the shilling. She placed it on the table, but before she made another move, he snatched it up, bent at the waist, and stuffed the coin into the side of his boot. Then, with a lazy smile, he leaned against the bar, his arms folded. He inclined his head toward the table.

She set the red ball again, lined up the white behind it, and set the rest. Careful that everything was in place, she sighted down the cue stick, adjusted her stance, and sucked in a nervous breath. It wasn’t just the bet. She was nervous because he watched her play a game that he’d mastered. Her robe fell open, but she ignored it. With a hardy tap, she sent the white ball clacking into the red one and then held her breath, waiting for the red ball to fall into the pocket. It wobbled near the edge, and for a heart-stopping moment, she thought it would stick, and then it fell into the leather netting. She felt it in her soul.

When she looked up, he was staring at her. “I did it!”

“Very nice, Goose.”

“Did you see it?”

He chuckled. "Of course, but you're standing there in a thin chemise. What shall I look at now?"

She ran to him on bare feet, throwing her arms around his neck and feeling safe as always when his hands, warm and strong, slid under the robe, around her waist. He held her tight while her heart beat with this small success.

She pulled back. "Now, the wager."

He lowered his mouth and kissed her hard, his fingers digging into her back, his tongue memorizing her mouth as if they'd never have this chance again. A moan growled in his throat, and he splayed a hand over her breast. "You're mine, Goose," he whispered in her ear. "Don't you ever forget that."

She clung to him, wondering at the cryptic remark.

He set her back from him. "I'll tell you my part. But first, tell me what your father said about Winn's absence."

"He never said anything more than Winn had taken a holiday. I assumed you and Darrington, along with Winn, had planned it together. I didn't see you again after my come-out. I wrote to Winn. Did he get my letters?"

"I'm certain he did."

"He never wrote back. I just thought you were all young, reckless men."

"We were." He scrubbed a hand across his mouth. She backed up against the table and watched him flounder for the right words.

"It can't be all that bad."

“We broke the rules, Evelyn. Rules that could have changed our lives and ruined others.” He pointed a look at her.

“I’m listening.”

“It started innocently enough. Darrington and I had followed Winn to your come-out because Winn was enamored with Adeline. After Darrington and I had a few drinks, we decided that the overly sweet innocence of such an affair was not to our liking, and the last place we wanted to be was at a debutante ball. So we took our inebriated selves and decided to play out our lot at a rather disreputable gaming hell. Winn, of course, followed us. We were loud and obnoxious, and your brother wouldn’t have a drop of liquor because he thought we needed a nursemaid.”

“I’m guessing he was right.”

Rochester nodded, smirking with a lopsided smile. “More than right. For my part, I gambled away seven thousand pounds in less than ten minutes. Darrington didn’t do much better, and Winn bet nothing at all. There were words thrown about. The proprietor had taken a dislike to Darrington right away, and he wasn’t keen on titled men. Since that was my future, the man didn’t care for me either. The house cheated, and we lost. We were stupid and drunk and saying things only young, foolish fops say. Running our mouths in the wrong part of Town.”

“And?”

“And that’s my part.”

“It doesn’t make sense. That was five years ago. Stupid is not a crime.”

“The way we did it, it was. Our reputations were at stake, but more than anything, your reputation was at stake. Darrington’s sisters would have been affected as well,

and your father wouldn't allow it. He loves you that much."

"But the house cheated. You didn't."

"I didn't."

Her eyes went round, and she sucked in a breath. "Winn did," she whispered. "He didn't lose."

"He didn't bet. He wasn't drunk. He wasn't to blame. But he paid the price."

"Seven thousand pounds," she said in awe. "And Darrington? How much did he lose?"

Rochester rolled his eyes. He looked pained.

"I've already guessed it. You might as well tell all."

He swallowed. "Darrington lost enough. The total between us was over ten thousand pounds. It was a fortune, Evelyn. And Winn, being as young and foolish as we were, decided the house was at fault, and he,"—he shook his head—"he won it back."

"Winn is a master at card tricks."

Rochester nodded, pulling his arms closer to his chest.

"All of it? He cheated and won all of it back?"

"Yes. The house accused him, and there was nothing we could do. If it had been a hundred pounds, the outcome would have been bad, but not a matter of fraud. In the right court, Winn could have seen the gallows or at least prison, and you would have

never made a decent marriage. It was serious. It wasn't a game."

"You ran away."

"No," he said emphatically. "But we were rescued from ourselves by a benefactor who not only paid the sum of ten thousand but also a hefty fine. And Winn left in hopes of keeping gossip from forming."

"Did my father ask him to leave?"

"Ask Winn the circumstances, not me."

"And the benefactor? Did he demand retribution?"

Rochester laughed, a haunted hollow sound in his chest. "He paid it all and demanded that we stay away forever. Coming home was a risk." He licked his lips. "You here is an even bigger risk than just a few scandalous rules broken. If your father finds out, if Winn finds out, I'm a dead man at the end of a dueling pistol. Can't you see that? My actions as a young idiot almost ruined your life. And here we are, and I'm doing it all over again."

"You said my father has money. You know that because he was the benefactor."

"Of course. And I've tried to make retribution. I've tried to apologize. I've tried to pay him back. But he'll have none of it. I am persona non-grata. He does not want me near you. So you see, this thing we have will never work."

"I think it's working rather well."

He reached forward and took her arm, bringing her to him. With his arms around her again, his head propped on the top of hers, she heard his heart hammering fiercely. "I

love you, Evelyn, but your father will never have me.”

“But I will. I don’t blame you.”

“You should. It’s my fault Winn had to go away. Darrington and I thought we owed it to him to follow. So, we left too. And I don’t wish to speak ill of your father. He has done what he thinks is best for you. This baron, I’m sure, is perfect.”

She pounded her fist on his chest. “Don’t say that. It isn’t true. And my father cannot hold a grudge forever.”

“He uses the money I owe him against me. He threatens to make it a legal matter of debt if I ever cross him again. That would ruin me in the business world, and God knows my father has done nothing to secure a decent future for my inherited title. Rochester will live on in infamy of some kind. Did you hear about Lord Rochester’s faltering ruse of a business? They’d throw the fool in debtor’s prison if they could . That’s what the ton would say if they knew. My wife, my children, would not survive the cut. You know how evil people are.” Knuckles brushed her cheek like a feather, and eyes of pure love caressed her.

“I’ll talk to him.”

“No, Evelyn. You’ll make it worse. I promise.”

At two in the morning, Evelyn cried herself to sleep. There had to be something she could do. Her father was pigheaded, she knew that. But that his concern for her would, in turn, make her miserable could not continue.

CHAPTER 16

“Good, you’re alone,” Evelyn said the following morning while Rochester worked at his desk. He looked up without moving his head, a questioning quirk of his mouth.

“I want you to know that I’ve taken into account all that you said last night.”

He sat back in his chair, his hands steepled at his lips, his eyes sharp.

She swallowed her apprehension. “This whole debacle can be remedied.”

“How so?”

“I don’t care about reputation. I don’t care about anything but you. So, I suggest you stop dillydallying around and take me to bed once and for all.” For emphasis, she planted her fists on her hips and raised her chin in defiance. She had expected a roll of eyes and laughter. She had not expected anger.

He stood and moved to stand in front of the desk. His feet braced wide, and his arms crossed. “You think you’re the catalyst to fix it all? Yes, Evelyn, your perfect idea to break a rule will make it all go away.” His arms expanded to encompass the room. “And my reputation means nothing, of course, because we can live on your missing dowry. You know the one your father will no doubt rescind? I hope you like scrubbing pots, or God forbid, you don’t know how because we won’t have a shilling to our name. I suppose Lovie could take us in. Hudson, too, because God knows he has nowhere to go.” He poked a finger to the desk with emphasis. “This isn’t about you and me. You’ve created a little safe world in this house, but it’s about to get a

whole lot bigger because the week is up, my dear. Reality is on the way.”

“Reality is standing right here in front of you. Why not take it, Rochester?”

“We cannot, Evelyn. We’ve talked about this.”

“Why? Why not? I don’t understand.”

“You do understand.”

“Because it’s too far? Because it will ruin me? In my opinion, Rochester, the things we’ve done together are far more intimate than the act itself. I dare you to prove me wrong.”

He stared at her, chewing his bottom lip, his hands on his hips like that darn pirate she couldn’t stop envisioning. “Legally speaking,” he started to say.

“I don’t give a damn about legalities, I assure you. You want a mistress? Is that it? Fine. Because I’m not leaving this house until you’re mine and I’m yours. Do you understand that, Rochester?”

He just stood there, frozen, his cheek twitching.

“Well?”

“Well, then, I guess you should start calling me Dalton.” He moved forward with two long strides, grabbed her hand, and pulled her forcibly along. She tripped to keep up with him, her wrist smarting at the vice grip he had on her.

When they reached his bedroom, which had belonged to her for a week, he shoved open the door with enough force to send it crashing into the wall. He pulled her

along, propelled her into the center of the room, then turned and kicked the door closed.

“Everyone within the walls of this house will have heard that.”

“Perfect. Then your plan has worked. Now, take off your clothes.” He jerked out of his dress coat and threw it over the back of a chair.

“You don’t want to hang that up? It’s not like you to throw your fine clothes about.”

“Why are you still dressed? I thought this is what you wanted?”

“I suppose it is, but I will not stand here and just strip out of my clothes.” She tried for indignant, but his mood was changing quickly.

“Then I guarantee you won’t last long as a mistress, darling. They are paid to strip on command at the discretion of their benefactor.”

“I know you say things you don’t mean when you’re angry, Rochester.”

“Dalton,” he yelled, demanded.

She resigned herself to a grimace. “All right, Dalton. Why are you doing this? It’s not like you.” She took a step back. “You love me. I know you do. And I love you to the bottom of my scheming soul.”

That got a loud hiss, a slight roll of the eyes, and a reluctant grin from him. His hands fell from his hips, and his shoulders lost their stiffness.

“I do love you, Evelyn Markham, and that’s why I’m doing this, to dissuade you. You silly goose.”

“You failed because I don’t care how or where. I just want you. You think you’re doing me a noble service by leaving my maidenhead intact, but I’m not a virgin.”

“What?” He shook his head as if to clear it. “Who do I need to kill?”

“No one, you oaf. You’ve put every other part of yourself inside me, so why not that one?” She pointed to his groin. “I haven’t been a virgin since you kissed me, since your fingers were inside me, since your mouth possessed me completely, since your tongue tasted every inch of me. You think adding that piece of your anatomy to the process will ruin me? Dalton Rochester, you ruined me a long time ago.”

The look of shock and outrage left his countenance replaced with compassion and kindness. “I know what you’re saying, Goose, and believe me, hearing you say such things makes me wonder what kind of fool I am not to tear off your clothes and make love to you right there.” He motioned to the bed behind her.

She pulled in her chin and smiled wickedly, stepping toward him. “Dalton, I want you. I want you to make love to me.”

He shut his eyes.

“I want you to fornicate with me, join me in bed sport, tumble me, collude with me in convivial society, a stitch, a tiff, riding St. George right into amorous congress. All of it.” With every proposal, she took another step.

At her last suggestion, his eyes popped open, and he searched her with humor.

“I don’t care what you call it. It’s all the same to me because it will be with you. You make it all a pleasure, a good deed, a loving word. You’re all I want—all I’ve ever wanted.” She stood directly in front of him.

His fingers crawled through her hair, her face cradled in his hands. He touched his forehead to hers. "I am either the luckiest man in the world or the stupidest."

"Or both?"

He kissed her. "Yes."

She wrapped her arms around his middle, feeling the muscles under his shirt ripple and flex with her touch. His body was warm, his heart like music under her ear, and he smelled like home.

"I can't marry you."

She squeezed him around the waist like she knew this would be the last time she felt truly safe, truly wanted, despite his disregard.

"I wish with all my heart that I could." He cocooned her against him, his arms enveloping her shoulders. "We already belong to each other. That won't change."

She pulled back but not out of his arms. "Talk to him."

"I have talked to him."

"But not about me."

"I know his answer. You know his answer."

She moved away, walked to the window, and stared out at Hyde Park in the distance. She hugged herself, coldness seeping in where his warmth had scorched her. "Gretna Green. I don't need permission." She turned to look at him. "I'm old enough, and I don't care about money or my dowry. I truly don't understand this thing you have

about your reputation. If you're a good man, a good businessman, what else do you need?" She pleaded with him. "I am trying so hard to understand. I am trying not to feel slighted or jilted. Can't you do this for me? Am I not worth it? Is this a frivolous tryst?"

"This was not a tryst."

"Was? You'd rather watch me wed another man?"

He looked away, his throat convulsed.

Evelyn went to the dressing room and came out with what few items of clothing she had. The apricot dress, all but destroyed like her heart, an extra chemise thanks to Mrs. Hawke and her marginally acceptable stockings from that rainy night. She was wearing Mrs. Hawke's clothes today, and she'd travel home in them.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm packing. It's time. If you could have Hudson perhaps purchase me a ticket for Horley, I'll return to Winn's and write Papa from there. I can use the time to lick my wounds and find a way to stay a spinster. Fully intact." She flared her eyes at him. "Papa can use my dowry to pay the baron whatever fine there may be, if any."

"I'll take you to Winn's. You're not riding post."

"You?" She pivoted. "We'll kill each other before we leave the city. Me, because I'm trying to hate you. And you will be forced to defend yourself. Somehow, we'll both end up in the Times. The mystery of a grizzly murder. Was it a crazed highwayman, or is it Romeo and Juliet?"

"Very dramatic. We'd be famous," he said, his hands in his pockets.

“And there would go our reputations.” She shrugged. “So you see, fate cannot be changed. I’ve ruined you, and you’ve ruined me.”

He should have taken her to bed. Rochester had been chanting that to himself for an hour since they left London. Her surly attitude remained, and he couldn’t blame her. He was a heel, a fool, an idiot, and a madman.

“The shilling,” Evelyn said after an hour of hellish silence.

He preferred arguing to silence. This had promise.

“I want it back,” she demanded again.

“No. I’ve become rather fond of it, and I don’t think my shoes fit well otherwise.” In truth, it was his heart that would not fit without it. His chest felt painfully empty already, and she wasn’t even gone yet. He rubbed the tightness under his breastbone.

“You didn’t win it. You took it from me.”

“I disagree.”

“Why, because you cheated when you missed that original shot? Or because you insisted I pay to wager with you yesterday?”

He closed his eyes against the word that had haunted him for five years. She hadn’t said it malevolently, but it hurt like hell because that one night, that one mistake put him in this place. He’d give anything to go back to that night and make different choices. Not drink. Not gamble away a year’s income. Not cheat to get it back. They were all three wiser, more sensible now.

But if truth be told, he would do it again if it led to her. Would he be in this scrape

otherwise? Would he know her—all of her—if not for those decisions? It was foolish to even wonder.

There was no denying his future sat across from him, and he couldn't imagine a life without her. So why didn't he try? True, Winn and Adeline were happy. They deserved it because it was Winn who'd put his neck on the line, almost literally. He and Darrington deserved to face the fallout. Not Winn.

He gazed at Evelyn, her mouth drawn and her arms tightly woven, her green eyes lashing out, resolved to hate him.

"I didn't cheat," he said.

"You missed on purpose. Please, for the love of God, just admit it."

"Which is the greater move? Banking a shot on purpose, or making it? You don't think I considered my actions? A beautiful woman whispers in my ear, I'll make your day . What right-minded bachelor would turn down such an offer?"

She raised a brow and smirked. Answer enough.

"I'll give you another shilling, and you can keep it in your shoe."

"It's my shilling. You didn't earn it. And I want it back," she said emphatically.

"I'll think about it."

"I'm so relieved." She breathed and rolled her eyes.

"All right, Goose. What's the plan?"

She looked up at him, suddenly interested. “What do you mean? You’re taking me to Winn’s.”

“And I’m going to speak to him. But I have no doubt your brother is going to beat me to a pulp if he doesn’t shoot me first.”

She bit into an answering smile that pulled at her cheeks. “He wouldn’t dare.”

“He would, and he will. But I love you. And if another man touched you, I’d kill him. That’s the truth.”

“It would be even better if I am completely ruined when we arrive. Right here. There’s plenty of room.”

He started to laugh because he knew she was serious. “Not a chance. If I die in a duel, you’ll need your virtue so everyone will pine over my death at such a grave error.”

“Will you stay?”

“Goose, your brother won’t let me take one step into that house because when he sees your smile and my face, he’ll know. Memorize my nose as it is now because by tomorrow, it will be broken and bruised, and my spleen may be skewered.”

“Not your spleen?” she gasped, then sobered. “Thank you, Rochester.”

“Dalton.”

CHAPTER 17

Their arrival at the Markhams' residence was a flurry of confused elation. Mrs. Markham, Adeline, did not greet the newcomers. But Winn was in the drive before Evelyn alighted. Rochester checked over his shoulder while holding her hand and helping her down the step.

"I have it, Dalton."

His gaze snapped to hers. Though he appreciated her using his name, he hoped Winn had not heard his sister refer to him in the familiar.

"Evelyn Markham, thank goodness you're here. I was ready to send a search party." Winn ran a hand through his walnut-brown hair and made a quick perusal of Rochester. He could see the muscle in his square jaw popping. Neither said a word.

"Why ever for?" Evelyn asked. "I came straight from Rosewood for a visit."

"Nice try, Sister."

"What do you mean?" she asked, but Rochester could see her firm resolve to keep up the pretense, albeit uselessly.

"I received word today asking about your week-long visit," Winn said as Evelyn visibly flinched. "Father asked if you might be ready to return home since a certain Lord Cumberland is apparently eager for your acquaintance."

“Well, that is tricky, isn’t it?”

Winn’s face changed from irony to raw irritation, and his pupils filled his otherwise bright amber eyes. He pointed a finger at her. “You don’t say a word to Adeline, do you understand? She has enough to worry over. And,” he continued, reaching behind and grabbing Rochester by the lapel, “Mr. Rochester and I are going to have a friendly chat.” He gritted out the last part.

Rochester gave Evelyn an I told you so glare.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Winn, be nice to him. He saved my life.”

She walked away, both men watching her go, Winn still holding Rochester by the lapel. As soon as she disappeared into the manor, Winn turned on him. He gave Rochester a shove before removing his grip.

“Suppose you tell me where her chaperone is?”

“You’ll have to ask her. I’m not privy to such things.”

Winn shook his head; a storm brewed behind the snorting sigh. “I’m asking you, Rochester, because I thought you were my friend.”

“You know, that’s exactly what your sister said to me. The two of you have the same habit of guilt. A family trait, do you think?”

“Just tell me if I need to call you out.” Winn’s teeth sawed back and forth, and his cheek twitched.

“That depends.”

“Why, for the love of God, Rochester, did you pick her? I trusted you. Am I to suspect you of poor behavior at the Kingsley’s Christmas party too?”

“Should I suspect yours?” Rochester resented the question.

Winn didn’t hesitate at the innuendo, and Rochester never saw it coming. The first blow connected with his jaw. The surprise more than the force knocked him back a step. The second blow he deflected but didn’t return it. He bent his head to the left and spit. No blood, but his jaw was on fire.

“I will allow that one, Winn, but hit me again, and I’ll not pull my punch.”

“You’re wasting your time if you expect an apology.”

“I don’t expect one. For the remark alone, I deserve it. But it hurts that you would question my behavior or loyalty at the Christmas masquerade when you yourself asked me to watch her. And for what, my friend?”

Huffing like a bull, Winn breathed heavily. His gaze traveled the ground, and he shook his head, a look of self-disgust on his face.

“I’ve never asked what happened between you and Adeline. Are you not to offer me the same courtesy?”

“Don’t you talk to me of courtesy.” Winn pointed an accusing finger at Rochester, then pointed toward the house. “She’s my sister!”

“At least invite me in and let me explain.”

Winn didn’t budge. “Have you ruined her?”

“If you’ll just listen.”

“Answer the bloody question. Did. You. Ruin her?”

“No.” It was the absolute truth. He felt good he could say that much. But in every other sense of the word, he had ruined her, and she had ruined him.

The tension in Winn’s body, his whole countenance, visibly relaxed. The cut of his jaw softened. His eyes were less accusing. “I apologize,” he said, having gained some control.

“Don’t apologize, and before you get angry again, hear me out, please. I know your primary concern is for your wife, so let’s talk here, and then I’ll leave.”

“I take it I’m not going to like what I hear.”

“I can’t imagine you will.” Rochester’s heart felt heavy with guilt mixed with raw emotion for Evelyn.

Winn’s nostrils flared, and his teeth grinding returned anew.

Rochester held up his hands. “She’s not ruined. That much is true. If she wants to go home and marry the simpering baron—those are her words, not mine—there’s no reason she can’t do that.”

“I’m listening.” He was, but his arms were crossed, and his feet were spread, cemented to the ground.

“Evelyn had it in her peagoose brain to dissuade this match your father made without her consent. I won’t tell you how because I don’t want you angry with her. You can rage at me all day but leave her be.” He waited for some show of agreement.

“Yes, yes. Fine,” Winn finally said, flipping his hand toward him. “I know how determined Evelyn can be.”

“And a trifle stubborn.”

Winn shut his eyes. “Agreed.”

“In a short span of time, she sent me four messages which, before you make assumptions, I did not answer. But, I did feel compelled to show up at the events she attended. For her sake, I might add, not mine. Obviously, I wished to avoid this kind of thing.”

Winn gave up a sigh. “Thank you. I appreciate you looking out for her.”

“After two weeks of keeping her out of trouble, she sent me the last message I would receive. That one was so full of desperation that I answered it in person.”

“What did it say?”

“One word. Help.”

“That could have meant anything. She can be melodramatic.”

“This was not drama, my friend. By the time I tracked her whereabouts, she’d been at Rosewood for two days. Apparently, this baron was to visit and begin some kind of courtship. I believe the betrothal was ready for a signature, and Evelyn hadn’t even met the man properly except for a brief encounter at the theater.”

“And you know all this because?”

“Because when I dashed off to Rosewood, I found her climbing out a window in the

middle of the godforsaken night. And it's a good thing I showed up because she took a tumble from the trellis. Your father wasn't there. I believe the betrothal is what she was trying to avoid."

"God forbid. Was she hurt?" There was real concern etched on Winn's face.

"The goose was fine. I caught her, and my backside took the brunt of it." He paused for a reaction regarding his part but none came. Rochester chuckled. "I'm fine, really, no broken bones. Not a one." He mocked, hoping his usual humor would diffuse the situation.

Winn rolled his eyes skyward. "Any bruises?" he mocked. "Did you muss your favorite waistcoat?" Winn smirked.

"Your concern warms my heart."

"Finish already."

"I tried to convince her to stay at Rosewood. To meet this man. That perhaps she would like him. I told her that your father wanted the best for her. He always has."

Winn looked him up and down. "He's going to kill you, you know that?"

"I've little doubt."

"My father thinks she's been on holiday rustivating here for a week. So where has she been? I stood right here and heard her address you as Dalton. No one calls you Dalton."

Rochester scratched his head and grimaced. "That's a little more difficult." Not many called him by his given name, which was true. His mother had, his cousins might, and

every great now and again, Winn or Darrington had called him Dalton. But it wasn't the norm, and Evelyn had used it with familiarity.

Rochester tried to explain. "That night, I insisted she come here because she refused to go back home. I put her in my coach, and we set out for here, but it was pouring rain, and the roads were flooded. The mud was so thick the horses could not trudge through, much less the coach wheels. We nearly got stuck for a night. Quite literally. When we managed to pull the coach free from the sucking mud, there was nothing else to do but turn around."

"But not Rosewood."

"No."

Winn stared at him for a long, breath-holding moment. "You could have taken her to Lady Clover's if not home."

Rochester swallowed. "Winn, you weren't there. I couldn't do that. It would have involved Lady Clover's silence, not to mention Kingsley's. There was no chance of that and no choice left to me. Besides, it was nearly dawn by the time we reached Mayfair."

"God's teeth, Rochester! You took her to your home?"

He nodded.

Winn rolled his shoulders, cracking his neck from side to side. "And you did nothing for a week? You told no one for a week?" Winn's tone was understandably accusatory.

"Winn," Rochester said quickly. "I'm in love with her. I couldn't take her back to

Rosewood.”

“He’ll never agree, especially now,” Winn said of his father.

“I have to try, don’t I? Should I stand by while she’s forced to marry another man? Would you do that? Better yet, would you want that for her?”

“Of course not. But it doesn’t mean I want you, either. You forget how well I know you.”

“We all have done things we’re not proud of. Those three years exiled to Bath...” Rochester shook his head. “All of us, Winn. Darrington too. Drunk most nights, carousing the rest. We were young. But you’ve changed, so why can’t I?”

Winn scrubbed his face. “You think I want to hate you? Dammit.” He sighed, frustration in every movement.

“I didn’t plan on this. I tried to reason with her, but she wouldn’t listen.”

“Not ruined, that’s what you say, but I know you, Rochester. How? If you loved her, then how could you?”

Rochester licked his lips. “I’ve not lied.”

“Did you kiss her?”

“Oh, for the love of God, what do you think? You’re not her father, Winn. Support her choices. That’s what a brother does.”

Winn gave him a sharp look. “As if you’d know.”

That one hurt. It wasn't Rochester's choosing to be ostracized or for his brother to make accusations that were not only painful but not true. He had the joy of his cousins from his mother's side. But Rochester had painfully allowed his brother to steal and manipulate his father's side. Winn knew where to hit, and that was low.

"Should I ask how Evelyn feels about this? What will I find out from her answers?"

"She's a grown woman, Winn. Ask her yourself." Rochester quickly lost patience with the conversation. He understood Winn's position, but he was sorely tired of being treated like a child.

They stared at one another, neither looking away, neither relenting. And then Winn shook his head. "I shouldn't have said that about your family. I'm just angry and not at you. I'm angry with my father because he's put her in this position, and I know why. He sees me married. He sees Evelyn's best friend, and he expects that it's time. He's not a bad man, just a hurting one."

"Aren't we all? It's not an excuse. And Winn?"

"What?"

"Don't ever ask me again for an accounting of my private affairs and of what goes on between me and the woman I love. I don't care who she is to you. Your concern should be who she is to me."

Winn bit back a retort behind his clamped teeth and put out his hand. "My sister? But she's so irritating."

Rochester took Winn's hand as they both chuckled. "Then I suppose that will be my punishment."

“I hope so. I truly do, Rochester. But you’re not married yet, and at this rate, you won’t be because I believe the betrothal has been signed, and the first week of banns have been read.”

“How is that possible without Evelyn’s consent?”

“An old parish vicar who knows the family doesn’t need something so trivial as consent.”

“Well, that bloody well changes things.”

“Dare I ask how?”

“No. Just give me the name of the parish.”

“You’ll create a scandal.”

“Which you can blame on your father if he won’t see me first.”

Rochester wanted to say goodbye to Evelyn, but he knew Winn’s concern for his wife would override Rochester’s desire to see Evelyn again.

It didn’t matter. Time was of the essence. He had two weeks to change Mr. Henry Markham’s mind.

CHAPTER 18

After Evelyn left Rochester to see Winn, she was given a room where she cleaned up for her visit—a visit her father had thought she'd been on for a week. Rochester had not come to say goodbye, or more likely, Winn had not allowed it. But she put that aside to sit with her new sister-in-law, Adeline Markham, sharing a light dinner in Adeline's boudoir.

"Addy, you're radiant," Evelyn exclaimed to her dearest friend, who would make her an aunt in the next month or so.

"I look as if I ate the whole goose," Adeline said.

The mention of a goose made her long for a home that wasn't even hers. She'd spent a week with Rochester, had grown comfortable in his home, and felt as if she belonged there. Certainly, she belonged to him even if he had refused to completely compromise her. Now, she wondered what had become of Rochester and Winn's encounter.

What she did find when she arrived at her brother's home was a note addressed to her from her father. Of course, he would assume she had been at Winn's the whole time. The note alarmed her. It told of how her father looked forward to her returning home where she would meet her soon-to-be betrothed, that her future was looking bright, and that she should consider her trousseau. He even suggested Adeline's help with some light planning.

"Winn tells me there may be a wedding soon."

Completely distracted, Evelyn asked, “Whose?”

“Yours, silly. What is your baron like? Dashing? Handsome, I imagine.”

“I wouldn’t say he’s dashing. Handsome enough, I suppose, but not dashing.”

“Why do I have the feeling you aren’t agreeable to the match?” Addy watched her closely, skepticism written in the lines of her forehead and the grounding undertone of her voice. “Are you not excited?”

“Excited isn’t the word for how I feel,” she prevaricated. “I’m still stunned, and I’d rather talk about you.” With a spark in her voice, she squared her shoulders and folded her hands.

Adeline readjusted her seat, one hand on her growing belly and the other flat on the chair. She looked uncomfortable, and Evelyn knew she was further along than most expected.

“We shouldn’t be sitting in these hardwood chairs. Let me help you to bed or at least to the well-cushioned sofa.”

Addy pointed to the sofa as she grunted, lifting her hips off the chair first and looking as if she’d slide right out and onto the floor. Evelyn rushed to aid her. With a hand supporting Addy’s elbow, Evelyn helped her stand, and as she did so, reality set in. The emotion of seeing her friend in such a place, and imagining her own mother similarly excited, gave her joy. She’d never considered those months her mother carried her prior to birth. The event had always been associated with such sadness and guilt, but now she saw it for the miracle it was.

Without thinking, she pressed her hand to Adeline’s belly, imagining the joy her mother must have felt carrying her. Her father never blamed her, and perhaps this was

why. He'd seen his wife living out the joy of motherhood with a look toward the future. Evelyn was that future. Her father wanted to see her happy, thriving, married.

"It's so remarkable, Addy, this little life inside you. I can't believe my nephew or niece is right here in the room with us. What's it like?"

"A hiccup at first. A little tickle right here." She moved Evelyn's hand just below her navel. "And then those little butterfly wings become thumps." She moved her hand to the side of her belly. "And then jabs and the sensation of rolling. I think this is the head or the bottom, according to the doctor."

At the top of her stomach was a round knot, and as Evelyn cradled the small bump in her hand, she felt a wave under Adeline's skin. Evelyn snatched her hand back and then returned it, but the babe had settled. She felt her face stretched with a full smile, and her eyes wide open with wonder.

"Winn is beside himself."

"I can imagine. He's so worried for you," Evelyn said without thinking. "I'm sorry. That was insensitive of me. I'm certain there's naught to worry about."

Addy gave her arm a reassuring squeeze. "Help me sit." When they were comfortable, Addy continued, "Winn worries too much, but I want you to know that I'm not worried at all, so don't treat me like a fragile bird. I can handle it. This must be difficult for you, and that's all right if you wish to say it. We're friends, Evelyn, good friends, close enough for the truth."

Evelyn nodded and smiled a thank you.

Addy brought Evelyn's hand to her cheek. "I think this is harder for you and Winn than it is for me."

Tears burned Evelyn's eyes, not because of the baby or Winn, but because she wanted so badly to confide in her friend. She needed it. "I didn't come here to upset everyone."

"So why don't you tell me what's really happening since you'll never convince me that you're overjoyed to marry a man you hardly know."

Evelyn brushed a tear from her cheek. "I don't know him at all, and I'm in a real pinch."

"Then it's good you came to stay with us for a while. You're welcome for as long as you need. I'll make certain Winn doesn't cut your visit before you're ready. Truly, it's a comfort to me. I can use the diversion."

"The truth is that I'm in love with someone else, and no one knows of it. Not yet." Addy cocked a brow when Evelyn shyly looked at her.

"Does Rochester know?" Adeline asked tentatively.

Evelyn looked away, nodding her answer.

"And does he return it?"

Evelyn nodded again, her heart beating a pang of despair. "But Winn forbids me to speak of it with you."

"Winn knows?" Adeline looked aghast.

"I believe he does." She raised her eyes to meet Addy's. "Rochester brought me here."

“Alone?”

“Two footmen and a driver,” she said cheekily. “So, yes. Alone. Papa thinks I’ve been here for a week.” Evelyn had the good sense to grimace because the conclusion was obvious. “When I left Rochester in the drive, Winn had him by the collar, both watching me disappear into the house. And you can’t tell him, Adeline. Winn will kill me if he knows I told you anything, which just means that Rochester won’t be invited to stay even the night.”

Addy smirked. “Well, isn’t that a case of the pot and the kettle? Winn should understand because he’s been there himself.” She paused to sigh, pulling her mouth to the side. “Evelyn, your brother is an idiot sometimes.” She said it with such force that Evelyn burst with laughter.

“And now he’s yours forever, you poor lamb.” Evelyn patted her hand with mock sympathy, laughing all the while. And Addy joined her. Her family had grown in such a lovely way, and she wanted that for herself. She wanted it with Rochester.

They spent hours catching up on the Season’s amusements like how Clover and Evelyn had played billiards and how they’d outsmarted Lord Cumberland. When it was time to retire, Evelyn smiled all the way to her room, thinking about the billiard game and her wager with Rochester, which only reminded her why he refused to consummate their union and why he wouldn’t marry her. She’d as soon run away with him and live as his paramour than live without him. The trouble was she knew that he wanted that, too. This stubbornness had more to do with a deeper trigger than just impropriety.

A candle guttered In the hallway, the dark night a backdrop in the window at the end of the long corridor. The night rail Adeline loaned her hung over her left arm like a waiter’s cloth, and she would be forever thankful for the few extra items Mrs. Hawke had given her.

Candlelight preceded her into her room while a low burning fire lit the interior with dancing shadows. She shut the door, a smile on her face until she looked to her left and caught the eerie glow of a man leaning against the bedpost. When she stopped short, he uncrossed his arms.

“Dalton?” she asked hesitantly. It had to be him.

“Who else?” came his strong, soothing voice, a gentle, erotic balm to her soul.

A mist of tears stung the backs of her eyes, and her stomach dropped. The ordeal, the scorching trail of love they’d shared this past week, caught her by surprise. This beautiful man had rescued her every time, so why should now be any different?

“Why the tears, Goose?”

Her heart squeezed, thumping erratically, overwhelming her very breath. She stuttered, “Why are you here?”

He walked forward as his warm hands squeezed her upper arms and drew her to him. Without a word or warning, his mouth crushed hers. She folded into the familiar contours of his body, her arms sliding around his neck and the taste of salty tears on her tongue. He kissed her as if they hadn’t seen each other in an age.

“Are you stealing me away again?” Hope rose in her chest. His paramour, his mistress, elopement, she’d do it all for him, with him.

“No,” he answered. “But if speaking sense to your father doesn’t work, pack a bag, sweet.”

“And you came here to tell me that?”

“Not exactly. I came to consummate the marriage before the wedding.” His smile was wicked but also full of compassion and promise, and she recognized it as love.

Her mouth parted with wonder at his determination. “Truly?”

“Isn’t that what you wanted?” He brushed a lock of hair behind her ear.

She nodded, a trifle dumbfounded and more than a little nervous. Her eyes searched his face and lighted on his mouth. Under her thumb, she felt the swell of his upper lip, fuller than usual. He grimaced with a soft grunt but didn’t pull away. “You’re hurt.”

“Not much.”

“Who hit you?” As if she needed to ask.

“That would be your brother, love.”

“The clodpoll. What was he thinking?”

“Everything I told you he would. He took me to task, and although we ended on agreeable terms, he didn’t wish for me to stay and possibly upset his wife. I don’t doubt he’s still a little angry. You are his younger sister, after all.”

“Well, I suppose we can be grateful for his abiding love for Addy. But I fail to understand his anger with you. Did you tell him you love me?”

He chuckled, a wry, wicked twist to his bruised lip. “Do you really think he was in the mood for a deeply serious conversation? I hardly had time to beg him to listen, yet I didn’t fight him back.”

“Why the bother not?”

“Do you not know me by now? Have I failed you yet?” He tilted his head.

“No.” Raw emotion melted her heart.

“I deserved it, and Winn deserved the opportunity to seek retribution of a sort. He’s coming around. I’ve no worry of that, but your father is another matter.”

“But you’ll try?”

“Yes, my love. I will try.” His palms cradled her cheeks as he kissed her softly. “But first, I shall guarantee his compliance,” he said, scooping her up and carrying her to the bed.

A nervous laugh bubbled as he lowered her to the mattress. “After all our encounters, this one scares me the most.”

“It should. It’s rather permanent,” he said, shouldering out of his coat. He watched her intently while nimble fingers loosened his cravat, then expertly popped the buttons of his waistcoat.

She sat up, facing away from him, and pointed to the buttons down her back. “Your assistance, please.” The bed dipped where his knee rested near her. One, two, three, he released the buttons, pausing to kiss her neck, his warm breath near her ear.

“You know what I remember of you the most?”

Locks of her hair tickled her bare shoulders as she shook her head.

“You lying on the sofa at the club in my unbuttoned ruby waistcoat. One breast revealed, the other barely hidden, and the taste of you on my lips.”

Bending her head back, she looked up at him, and he kissed her forehead.

“You’re like a painting, a work of art my mind returns to a dozen times a day.”

Her throat bobbed, and she pulled her dress down to her waist, fighting with his hands to unlace her stays and giggling as he bit her shoulder. When the laces were undone, she brought herself to a kneeling position, removed the stays, and pulled her chemise over her head. She smiled wickedly over her shoulder while she wriggled out of her dress, pulling the fabric under her bottom.

Suddenly, he was bending over her, pushing her onto the bed, her bum pressed against his hips. “Little minx, God, I love you, Evelyn. What a lucky man am I.” He nipped her ear while his hand slid up the back of her thigh, cupping her bottom before he slid his palm around her hips and traced a finger, gently parting her legs and rubbing the sensitive crest while the world fell away. He placed a finger inside, and she moved her hips against it. This was a familiar game with him. Taunting and teasing and wonderful.

“Not this time, love,” he whispered feverishly against her shoulder. “Don’t come yet.” His wet fingers slid up her stomach and over her breasts.

She sat back against him, her dress still under her knees, but her body completely bared to his lover’s touch, fingers caressing and rolling her nipples while she gasped. His head bent over her shoulder, his teeth nipping her skin. She stretched a hand around his neck, and the other she put between her legs.

He chuckled, a throaty growl while she continued the rhythm he started.

“I can’t stop, Dalton,” she gasped, rocking back and forth. “Don’t ask me to stop.”

He pressed a hand over hers, molding his body over hers, and she rode his finger and

hers until the world parted, the air thinned, and her breath pulsated while she came around them both.

Rochester held her back against him, his fingers drowning in her, his heart beating wickedly hard. “You’re so beautiful. So damn beautiful.”

Evelyn pushed him back and hurriedly untangled herself from the mounds of fabric, throwing her dress onto the floor. She knelt in front of him and gripped his shirt, wresting it out of his trousers. She kissed his chest, and he watched in amazement as this woman, who had admitted to being nervous moments ago, now ran her hands down over his hips and tugged on his trousers, frustratingly pulling at the buttons at his fall.

They both kneeled facing one another, Evelyn bent over her task, and if he weren’t so utterly aroused, he’d have laughed with the joy of watching her eagerly remove his clothing. Her warm, smooth palms worked around him, her fingers rubbing his stiff cock until he was painfully hard. He could have come in her hands as he’d done before, but not tonight. He pulled her erotic grip away. And stood to finish removing his clothes.

“Sorry,” she said sheepishly. “Too carried away?”

“Never too carried away, darling. But I’ll never make it if you keep torturing me.”

She bit her lip, a smile tugging at the corners. “I didn’t make it, did I?”

“I’m hopeless against your pleading. Tell me what you want, and it’s yours.” He crawled over her on the bed, her butterscotch hair a forbidden mess of curls on the pillow.

“I want what you want.” Her eyes turned serious, and all play left her voice. “And

only what you want, Dalton. If this isn't it, then we'll finish another way."

He pressed a knee between her legs. "I've wanted you this way all week, Goose."

She giggled. "I like it when you call me that."

"My adorable, lovely little goose," he said as he covered her mouth with his. He drove his tongue into her, eliciting a moan. When he touched the tip of his cock to her, she opened for him, bringing her thighs around his hips and moaning into his mouth. He played the excruciatingly complicated game of yes and no. Now and wait. Until he was so hard with need and his heart so full of desire that he pressed himself beyond playing.

Her arms wrapped tightly around him, and he could feel her anxiety. She pressed her forehead into the crook of his shoulder, and he felt her nod. He heard her hold her breath.

"Look at me, Evelyn." She obeyed, her brows drawn together. "Breathe. I'm not here to hurt you."

She nodded again.

"I just want to love you." He kissed her longingly, hovering over her, not moving until her body relaxed, her thighs softened, and he eased himself deeper and took her with a sudden thrust. Her legs tensed, and she gasped. They stayed that way for what felt like minutes. "That's about as done as it can be. We can leave it at that, and it will be better next time."

She pushed his shoulders back, his cock hard inside her. "Is that what you think I wanted? I want you. All of you. Don't let me scare you away, Dalton Rochester. Show me everything. Hold back nothing."

“Thank God,” he said with a wry grin. “I’m dying.”

She laughed, then sucked in a breath as he withdrew an inch and then pressed himself back deeply inside her. Each time, he retreated farther until he was gliding in and out, pulled into her warmth until he lost all sense of time and place. He groaned, holding her hips under him, teaching her his rhythm until his life poured out of him with the same pulsating ecstasy as she’d shared with him.

With his forehead on hers, he rested on his elbows. She kissed him, wrapping her legs fully around him. “You’re mine forever, Dalton. You hold back that wickedly delightful cock from me again, and I will hunt you down.” She eyed him sternly, her soft lips working at a determined resolve, but he just laughed at the farce.

“I promise that you won’t have to hunt me down. I plan to comply with all your erotic demands from henceforth.”

“From henceforth,” she repeated like a vow.

CHAPTER 19

Evelyn woke to the sound of tapping, and she immediately stretched her arm over the cold spot next to her where Rochester had lain. She knew he had to leave before sunup, but she wished he had woken her beforehand, although she had a faint memory of a whisper of a kiss on her shoulder. Even if it had been a dream, she'd keep it in her heart as truth.

The tap came again, along with the smooth sound of well-oiled hinges and someone stepping lightly into the room.

“Oh, good. I haven't interrupted your morning toilette.” Addy turned toward the cold grate. “It's freezing. I'll have someone light the fire.” She turned to pull the bell cord and then stopped.

Evelyn sat up, clutching the sheets to her naked body and wishing she had thrown on a chemise last night. But she couldn't resist sleeping next to Dalton without a scrap between them. His skin had been like living heat, and his arms a safe place to fall. Even if he couldn't stay the entire night, she relished the memory of him there.

Now, however, she had a new problem. Not so much Addy, but the sheets, the maids, and whether she should disclose to her friend what she'd done.

While Adeline's hand was arrested on the bell pull, her gaze swept from the hearth to the night rail flung over a chair, to Evelyn and the muss of bedclothes. Evelyn bit her lip, waiting for Addy to say something. Anything.

Adeline's gaze lifted to meet Evelyn's. "Too warm for a fire and a night rail?" Addy asked with mocking incredulity.

"Apparently." Evelyn grimaced her lip between her teeth. "Are your maids bribable?"

"Stay here." Adeline left the room, and Evelyn took the reprieve to grab a chemise. She looked back to the bed where she'd slept on a towel, avoiding the obvious outcome of her and Dalton's lovemaking.

When Addy returned, she found Evelyn sitting at the vanity, pulling a brush through her wild hair.

"It's taken care of. Now, are you going to tell me what happened here?"

"Must I?"

"Probably not," Addy said, looking at the bed again. "But I'm dying to know, all the same."

"Have a seat." She pointed with the hairbrush toward two comfortably stuffed chairs.

Her friend selected a pretty pink- and-white-striped chair set by the fireplace.

Evelyn gathered herself with a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You mustn't tell Winn, please."

"Of course not. We're friends, Evelyn. The very best of friends. You know how this happened." She pointed to her stomach. "I trusted you with my foibles. Although, I rather think they were bits of whimsical genius."

Evelyn giggled, holding a hand to her mouth. "I think so, too." She cleared her throat.

“He showed up here last night having snuck back from the town where he’s supposed to be staying. He rode in on a donkey cart if you can believe that.”

Now Addy laughed. “It’s precious.”

“I stayed with him for a week”—she paused, looking at anything but her friend—“although we had encounters, none of them had actual proof.”

“I see. So why last night, if I understand your meaning, did he come here to finish the task?”

“I begged him to before we left Mayfair, but he refused because he believed, and still does, that my father won’t allow a marriage.”

“What a dolt,” Addy said, then she corrected, “Not your father, but Rochester. Did he imagine you’d marry someone else?”

“No, I don’t think so. He feels as if he’s done so much wrong to my family that this would be unforgivable.”

“What would be unforgivable is if he watched you marry another.”

“He couldn’t have done that. I know he couldn’t. He needed time to understand and accept that whatever happens, we’ll be together.”

“Are you speaking of elopement?”

“Oh, I offered him everything, Addy. Mistress, paramour, elopement, anything. Except those will shame my father in the same way my disagreeing at the altar would.”

“So, he came here to make sure there is a wedding?”

She nodded. “At my request. Not here, I mean, but the consummation part was my idea. He’s been nothing but honorable to me, and he’s protected me all Season from my own erratic ideas.”

“Like breaking the rules?” Addy smiled sheepishly. “Like Winn and I did at the masquerade?”

“Something like that. When Rochester wouldn’t help me break the rules, I took matters into my own hands.”

“Evelyn, you didn’t.”

“I tried. I was desperate. My hope was to drive away this baron, whom I hadn’t even met before a contract was made. And Rochester, in his wise equilibrium for rightness, made certain I didn’t defame myself in doing so. He rescued me in the dead of night—in the pouring rain—and tried to bring me here, but we became stuck in the mud. He had no choice but to either take me back to Rosewood, where I would have been forever brokenhearted, or take me to his home.”

“Who knows you were there?”

“You. And I imagine Winn does now. But nothing permanent happened there. That part is true, and the part that Winn was most angry about.”

“For good reason.”

Evelyn didn’t blame Adeline for defending her husband, and in truth, she knew Addy was right. Winn did have good reason to believe Rochester had acted untoward. And in truth, he had, but not to the full extent. “My father cannot know, and if he believes

I've been here for a week..." She let the rest hang between them.

"I'm terrible at lying, but I won't offer any information."

"Thank you. What do you think Winn will do?"

"If he doesn't know that Rochester snuck in here last night, then I believe it's a matter of accepting that you love him and Rochester loves you. And that, my darling, has been obvious for some time." Addy sighed. "Now, for the important bits. How are you feeling? Do you need anything? I remember being a bit sore the next day."

"I feel full and in love and so happy to have a confidante."

"How about a soothing bath with chamomile?"

"Would you stay with me? I don't want help, just company, and it seems awkward having a maid in here under the circumstances."

Addy nodded. "I've already arranged for my personal maid to make up the room. There won't be any repercussions. And I'd be happy to keep you company."

First things first, Rochester sent word to Evelyn's father requesting an audience, which the man denied as expected. He then sought out the parish church where the Markhams attended. If Winn was correct, then he had just two weeks to convince the parish priest that the wedding should be canceled. And he needed to do it all without sullyng Evelyn's name. Claiming an appeal on the grounds of amorous congress would not gain him an ally with her father, or Winn, or Evelyn for that matter.

But what a sweet joining they'd had. He couldn't be more in love if he had invented the notion. After kissing her shoulder, he'd whispered in her ear that he loved her. Her sweet surrender razed him on the spot. His soul belonged to her. His heart

embraced the ruination of his sanity. His reality was made complete in her, and he was nothing without her.

Falling in love was easy. Peacefully dissolving the betrothal contract of a stranger was not.

CHAPTER 20

Coward that he was, Rochester would have chosen Cumberland's parish if he'd known where the hell it was because showing up at the church where Evelyn's father might attend on any given Sunday made his hands sweat. He'd already written Mr. Markham for a private word and been met with a return post unopened, which was answer enough. With no other choice left him but elopement, Rochester was forced to show up for the banns and somehow appeal them.

Using a late arrival for strategy gained him access to the parish where he might have otherwise been denied by Mr. Markham—had he been there—it also, unfortunately, made him a spectacle.

He chose the morning prayer and said his own hail to the Lord that everyone practiced the reverence of eyes closed and heads bowed dutifully. Turned out it didn't matter because the old parish door creaked on its hinges, and several heads turned, creaking necks and all, to see the newcomer. Thankfully, Mr. Markham was not in attendance.

Rochester sat through an organ prelude and a reading in Psalms while his heart thudded uncomfortably like a thief ready to spring when the vicar cleared his throat. He felt the charge just before the announcement as if electricity sparked the air, preparing for the proverbial lightning strike from heaven.

"And for the banns," the minister recited. "I publish the banns of Miss Mary Sutton to Mr. Harold Mercer..."

Rochester waited patiently, blood rushing through his eardrums and creating its own sound like the ocean.

“And for the banns,” the minister began again.

Rochester twisted one fist into the other.

“I publish the banns of Miss Evelyn Markham and Victor Beasley, Baron Cumberland.”

Rochester’s gut dropped. All hope that Winn had been wrong dissolved.

“If any of you know cause or just impediment why these two should not be joined together, ye are to declare it. This is the second reading.”

The time had arrived on golden wings and a thunderous shout. No, on second thought, it was a shout of thunder and an explosion of lightning setting off the cobalt blue, rusty red, lemon-orange, and a myriad of dazzling colors ablaze in the stained-glass windows lining the church walls.

A blessing from God? Or a curse?

Rochester stood, his knees locking, his hands gripping his coat with a tug. He cleared his throat. “I have grounds to speak.”

“On which case, sir?” Every neck craned to see who had the temerity to do such a thing.

“The latter between Miss Evelyn Markham and Lord Cumberland on the grounds of love.”

The minister looked reverently patient as if he'd said something most obvious. "As one would hope, my good man. We wish for all marriages to join through a mutual love for one another."

"Yes. I understand, but I am the one in love with Miss Markham."

A few of the ladies gasped into handkerchiefs pressed to their mouths.

"You are not Lord Cumberland?"

"I am not. I am Mr. Dalton Rochester, heir to the Rochester Viscountcy, and I declare the banns false."

The minister coughed uncomfortably. Clearly, this was a first for him. "Unfortunately, this is not a legal reason to void the engagement. Perhaps you'd like to take this up in private council after service?"

Unless he wished to sully Evelyn's name with the graphic truth in the middle of a prayer meeting, he had little choice but to agree and take his seat. The older women regarded him with pity and understanding. The older men grinned at him as if to say he had barely escaped an impulsive crush that might cost him a lifetime shackled to the same woman. One gentleman even winked and held up his thumb in agreement.

After service, he stayed seated, hoping the church would empty out and he'd avoid being accosted in the yard. But the women were bolder than he would have expected. They filed between the seats, each pausing to pat his hand and, those close enough, kissed his cheek. Rose perfume and gardenias, mingled with wood polish, assailed his nostrils, which he supposed he deserved.

"Mr. Rochester," the vicar began after the church finally bled out. He stood in the aisle close enough for a less booming conversation and a less public one. "Is there

any other just cause you would care to mention?"

"With all due respect, reverend, I believe that love is the most important cause, and fully justified, to challenge the banns."

"If the engagement is settled, I can only deduce that the couple is in agreement with the contract of love."

"Yes, but this couple is not in agreement, I assure you. Miss Markham's father, who, God willing, means to honor his daughter with the best intentions, has set upon this contract of betrothal against his daughter's wishes."

"Then why is Miss Markham not here to protest?"

"Because she's unaware."

"Then I must surmise that she is also unaware of your tendre for her since she is not here."

"It is not a tendre I feel for the lady. It is a deep abiding love. The kind ordained by God Himself as set forth in Genesis." He could not be any plainer without directly profaning her name.

"I am not without sympathy. I do feel for you, son. Young love is a sensitive and often painful lesson. May I suggest you pray on it or have a frank discussion with the young lady's father?"

Rochester left the church no closer to his goal than when he entered the beautiful archaic building. Which made him think how archaic it was to betroth one's children without full consent. And in this case, without any consent.

With his coach at the local inn, he'd be forced to stay the night. A horse would have been more prudent, but he had traveled straight to the parish from Winn's and wouldn't return home until this was rectified.

Step one and two, between Mr. Markham's refusal to see him and the minister's refusal to listen, Rochester was down another day. He had a week to null the banns. A week to convince Markham. A week to plan a trip to Gretna Green because he'd never secure a license quick enough to keep Evelyn's father from hauling her away.

He emerged from the church, bouncing his hat on his thigh and muttering to himself. He looked at the sky, which appeared clear of rain and caused him to wonder whether he'd imagined the thunder and lightning.

"Son?" The man with the knowing smile—the one who'd winked and given him a thumbs up—stood in the garden just beyond a short retaining wall. He bent and pulled a weed.

Rochester waved sportingly. "Good day," he said as he kept walking.

The older gentleman did not halt his gardening but regarded Rochester with a side-glance and waved him over. Curiosity alone over the man's mannerisms in the church changed Rochester's mind, and he turned in the direction of the garden. With hat in hand, he ducked under a blossoming cherry tree.

"What can I do for you?" Rochester asked.

The man straightened. "Nothing, son. It's more what I can do for you." When he brushed off his hands and held one out, Rochester took it. He appeared to be in his sixties, perhaps, with a thick head of dark gray and white-peppered hair. He stood a few inches shorter than Rochester's six feet one inch and had kind eyes and a warm demeanor.

“I’m Mr. Benjamin Hartley,” he said.

“Mr. Dalton Rochester.”

“So I gathered.” Mr. Hartley went back to weeding, speaking while he worked, pausing to take a deep breath now and again. “I watch over the grounds and sit on the board of saints. I’m the parish leader here. Have been since, oh, before Miss Evelyn was born.”

Rochester watched him more intently, his curiosity on heightened alert. “How well acquainted are you with the Markham family?”

Mr. Hartley pushed around the dirt, pressing his knuckles into the ground where he’d made a hole from pulling a rather large weed. He puffed out a reply between squats. “Weeds choke the beds, and ones left to grow as large as that one tend to come back with a vengeance.” He pointed to a thick-stemmed dandelion limply lying on a mound of wilted greenery with the roots holding on to a ball of dirt. “Sometimes the good dirt is sacrificed for the root ball. Must get it all or sacrifice the garden to it.”

“So I gather,” Rochester said, refusing to be distracted with talk of gardens and weeds and dirt. He hardly had time to entertain a lonely parish saint.

“Evelyn is my goddaughter. I take it you know her well.”

“I do,” Rochester replied curtly. “I apologize for my abruptness. It’s been a long day.”

“You’re not nearly as abrupt as you need to be, my good fellow. If Mr. Markham is set against your match, then there must be a reason.”

“You don’t seem to agree with the banns yourself if I read your wink correctly. Why

so if Mr. Markham is your friend?"

"Because, Son." He stood again, this time brushing off his trousers. "I can see you truly love her, and I believe that is the single best reason to object. No one should wed without love."

"If you know the Markhams so well, have you met Lord Cumberland?"

"No, no. Henry and I had a falling out some years ago."

"Then we have that in common, Mr. Hartley."

"Ah, now I understand why you came here instead of seeing Miss Evelyn's father."

"I've tried that already. Believe me, this was not my first idea. Markham won't see me, so I had little choice."

"The man can hold a grudge."

"He's as stubborn as hell."

Hartley chuckled. "If you're staying at the inn, I'll walk with you, and we'll sit and chat over an ale and a noontime meal." Hartley followed the cement divide until he reached the garden gate. When he caught up to Rochester, he slapped a friendly palm on his shoulder.

For the first half an hour of their meal, Rochester listened patiently while Hartley regaled him with memories of Evelyn as a girl, of the Markham family, and some memories of Evelyn's mother—who sounded much like her daughter. He found out that Evelyn favored her mother down to her dark-blond hair and sea-green eyes. He learned that Hartley had been married for thirty-five years to the love of his life and

that they'd never had children, which made the honor of being named Evelyn and Winn's godparents so significant.

"How did you and Evelyn meet?" Mr. Hartley asked.

Rochester rubbed his jaw, wondering how much to say. "Winn and I are close friends. Like brothers."

"And the family?" Hartley asked with a half smile as if he already knew the answer.

"Not so close." He tipped his ale like a toast.

"Has it always been that way, this unease between you and Mr. Markham? Or did something cause a rift with the family, perhaps?"

"Perhaps."

He chortled, saying, "I can see it's going to be agony and take more than a tankard of ale to draw the story from you, and I'm guessing you don't have that kind of time."

"The story is mine, Mr. Hartley, and I'm not inclined to tell it to just anyone. Not even the godfather of the woman I love."

Hartley took a draw of ale, watching Rochester over the rim with a perceptive eye and a depth of wisdom behind the penetrating gaze. "What if I tell you that I want to help? Because I believe you can use all the assistance you can get, even from an old man like me who's possibly as unwelcome as you are with Mr. Markham."

"I might be inclined to take you up on it if I weren't hard-pressed to believe Markham hates anyone more than he hates me."

“Ack. He doesn’t hate you.”

Rochester eyed him with suspicion. “How long exactly have you been on the outs with him?”

“Hmmm.” Hartley tapped his lip. “Exactly, four years and four months.” The older man raised his eyebrows, a clear challenge.

If Rochester didn’t know better, he’d think the man knew of his humiliation. On second thought, the dates were too close to be anything else. “Should I ask, or is your story also a private matter, Mr. Hartley?”

“I imagine it’s a private matter so much as it concerns your friend. Is it possible we’re speaking the same language?” He squinted one eye and gave a good-natured half smirk.

“Your calendar puts Winn in Bath for three years and home for sixteen months.”

“Precisely.” Hartley nodded a toast.

“Mr. Hartley, Winn is one of my dearest friends.”

“And I recall he traveled to Bath with two of his closest companions.”

“It’s doubtful I need to explain much more of my position with Mr. Markham. Since you know why the man is angry with me, might you enlighten me why he’s irritated with you?”

“Because, my dear boy, I disagreed with him quite vehemently. I thought the whole thing would blow over, but he was bent on keeping Evelyn’s name safe.”

Rochester rolled his eyes and sighed heavily; his teeth came together smartly, and his cheek twitched. “I can’t say that I’m relieved that someone else knows, although it is good to hear another opinion.”

“Oh, don’t misunderstand me. I’m not defending what you and your friends did. I simply thought it was a harsh judgment on Winn. I couldn’t say whether it was for you or not. I didn’t know you then.”

“You don’t know me now, sir. If you don’t mind me saying.”

“Mayhap not, but I can read your character, Mr. Rochester, and I find your persistence in the face of Mr. Markham’s anger to be rather encouraging. And I like you.”

Rochester couldn’t help but smile. “Pardon me if I feel relieved at the notion. I’ve been through hell in a handbasket for a week.”

“Don’t be surprised when you go from the frying pan into the fire. Let’s have another ale and see how many more idioms we can sharpen our tongues on. Then, we’ll make a plan. Give me a night, and I’ll go see Henry and see if I can’t secure you an audience. But first, I want to get good and drunk because I might look like a kind old man, but I’ve overindulged on pride.”

Rochester gave the man a day and night. He waited for word, but by day two, none had come, so he headed for Rosewood Manor with every intention of demanding that Mr. Markham see him.

CHAPTER 21

He could have used a change of clothes, but time was of the essence. Thankfully the roads had dried since Rochester had been to Rosewood Manor. The last he saw of the stately brick house, with its three stories flanked at the front corners by six bay windows, respectively, was when Evelyn had been toppling over the sill of her bedroom window. In the daylight, one could clearly see a dozen chimneys peeking up through the hip roof, and the sight of the bronze front door gave Rochester's stomach a lurch.

He took a deep breath and raised the brass knocker. The door swung inward as soon as the hammer clashed against the brass plate.

"Good afternoon," the butler said.

Rochester had no time to think. "I'm here to see Mr. Markham. Tell him that Mr. Dalton Rochester requests an audience."

He pulled his hat from his head and stood in the foyer, arguing with his private thoughts to quit pursuing a conversation that hadn't taken place yet. Rochester wished to be fresh and free to speak organically without predetermination, which was more likely to come out stilted than genuine. And he was god-awful nervous about the whole affair.

Mr. Markham headed into the foyer, presumably without the butler, so he might throw Rochester out himself.

Rochester bowed. “Mr. Markham, sir. All I’m asking for is five minutes of your time.” Rochester didn’t waste precious moments on incidentals because he was likely to be dismissed before he could say anything important.

Markham laughed derisively. “Oh, the irony. You young pups think we all have time for your inane chatter when the God’s honest truth is if you’d taken your lessons before your blundering mistakes, you’d have no need for explanations now.”

It never dawned on Rochester that Mr. Markham had anything to offer him besides a scowl accompanied by a harsh reprimand, which he recognized was no more than he deserved. But he’d failed to consider the position he’d put Winn’s father in. Not just the embarrassment but the joy of life that he and Darrington had robbed from a man who’d lost so much already.

Rochester humbly bowed this time, checking his thoughts. “Then do please let me offer you five minutes for instructing me in lessons I apparently missed, and then I’ll leave.”

The older man squinted, measuring him for sincerity. “Are you mocking me?”

“No, sir. I mean it with solemn respect.”

Markham ground his teeth, his nostrils flared, and Rochester could see him sifting through truth and lie. His gaze, angry and unrelenting, pierced him until his shoulders sagged on a heaving sigh, and he turned and walked away. Rochester watched after him, uncertain what to do next, at which point Markham turned back. “Are you following or not?” he asked curtly.

Rochester answered with long strides, catching up quickly, hearing Mr. Markham mumble several curses under his breath.

Rochester still held his hat because the butler had not offered to rid him of it or his coat. Convenient for Mr. Markham, he supposed, because the butler need not be called before Evelyn's father threw him out.

"Sit," Markham commanded, pointing to a russet leather sofa in the formal drawing room.

Rochester cleared his throat, taking a seat as directed.

"You two, out," Markham commanded two Irish Setters lying by the cold hearth. The beautiful animals leaped up from their respective pillow beds, tails wagging, and collectively bumped Markham's open hand as they left. The dogs didn't seem to fear the man, so why should Rochester? Because the dogs were more family than Rochester could ever hope to be.

Next, Markham filled two glasses with brandy and set one before Rochester on the tea table.

"For God's sake, give me the hat. You look like a beggar."

Before Rochester could move, Mr. Markham snatched the hat from his sweaty grip and tossed it on the sofa next to him, then he took a seat in a high-backed chair adjacent to the sofa.

"I have it on good authority that you stepped inside my parish church and challenged the banns. Why?"

"Because I'm in love with your daughter." No greater truth could be said.

"You're too damn young to know the meaning of the word and too stubborn to understand the emotional wounds that come from ill-placed words of love."

Rochester suspected he perhaps was too unloved to know the meaning, but his age had nothing to do with the raw emotion he felt for Evelyn. That kind of magic was timeless, ageless, and a mystery to every man who'd ever been enlightened by it. He wanted to tell Mr. Markham that he was eight-and-twenty and had known his share of women, and his feelings for Evelyn were nothing like that. He wanted to explain the shilling in his shoe, the one that reminded him of her every moment of every day, and he had tried making her an uncomfortable metaphoric pebble when she was, in fact, his rock. She settled him, balanced him, breathed life into him, and he couldn't, wouldn't, live without her.

But he stayed silent, instead, searching for patience so he might concentrate on what Markham had to say and accepting he may not be given the opportunity to speak. At least not this time because, God knew, he'd never stop trying.

"And you couldn't tell me or seek an audience before the banns were read?"

Once again, Rochester had no answer because he suspected all his thoughts on the matter would be argued and discounted. Besides, he had sent notice for an interview, but his post had never been opened.

"Regarding the banns, my lord, and the betrothal contract, I insist on paying whatever fine may come from breaking the promise to Lord Cumberland."

"What a lovely surprise," Markham said caustically.

Offense at Markham's comment coursed through Rochester's veins. He didn't come here to win an argument. He came to win Evelyn. Markham knew that Rochester had offered to pay for the damages and crimes regarding the gambling debts. The amount was astronomical, which attested to the size of the grudge Evelyn's father held toward him.

Markham twisted a smile. “No worries there. Evelyn is my daughter. My responsibility.”

Rochester’s cheek twitched involuntarily. He felt his nose cinch with scorn, and he fought it back. He didn’t hate this man. Truly, he didn’t.

“Well?”

He opened his mouth, but nothing came out except, “Excuse me?”

“Your five minutes. The clock starts now, Mr. Rochester.”

He straightened and swallowed his pride. “I’ve already told you that I’m in love with her. If you’re interested in her feelings for me, I’m certain she’d be more than happy to share them.”

Oddly, Markham grunted through a half smile that looked less menacing than moments ago.

“But allow me to begin elsewhere,” Rochester continued. “My debt to you is great.”

“Damn right, it is. But do you know what it is?”

“Seven thousand pounds on my part plus a five hundred pound fine from the gambling hell.”

“Five hundred apiece,” Markham corrected.

“I’m aware of it and grateful for your intervention more than you know.”

“Mine?” He laughed cynically. “You think I intervened for you? Ha! I lost my son for

three years and could have lost him forever. He could have gone to prison, maybe the gallows, for cheating a gambling hell out of a fortune on your behalf, must I say?"

Rochester flinched, his face warm with embarrassment and grief. Everything he said was true. It was all true.

Markham leveled him with a lethal stare. "I didn't do it for Winn. Or more like, not just for Winn."

"I understand."

"You're all children. Do you know that? Age does not make a man, Mr. Rochester. Women don't make you a man, either. And if you ever have God's good grace to have your own children and a wife you love more than your own life, then perhaps you'll get the chance to understand a small speck of what I say today. You three boys could have ruined her."

Pain radiated from his chest, constricting his breath and making him feel lightheaded. He felt heat rise up his neck, not from embarrassment but because he had never considered the depth of Evelyn's father's despair. He swallowed hard. His head ached with grief.

"Sir, you're correct. I have not understood, but please know that it pains me that I could lose her for a young man's folly. I had not taken into account my actions that night."

"None of you did. And Evelyn is betrothed to a good man with a good reputation who can take care of her. Someone who won't embarrass her or cause her pain. He's spotless, Mr. Rochester. What have you to offer?"

With his elbows to his knees, Rochester watched his fingers folding repeatedly over

his fist. Mentally, his head was in his hands. His shame was so great. Without looking up, he spoke. "Five minutes. I cannot undo the past, and I cannot repay the emotional cost to you. This man, Baron Cumberland, may be everything that makes you happy, but I guarantee he will never make Evelyn happy. And I refuse to believe you don't care about that."

Rochester chanced a glance under his brow but shouldn't have because Markham's hard expression looked like a coming storm ready to break open over an already turbulent ocean, with eyes flashing and nostrils flaring. It was not a good sign.

Rochester bit his lip. He picked up his hat. "I'll have my accountant send you a bank draft for my part five years ago. You may choose to deposit it or sit on your anger. It matters little to me. I will write it out and consider it finished." He stood to leave. "And as I've spoken before, I'm happy to pay the betrothal fines if any occur. I do all that, Mr. Markham, because Evelyn is not marrying Lord Cumberland, no matter the outcome here."

"You think you have my blessing?"

"Me? No, not likely. But I'd hope that Evelyn would. I can do no more than I have." He gave a short bow. "Good day, Mr. Markham, sir."

As Rochester turned his back on the room, he heard Mr. Markham rise. "I never heard from your father," Markham said. "What did the viscount think of your transgressions?"

Rochester stiffened, clenching his hat. He didn't turn around to face the older man. "I doubt my father was even aware of my three-year absence, much less the reasons why." He continued to the foyer and let himself out.

CHAPTER 22

Evelyn couldn't be more surprised when she found her papa sitting in Adeline and Winn's family drawing room until she stepped fully over the threshold and caught sight of her godfather. It had been more than several years since the two men had talked, although Evelyn had seen Mr. Hartley at church on occasion, and he'd asked about her papa. She never did understand the reason for the rift. But now, here they were under the same roof, and she was very curious as to why. She would have thought they'd come to see Winn and Adeline after the baby was born, but it would seem that Mr. Hartley had contacted her father after an encounter with one Mr. Rochester.

Evelyn was almost giddy except for her nerves. She still did not know if her father knew the truth of how she'd come to be at Winn's. She happily took a seat and joined them.

"You should have seen it, the way he stood up and appealed the banns on the basis of love." Mr. Hartley's smile and joy for life stood out in the crinkle at his eyes and the grooves framing his mouth. His presence brought a penetrating warmth to the room.

"Oh, I wish I could have been there," Evelyn exclaimed, slanting a sly glance at her papa seated to her right on a ruby silk-covered chair. "Because if I had been there, I'd have stood and appealed the banns myself."

Her father sighed heavily, a sound not missed on anyone in the room. The man had been one long, heaving sigh since he'd arrived with Mr. Hartley in tow.

“Well, I can’t help but like the man,” Hartley said. “That kind of thing takes courage. It’s something you would have done, Henry,” he directed the comment to Evelyn’s father.

“Would you, Papa? Would you have done that for Mother?” Evelyn asked with a smile in her voice, enjoying the conversation immensely. But she could have cried when she turned her laughing gaze toward her father. His eyes misted. He looked at the floor at his feet. The room grew deathly silent, and her father looked lost.

“I’d have done anything for her.” He looked up at Evelyn. “As it would seem, your Mr. Rochester would for you.”

Tears burned her eyes, and she wanted to run and hug her papa, but such an outburst would only embarrass him. She swiped a tear that escaped. Whether it was for her father or for Rochester, she didn’t know because she loved them both to the point of pain.

Mr. Hartley cleared his throat. “This old man needs a break. It’s been a long drive for me, and I need to inquire about a room at the inn we passed on our way here.” He stood carefully like someone who’d been sitting all day with stiff knees.

“Nonsense,” Winn announced, strolling into the drawing room. “Mr. Hartley, my wife would never forgive me if I allowed you to stay anywhere but here. I’ve already taken care of it. Besides, she’s looking forward to visiting with everyone tomorrow.”

Evelyn cocked a questioning brow toward her brother, who’d forbidden her access to his wife without proper instruction on what to say and what not to say. It appeared he’d given up on controlling every situation. At least one could hope.

Winn shrugged at her. “Adeline strongly insisted that she’s healthier than ever and that I might wish to take off a day from orchestrating her schedule.”

Evelyn's father added, "Of course, she's healthy. There's no reason to believe otherwise."

"Oh, Papa." Evelyn went to his side and sat on the arm of his chair. "You've always been so softhearted and sensible."

He regarded her with a look of comical shock. "Me?" He chuckled. "Evelyn, my dear, you are a contradiction."

"No, I'm a woman."

"Same thing," Winn said, flashing her a brother's knowing smile. He showed Hartley out.

Evelyn kissed her father on the top of his head, then returned to her seat on the sofa. "I'm glad you're here, Papa."

"Are you? I believe you've enjoyed your time away."

"A little, yes. But you're always welcome company."

"You think I'm meddling and too old to know what's good for my children."

"That's not true. You're not old."

He snorted. "And the rest?"

"I wouldn't like to say," she said cheekily.

Winn returned and offered her a sherry, which she took willingly. And for their father, he poured a brandy. "Addy's thrilled to have company. I can't tell you how

much she is looking forward to being with everyone tomorrow. If she'd known you were coming, she'd have planned her day accordingly. And, Evelyn, she wants you to call on her before you retire."

"And you approved this?" Her eyes were mockingly round.

Winn rolled his eyes and crossed his legs. "I think we all want the same thing. A healthy baby and a healthy, well-rested mother."

Evelyn's father waved a hand toward her. "Your sister here wants more than that. She wants to know if I've come to take her home, but she's afraid to ask."

"I'm not afraid. But I am curious why you didn't send notice."

"Because I hardly had time. Benjamin came for a visit, and we had a long talk."

"About?" she asked.

"Things that don't concern either one of you." He referred to her and Winn. "And to tell me about the banns and meeting Rochester. You might thank him tomorrow. You owe him a debt of gratitude because he convinced me to come here instead of sending a coach to bring you home."

"So, you have come to take me home?"

"Not exactly. I've been informed that the parish vicar would like a word with you."

Winn said, "Sounds like Rochester made an impression."

Evelyn buried a smile by sipping her sherry but failed.

“That smile might have made an impression on me had you at least agreed to meet Lord Cumberland,” her father said.

“I did meet him, first, at the theater quite by accident, where the poor devil fumbled through his own name by an embarrassing degree. Had I been called upon to introduce him to a friend, I would have humiliated not only Lord Cumberland but also myself. Is that the kind of husband you planned for me?”

“He’s a good man, something I keep reminding everyone around me.”

“Do you have nothing to say, Winn?” she asked her brother in desperation. “Rochester is your friend.”

“Evelyn, there are things you don’t understand,” Winn said.

“You might be surprised.” She folded her arms, pulling her mouth into a hard, determined line.

“Rochester is foolhardy,” her father exclaimed, pushing himself out of his chair.

“In his defense, Father, he has tried to make amends.” Winn cut into her thoughts, saving her from having to explain her knowledge of events that were more Winn’s affair than hers. Except it involved the man she loved and was to blame for the tangle she was in now.

“Bah, humbug. Amends. What do any of you know of amends?” Her father walked to the hearth and examined the Ormolu clock.

“I imagine we know as much as you did at our age, Father. Perhaps a little more if you were perfect and never did anything unforgivable.”

Evelyn sat silently, watching her father and brother spar, hoping Winn didn't push too hard. Then, there was the matter of her godfather and the mystery surrounding his sudden visit. He'd gone silent after Winn had gone away to Bath. Now, she wondered if the two events were linked somehow.

"I don't recall making a bungle of things in my youth," her father said.

"Never?" Evelyn asked, surprised enough at that announcement to join the conversation again.

"Not to such a degree, no."

"Did you have any fun at all?" she asked, not unkindly. "Perhaps it's time to invite Papa to join our game."

Winn looked at her sharply. "Evelyn, remember silence is a virtue."

"Nonsense."

"What game?" Her father's forehead was a wave of curiosity.

"The rules of the beau monde are stifling, so I thought we should break a few. For instance"—she turned her attention to Winn—"Winn took Adeline on a sleigh ride and held her hand in public. And Adeline kissed him under the mistletoe, the Christmas before last." To her glee, her father smiled spontaneously as if he'd just heard the story. "And look how that turned out. Your first grandchild will be here in a matter of weeks."

Winn rubbed his forehead. "Indeed."

"And you, Evelyn?" her father asked. "What did you do?" Mischief filled his words.

“It was a masquerade, and I skipped the midnight unmasking ceremony with Rochester.” She lifted a brow, and her father’s momentary joy fled.

“Do you see?” her father accused. “Think of the scandal you could have caused. It’s a good thing Lord Cumberland isn’t aware of your folly.”

“Well, if I’d thought playing draughts at midnight during a holiday party would have dissuaded Lord Cumberland, I’d have printed it in the papers.”

“Evelyn.” Her father chastised, then blinked rapidly, shaking his head as if to clear it. “Draughts?”

“Draughts, Papa. And do you know why? Because Mr. Rochester knew I wasn’t keen on being caught under a bough by an overeager stranger seeking free kisses.”

“Draughts. He only played draughts with you?”

“Yes.” She was comfortable confessing that much but left off the part about her inappropriate wager and the scandalously stupid card game she’d dragged Adeline into.

Her father took his seat again and leaned an elbow on the chair arm. “What do you know about his family?” He directed the question at Winn.

“Son of a viscount by the same name. One brother. Lost his mother as a boy. Things I’m sure you know.”

“He came to see me right before Hartley.”

“What did he say?” Evelyn asked. Her body wanted to sigh with relief, but her pounding heart wouldn’t allow it.

“He alluded to an estrangement with his father. I found that odd since he always acts so cocksure of himself.”

“Winn?” Evelyn turned to her brother, placing a hand on his arm. “Do you think Rochester would mind?”

Her brother glanced at her, searching her eyes as if he questioned whether she knew the story of Rochester’s childhood. Then he answered their father, “I say this for his sake because perhaps it will help. I can tell you that his mother died in his arms when he was a boy of five years, and his father blamed him. His mother took a fall down a flight of stairs, and Rochester was the first to find her.”

Evelyn’s father looked at Winn and then her, and she saw raw pain in his eyes. “I didn’t know that. Sometimes people need a reason when bad things happen, and so they blame those they love the most.”

“You never did, Papa,” Evelyn said in a reverent voice.

“Grief can be unpredictable and, as irrational as it sounds, pain dulls pain. As if one moment is traded for another so the brain is tricked, and grief is put off. When I look at you both, I see your mother. Good, graceful, merciful to a fault.” He stopped abruptly and turned his head away. “I’m tired. I think I’ll turn in.” Then, to Winn, he said, “Don’t get up. I’ll find my way.”

Evelyn marveled at how her father had always found his way through the unbearable grief of losing his wife. Deep inside, she held faith that he would find his way to forgiving Rochester and blessing their marriage. It would take patience and mercy, and her father had both, even if he was not inclined to show them now.

Soon after her father left the room, Evelyn excused herself to visit Adeline before retiring. She found her friend seated at her vanity, wearing a dressing gown and

brushing her russet-brown hair.

“I apologize for the time, but Winn said you wished to see me?”

Adeline craned to look around Evelyn, checking the door between the lord’s and lady’s suites.

Evelyn tossed a look in the same direction. “He was still downstairs when I left. But I imagine he’ll be up soon. What is it?”

Adeline motioned for her to sit. “I’ve taken care of the bedding. Now, tell me what you’ve planned.”

“Me? Nothing quite yet. Why?”

“Because Winn told me the banns have been read.”

“Not all of them. And according to my godfather, Rochester stood right there in the church and denounced the wedding. Although it did not have the desired effect. At least not yet,” Evelyn said as she took a seat on the cozy divan.

“There’s but one week left.”

“And?”

“And I think you should take a trip to your home parish,” Adeline suggested, raising a sly brow. “This calls for a bit of rule-breaking, don’t you agree?”

“As if I haven’t broken the most important ones to date?” She sighed. “I suppose you’re correct. How shall I get there?”

“You leave that to me.”

CHAPTER 23

Two days after his visit with Evelyn's father, Rochester questioned whether he'd made any progress at all. He missed the hell out of Evelyn and learned she was still at Winn and Adeline's. That alone was a piece of good news. At least she hadn't been called home. Not yet.

That last question Markham had asked about Rochester's father ate away the years he'd spent putting emotional distance between him and his family. With the exception of Hudson and Lovie, Rochester had little contact with any relatives. He'd worked a lifetime to bury his painful childhood under smiles and wit and games of billiards. He believed busyness and hard work would eliminate the memories of that day. The smell of blood, of distilled spirits on his father's breath, and his mother's own scent of gardenia mingling with it. To this day, he could not abide gardenias in any form.

If Evelyn's father had questions about his title, his family, and his inheritance, Rochester decided it might be a good time to pay his father a visit. He hadn't been there in over a year. Most of his contact was through correspondence with the family barrister.

"The prodigal son returns," his father said when Rochester arrived at Heavenly House, which was anything but heavenly.

"Not quite. I believe the prodigal son was gravely missed and had a father who pined over him. Not one who preferred his inheritance go to hell."

His father blew out a grunting, aggravated sound with his lips. Clutching the chair where he sat, he looked like an angry king. Perhaps the mad king. Which made Rochester sympathize a bit with Prinny. His father didn't look like a lunatic, but he did look tired. More so than Dalton remembered. His face was a little sallow, and his cheeks receded into sharp angles, which would have made him appear a little sinister but for the look of alcohol consumption about his hazel eyes. The whole of it was set off by his graying hair that had lost its healthy luster.

“Come to check on your riches?”

“Something like that.” Rochester looked about, wondering what painting was missing from the wall above the hearth. “Where's my brother?”

“Noah's collecting rents. I let the steward go. A waste, you know.”

Of course, he did. And what rents? The three cottagers who struggled to stay and struggled to make their properties productive as their landlord made a practice of destroying his? “How long ago did Noah leave?”

His father shrugged. “Quarter hour. Don't wish to sit with your ailing father?”

It was true. His father was ailing from a gut rotting bout of alcohol and anger.

“When was the last time a physician called on you?”

“Ack, I'm beyond that.”

“I'll have someone sent round. You should be seen regularly by the physician.”

His austere father, so full of venom it was hard to tell how he felt most of the time, relaxed his grip on the arms of his chair. He looked tired, sallow, older than he

should, and Rochester was not without compassion for the man who raised him and gave him a home, such as it was. He certainly didn't wish him ill. Rochester would see to another steward. His father's determination to destroy Rochester's inheritance had only hurt himself.

Rochester took very little income from the property, and after this trip, he decided he'd cut it all. He made his own money now, but he hated seeing his family home gutted.

"I think I'll catch up with Noah. Do you need anything before I leave?"

His father waved him on. His countenance dismissed him before he'd asked the question.

After Rochester relinquished his jacket and waistcoat to the cleanest peg he could find in the stable, he saddled a horse and rode off in the direction of the last remaining cottagers.

Acres upon acres of lush green land stretched before him. He passed three empty houses where productive farmers once thrived growing wheat and barley, according to the stories of his grandfather's time. The grounds were in surprisingly good shape despite the condition of Heavenly House, where Rochester was sure a leak had destroyed a beautiful fortepiano rumored to have been built by Johann Stein himself. It was a story his father liked to tell, but one that could not be credited since the piano belonged to his grandfather, the sixth Viscount Rochester, another life cut short. His grandfather had purportedly died from a failing heart at the age of forty-one.

Why hadn't he considered that parallel before? His father became the seventh Viscount Rochester as a boy of ten years. Rochester's Uncle Oliver, whom he rarely saw, had to be no more than eight when it had happened. Two brothers at odds because the grief of losing a parent had eaten away at their childhood and destroyed

the normal expectations that children tend to count on for survival.

His father and uncle's relationship had never recovered. Rochester didn't really know his uncle except that the man did not have children. And here, Rochester and Noah were reliving that same curse, which was a word his father liked to use. Their father spoke of the title as being cursed because it bore their surname, and because of that, they'd never escape it. The title was not uncommon but also not so prevalent that people weren't drawn to remark upon it at times.

Dalton, however, did not believe in the Rochester curse, even if it would have been a fine excuse for his fractured judgment.

"Noah!" Rochester called when he caught sight of his brother, grinding up the ground between them until they were close enough to hear each other and then reined in.

"The prodigal son comes home," Noah said.

"You've been living with our father too long. You're beginning to sound just like him." Very telling that they should both greet him with the same words. Oh, to be a fly on the wall in that house.

"Well, Brother, someone must look after your home."

Except it had never been Rochester's home. Hudson and Lovie had made it bearable when they were all children, but he'd never considered Heavenly House his home. Nor had he ever considered it heavenly. Such a name, he thought. "Then I should thank you for the missing portrait over the hearth, I suppose?"

"You can blame our father for that."

Rochester eyed his brother and found no lie in him. "Our father is sick. Why hasn't

he seen a doctor?"

"Believe me, I've tried," Noah said. "He won't allow it. And he sacked the steward."

"I've heard. I'll hire another. You can't be expected to keep up with all this." While holding the rein and resting his hands on the tucked pommel, he twisted, gesturing with his head to the general lay of property.

"And why should I? It's all yours."

Rochester sighed. "Would that I could, I would change it, Noah."

"We've hardly spoken in four years, and it has been over a year since you've been home, so why the visit now?"

"Show me the rounds, and we'll talk over a brandy when we're finished."

Noah seemed to mull that over, minus his usual sharp retort. With his mouth pressed in a taut line, he nodded, then pulled his horse around, leaving Rochester to follow, calling behind him, "Stay through dinner, and we'll talk without father. He retires early these days."

That worried Rochester for two reasons: One, his father was perhaps weaker than he first anticipated, and two, this somewhat agreeable side of his brother was the calm before the storm.

After spending the better part of the day scouting the countryside, Rochester cleaned up and stayed through dinner, waiting in the library for his brother and happy to see one room in the house had not been touched. The books were all there, the paintings, the knick-knacks, the cigar box at the upper left corner of the writing desk, familiar and a small comfort to him.

“Thanks for staying,” Noah said, walking into the wood-paneled room. He slid the pocket doors closed. His brother’s hair was a shade lighter than his, but his stride was as long, and his physique rivaled Darrington’s in the ring. Rochester attested that to the hard work required to keep Heavenly House going without a proper staff.

“I poured myself a glass. I didn’t think you’d mind,” Rochester saluted his brother.

“Good, good,” his brother repeated, passing Rochester on his way to pour himself a brandy. He then threw himself into the nearest high-backed chair, his legs spread comfortably wide, and took a sip of brandy. As he swallowed, he closed his eyes and leaned his head back.

This was not the man Rochester saw a year ago. He appeared changed, grown-up perhaps, or something else.

Noah sighed heavily with his face turned up toward the tiled ceiling. “He’s not himself, you know. Brash. Angry most of the time, not lucid at others. I realize this was the father you always saw. For some reason, I couldn’t see it.”

Rochester stared at him, dumbfounded, confused even. “What are you saying?”

His brother lowered his chin and looked straight into Rochester’s eyes, compassion buried in his creased brow. “I’m saying that I think he’s been ill for a long time. Not physically, perhaps, like he is now, but his mental state hasn’t been stable. I know he blames you for so much. I don’t have the luxury of memory. He’s been my only parent.”

“You were a child, Noah.”

“So were you.”

“I lost that innocence when our mother died.”

“There’s more to it than that. When he’s not thinking clearly, he says things, and I’m coming to understand them for truth.”

“I thought it was his heart?”

“More than you know. He’s fainted several times. The last doctor wanted to bleed him.”

Rochester scowled. “Damn quacks.”

“I wouldn’t allow it, but the last physician did say that his fainting is from a weak heart, and we can’t be sure how long he has.”

“Do you suppose the physician is speculating because our grandfather died of a failing heart? Or could it be something else?” The man smelled pickled, in Rochester’s opinion, and you don’t get that way without drinking heavily on a daily basis.

“You believe it’s drink,” his brother stated.

“Do you disagree?”

A thoughtful sigh filled the space between them, and Noah shook his head. “No. I think we aren’t getting the whole of it because Father won’t allow the doctor to speak the truth. It doesn’t, however, dismiss the fact that he’s not completely right in the mind. He says things sometimes.”

Right mind, indeed. Rochester looked up from examining the contents of his glass. “What kind of things?”

“Nonsensical, mostly. He’s angry and bitter. He speaks sometimes of our uncle and more often lately of our mother.”

“Why do you think that is?” Rochester had his suspicions.

Noah studied the contents of his own glass. “Perhaps he has some unresolved guilt.”

Rochester thought Noah said that of himself more than their father.

“Dalt?”

The painful memory of the nickname fell heavy on Rochester’s lids, and his eyes shut against it as his cheeks spread in a reluctant smile. “You used to call me Dolt when you were little.”

“Dolt. Dalt. It’s all the same,” Noah said, the last part muffled by his glass, a clear grin on his face. “This calls for something better, I think.” His brother stood and made his way to the Tantalus bar, where his father kept his best scotch locked away. He drew a key from a secret compartment in the secretary, held it between two fingers, and smiled devilishly. It reminded Rochester of their younger days.

Noah poured two glasses, then proceeded to take Rochester’s brandy and replace it with the scotch. He set the brandy on the table and toasted the cut crystal with a resonating ring. Both drank, smiles on their faces, and when Noah took his seat again, a laugh rolled from Rochester’s chest. The kind that is contagious.

The sound echoed as warm and gasping in the room as the scotch burned a satisfying trail down Rochester’s throat, erasing twenty years of nauseating anxiety. They hadn’t laughed like that since they were children, sneaking much the same spirits as they did today.

“Well, Dalt,” his brother continued. “As I was saying, when one’s father isn’t quite lucid, he speaks nonsense. However, there are subjects honed by alcohol consumption that come up too often not to have an edge of truth.”

With his glass hanging from his fingertips, Rochester set his drink on the table next to him, then he rested his cheek against his fist and waited.

“He’s spoken of our mother and Uncle Marcus. I think Hudson and Lovie’s father had an affair with our mother.”

Rochester bit the pad of his thumb—an affectation that belonged to Evelyn and proof that she was never far from his mind. “I’ve often suspected they’d had a relationship.”

“Did you also suspect that I might be a product of it?”

Slowly, Rochester looked up while his thoughtful, brooding words were trapped behind his parted mouth. He couldn’t help his gaze from examining the length of his brother, boot to nose, searching for signs of familiarity.

His brother spread his hands wide. “Look all you like. I’ve studied every nuance, and I can’t be certain. You, me, Lovie, Hudson, we all look like family.”

So much made sense now. If his father knew about the affair, the knowledge might have soured his father’s relationship with his uncle. It would have been a thorn in the side of his marriage and been responsible for the distance between his parents, and perhaps the loud arguments he vaguely remembered.

His father might have been a horrible parent, a bitter human being, but he wasn’t violent to the point of bodily harm. He generally saved that kind of thing for objects like the house, a mirror, a glass against the hearth. But if Noah was the love child of

his mother and his Uncle Marcus, it could be enough to drive a man like his father to lead his own brother-in-law on a hunting expedition, where a convenient accident might become his father's truth. And if that were so, then his father's guilt could have been eating him like maggots from the inside out.

"You have no proof," Rochester said the obvious, although his mind was percolating.

"None. Other than the drunk ramblings of an ailing man." Noah bit his lip. "That's not the worst, however. Where our uncle's death is concerned, I suspect foul play."

Rochester swallowed hard. "Perhaps. But perhaps not. What do we gain by speculating and digging up a past that would hurt too many."

"You think that's what I want?" his brother asked, a hard accusation behind his voice.

Rochester shrugged, feeling helpless, desperately trying to process the news. "I'm not suggesting you don't deserve to know the truth. Honestly, Noah, I'm shocked, is all." He stood, grabbed his empty glass, and headed for the bar.

"We have too many secrets. What I want is to share them so we might figure out how to proceed."

"With what?" Rochester missed his glass and spilled a dash of scotch on his hand. He shook it and busied himself, drying off the rest from the back of his knuckles.

"I don't even know where you've been. I've been living in anger with an angry man for so long that I've invented my own trouble. Now, I want to clear the air. I want the truth because I wish to know my brother, and my guess is that our father never wanted that."

"If what you say is true, then why would he treat me so poorly and care for you so

completely.”

“Convenience? Perhaps he passed his guilt onto you.”

Rochester shut his eyes. “Because he blamed me for our mother’s death.” He looked at his brother. “And so did you.” Rochester leaned a hip against the windowsill and gazed out at the setting sun.

“I was a child who believed everything his father told him because he was the only parent I ever knew. My memory of our mother is almost nonexistent. And before you say anything, I have no ill feelings about her. I simply don’t remember her.”

“That alone must be painful, I’m sure.” Rochester shot him a look of understanding.

“We’ve wasted a lot of time on a childhood neither of us can change, but I don’t want the rest of my life plagued by a child’s grief or by memories I now know were created by anger. Dalton, I’m not angry. Not anymore.”

Damn, if that didn’t crush him. Rochester had spent most of his life trying to forget he had a family. “How do we move forward?” he asked, his emotions weary from so much truth.

“We’re already doing it. If you can help me with the property’s upkeep and our father’s care, I would appreciate it.”

“It’s my responsibility to begin with. Just let me know what I can do.” Rochester didn’t have near the funds to care for two households, but he’d deal with that difficulty later.

“None of this is your fault. It’s mine. I could have stopped him from destroying this place, but I didn’t. And you, by all rights, should be pulling more of an income from

here, but you're not. The steward will help and maybe a companion to assist with Father's care."

Rochester nodded, then pulled back a dram.

"And if you need anything from me. I'm here for you, Brother."

This trip to his family home did so much good for Rochester's soul that not even his father's surly goodbye could ruin the time he'd shared with his brother.

Noah had his hands full taking care of the house, the property, and their father, but Rochester didn't have time for the guilt he felt. He had less than a week before the last of the banns were read. He had hoped to see Evelyn and to speak with her father again to avoid another trip to the parish, but the problem of finances had to be addressed sooner than later. If he could not prove himself up to the task of caring for Mr. Markham's daughter, he could forget the blessing to wed her.

CHAPTER 24

The visit with his brother made the trip to Heavenly House worth every minute, even if Rochester felt like a kitchen dog on a wheel, going nowhere fast. Never had he been so happy to see his own bed. He half expected to see Evelyn in it and had hoped the room still smelled like her. But they had both been away too long. For the first time in two days, he wondered how she was doing. He wondered if her father was still at Winn's. And he wondered if Mr. Hartley's good word had helped.

"Where the bloody hell have you been? And what the devil is that?" Hudson caught Rochester as he shed his jacket on the way to his dressing room.

"I've been everywhere. And that is a baby goose." As he entered his wardrobe, he pointed to a large crate by the window with slats spread far enough apart to see the goose.

"A gosling? Why is it caged like a canary, and more importantly, why is it here?"

"The cage was originally for a canary until I saw the goose. Or gosling, as it were," Rochester called from inside the dressing room. "And it's here because I purchased it for Evelyn."

"Does she raise geese?" Hudson was at the cage poking his fingers through the bars when Rochester emerged.

"Lord, I was never so happy to see the inside of my wardrobe. I hadn't planned on being away so long." He pointed at the gosling. "What do you think of her?"

“I think you’re daft. You, of all people. A goose. You must really love this woman,” Hudson said but continued to test the gosling’s patience with his curiosity.

“I couldn’t help it. It reminded me of her.”

Hudson turned an arched brow on him. “And you’re under the impression she’ll find that complimentary?”

“You believe she won’t?”

“You know her better than I.” Hudson turned an appraising eye back to the gosling.

“I couldn’t resist when I saw her. One of the cottagers raises canaries, and I thought to bring home one for Evelyn until I heard the geese honking and saw the babies. Then the choice was obvious.”

“Oh, yes. Of course. Obvious. Anyone would think so.” Hudson stepped back from the cage and rubbed his forehead, staring with a dumbfounded look of unconscious confusion while the gosling settled into a mock nest of hay. Hudson seemed to have a difficult time breaking his gaze from the spectacle. He sighed. “I didn’t know where to find you, so I canceled most of your tournaments, and then I noticed you’d drawn on most of your liquid assets. I hate to tell you that your spending has left you quite flat, Cousin.”

“I know. I paid Mr. Markham.”

“And he took it?” Hudson followed him from the bedroom.

“Not sure. I drew the funds, but I’m unsure whether he’s deposited them. Regardless, they’re unavailable.”

“Well, I hope you told your father that you expect the return of your stipend.”

Rochester stopped at the foot of the grand stairs and turned about. “There’s nothing left, Hud.”

His cousin’s face dropped. “What do you mean? How many cottagers are left?”

“Only three. And my father has seen fit to sack everyone with any business savvy.” Rochester continued down the staircase.

“And what’s Noah doing about it?” Hudson stopped after three steps, looking down at Rochester from the top of the stairs.

“He’s swimming in debt and guilt.” Rochester continued to the drawing room. Realizing it would be a good year before he could start working on his home again, he longed to sit in a fully finished and fully furnished room.

Hudson pursued on his heels. “Good. Guilt is the least he should feel.”

“Don’t be too hard. We had a rather eye-opening discussion about our parents. And when I say our, I mean all of ours. Yours, mine, Noah’s.”

Hudson’s forehead creased, and he squinted his eyes with confusion.

Rochester pointed to a chair. “We all need a drink for this, I assure you.”

For the next hour, he shared with Hudson the entire excursion minus the night he spent with Evelyn. Although his trip had turned out well, old childhood trauma had a way of imposing itself into Rochester’s adult world because he still came away with a lingering feeling of failure. He supposed it was why he played billiards. It was a game he could win. The hard work of practicing excellence had paid off well when

challenging opponents in a way that his work at the family homestead had never done. At home, he was constantly reminded of what a disappointment he'd been, and now he fought against that very thing with Evelyn's father, too. He'd always fought the fear of being brought low due to emotional exhaustion by avoiding emotions altogether. But he could do that no longer.

In answer to the overwhelming odds against him, he got busy. Failure was not an option.

Strong's Boxing Club was relatively quiet in the late afternoon. The front lobby served as a gentlemen's club where comfortable chairs surrounding low tables invited sparring conversation. Whereas the back room gymnasium offered physical sparring in the form of fists and jarring banter. Rochester found both equally entertaining.

"The last I saw you, you were being pummeled in the ring," Rochester said, slapping a surprised Hugo Darrington on the shoulder. "Don't get up," he continued as he walked around the club table in the main foyer and took a seat opposite Darrington.

With a friendly smile, Darrington held up two fingers, signaling the footman to bring drinks. "Shouldn't you be somewhere hustling unsuspecting strangers with that ridiculous game you play?"

"No, my friend. These days, I'm playing a far more challenging game where the odds are stacked against me."

"Finally," Darrington teased and then added when Rochester was slow to answer. "Ah, yes. Marriage."

Rochester shook himself, a half smile creeping up his cheek as he took the drink offered by the footman.

“We have mutual friends.” Darrington smiled indulgently, clearly enjoying his winning position. “Markham suggested that if you showed up in the city, I should keep an eye on you.”

“You mean spy on me? And please don’t refer to Winn as Markham anymore. I’ve had quite a time speaking with Mr. Henry Markham, and the name alone makes me want to hit something.”

“I’d say you’re in the right place.”

“Why did Winn contact you?”

“Because we’re friends?” Darrington lifted his eyebrows as if Rochester was a nodcock.

“Are we? And whose side are you on, Darrington? Winn’s or mine? Because the bastard cuffed me the last time I saw him.”

“If you were trying to ruin my sister, I might have done the same. You forget how well we know you.”

“I’ve forgotten nothing, and I didn’t come here for your blessing. Who else knows?”

Darrington managed to look comically offended. “Are we gossiping women? No. We are not. Rein in your temper, good man. No one else knows. And I’m on the side of love, let’s just say.”

“How diplomatic of you. I didn’t peg you for a romantic.”

“I’m a saint. Now, what’s your plan? I assume you need one since you’re here and not courting your beloved.” Darrington gestured toward the club as a whole.

Rochester straightened his waistcoat and sat back, his hands clasped at his middle. “You’re so well-informed I would have thought you knew about the betrothal.”

“You’re betrothed?” his friend dared to ask.

“Don’t be a bore, Darrington.”

Darrington propped his chin on his fist. “Winn did mention something about a wedding and a Lord Cumberland, whoever that is. I can’t imagine he’s a threat to you. Why don’t you just challenge the banns?”

“You don’t think I haven’t tried? What grounds would you suggest because love, apparently, isn’t enough. Besides, the banns and the wedding are the least of my current concerns.”

Darrington’s countenance changed from ribbing to serious. “I know Mr. Markham doesn’t care for you much.”

“Us. He doesn’t care for us ,” Rochester corrected.

“With all due respect, I don’t need him to like me in the same way you do. But even so, I would have assumed he cared more for his daughter than to marry her to someone she did not wish to wed. There must be more. What haven’t you told me?”

“He betrothed her without her knowledge. How discerning can he be?”

“Yes. I gather that, but surely he knows differently now.”

“One would think, but as I said, that’s not what has me worried. The point is, I paid him back. I made him take a banknote on promise, and I’m flat on funds.”

“How flat?”

“Paper thin. My father isn’t well, and he’s made a muck of things at Heavenly House.”

“God, how I hate that name.” Darrington rolled his eyes.

“Focus, Darrington. I need your help.”

“You’re not kidding?”

“I’m dead serious. Why do you think I’m here and not eloping? Because God knows I won’t allow her to marry that man. Unfortunately, even a scandalous elopement may not be possible any longer.” He motioned for another drink. “I had a plan until I paid my father a visit. He’s destroyed everything.”

Darrington waited for another round of drinks. “But you’ve taken so little income from there for years.”

“And still, he’s managed to make a mockery of my inheritance. Which as well you know, I don’t give a damn about except I’m responsible for the place, and someday it will belong to my son, God willing. I make a nice bit playing billiards, and my few investments with you are lucrative, but it isn’t enough to support two households. The viscount sacked the steward, and he’s lost all but three cottagers. It’s failing badly. With a leaking roof ruining the furniture and causing structural damage, the house is in shambles.”

“And Noah? What about him?”

Rochester sighed heavily and clamped his jaw tight. “Noah and I had a good talk. I’ll fill you in later on how deeply that went, but suffice to say, he needs and deserves my

help.”

Darrington bit his cheek and nodded, clearly a question in his eyes, but thankfully, they were good enough friends for him not to ask them now. “What can I do?”

“I met Mr. Torrent and Lord Bastion as a guest of the Duke of Kingsley. I need another audience with them. You say Belgravia is on the verge of booming, and these two are knee-deep in it.”

“Yes, of course it is. I plan to be filthy rich by the time it’s finished. But Rochester, it’s a long investment. You know that. You’re talking of a family. A home. A future.”

“Obviously.” A family. Oh, how he wanted a family with Evelyn. Whether he deserved it or not was another matter. She would be a wonderful mother, and with any luck, he’d do better than he’d been given by his father. He might not know exactly what to do, but he sure as hell knew what not to do.

“Belgravia is going to be big, but the turnaround is like any other grossly lucrative adventure. It takes time, which you don’t seem to have. If wishes were fishes, my friend. I can get the audience, yes, but to what end?”

“You’re looking at this all wrong. The future success of a venture is as important as current capital.”

“You speak of debt? Do you want to go into debt for a decade? I wouldn’t be a friend if I allowed that or encouraged it.”

“A good name goes far, and risk is the investment. A man’s word.”

“Don’t we all know that.”

“Besides, you’re in debt. It’s your investment sense that people believe in. If I’m not mistaken, you’re flourishing because of it unless I’m missing something. You don’t look worse for the wear, except perhaps a purple eye every now and again.” He smiled smugly. Darrington might have made his money investing, but he also made a penny boxing in the same way that Rochester wagered on billiards.

“Me, yes. You? I don’t know.” The comment wasn’t meant to be condescending.

“What are you saying? That I’m not worth the risk?”

“My risk, yes. But you’re talking about a family.”

“And you’re saying what?” Rochester asked sternly. He felt his face tighten with the gravity of the situation and couldn’t believe that Darrington would question his wisdom on the matter.

“I’m saying that I don’t have a family, so I can afford to take chances. I rent my town house, and if my income goes to hell for a Season, I move back home with my siblings, as awful as that sounds. That option would be detrimental with a family, even for me.”

“Which means?” Anger bled from the words, and Rochester was on the verge of inviting Darrington for a brawl, only he wasn’t keen on a broken lip.

“Oh, please,” Darrington said while aggravation crept around a long sigh.

“All right. I know you mean well, and Lord knows I don’t want to live at Heavenly—despite the ridiculous name.”

Darrington put his elbows to his knees and steepled his fingers against his bent head.

“Listen, I’ll set up a meeting, but the minimum buy-in is five thousand pounds. If you

must borrow to do it, then borrow from me.”

“No.”

Darrington looked up under his brow.

“We’re friends. I’d like it to stay that way.”

“That’s what friends do. They help one another. If not, then what was that trip we took with Winn to Bath? I understand he took the house’s money, but he did it because of our inebriated stupidity. And why? Because we are friends.”

“Such good friends that he dug a fist into my cheek.”

“If I thought you were serious.”

“—I am serious,” Rochester interrupted.

“No, no. I believe he hit you, but I’m also certain he had reason to.” He paused to study Rochester. “Do you seriously think he didn’t have a reason? And save me the daggers, I’m not prying into your private affairs; I’m simply asking what you would have done under the same circumstances.”

Rochester grunted. “The same. I don’t blame him, and I wouldn’t have blamed you. I’m just angry because money should not stand in the way of happiness.”

“So don’t allow it. If you’re going to spend an entire life with her, then ask what she wants.”

“She wants to be taken care of.”

“You’re an idiot, Rochester.”

“And you sound like a godforsaken woman, Darrington.”

“Huh. Well, we’re fighting like women. What do you expect?”

An involuntary chuckle leaped from Rochester’s throat. “Just get me an audience, will you?”

By the following afternoon, Darrington had sent a message that Mr. Torrent would be happy to meet with him in a week. In the meantime, Rochester played several matches of billiards arranged by Hudson and instructed Lovie on how to care for the goose since leaving the bird with Hudson meant death. He even had a modest pen built in the back courtyard before he left. Amid the chaos, he prepared to tackle the last banns for a wedding that would only happen over his dead lifeless body.

CHAPTER 25

Evelyn eyed Lord Cumberland from behind her black veil, which had been the only color available to her from the local haberdashery. Thankfully, the church was crowded enough that Cumberland didn't readily notice her from his seat on the first row. In truth, no one paid much heed because she looked like a grieving widow, except for the modest gray-blue walking dress she wore. If one didn't look too hard, it might appear a forgivable dove gray.

And then the words she'd heard recited a hundred times, and words she'd ignored almost as many, echoed loudly from the rafters. Or so it seemed. For a moment, guilt flooded her, and she felt sorry for Lord Cumberland. After all, it wasn't his fault, but neither was it hers.

"And for the banns," the minister announced. "I publish the banns of Miss Mary Sutton to Mr. Harold Mercer..."

From the modestly full pews came oohs and aahs for the lovely couple who sat conspicuously on the first row, seated across the aisle from one another and sneaking peeks around their proud parents. Cumberland beamed, seated next to the excited young fop like it was some kind of grooms' club, and she ought to be sitting on the front pew with the bride.

Instead, she sat near the back of the church on an empty pew, waiting for Hades to show up and drag her away for what she was about to do. She kept a nervous vigilance, watching for Rochester because she knew he had the same plan. But after returning to Rosewood Manor and the encouragement that came readily from her

godfather, Evelyn had struck out this morning for the family parish after leaving word that she'd gone shopping in the village. She had little doubt her father would eventually be informed of her behavior, but for now, the ruse would throw him off track and keep him from turning up at church.

"I publish the banns of Miss Evelyn Markham and Victor Beasley, Baron Cumberland," the minister announced. "If any of you know cause or just impediment why these two should not be joined together, ye are to declare it. This is the third and final reading."

Now was her time. Evelyn braced herself to stand, her knees a little like jelly, but before she could utter a word, the back door swung open with a hardy whoosh, banging the wall like a gong and signaling the entire church to turn their heads.

Rochester rushed in without so much as a look around and shouted, "I appeal the banns."

"Son, I do believe we've had this discussion already," the very patient minister pronounced.

Just then, as if things could not get worse, Lord Cumberland stood and pivoted around, an angry slant to his mouth. No confused babble now, he blustered quite coherently, "You, sir, are ill-advised and do not speak for this union."

Rochester looked wildly about, his gaze passing over Evelyn's covered head and then suddenly crashing back to her, his hazel eyes piercing her soul. She saw anger and perhaps relief, too. Just now, she concentrated on his fiercely flaring nostrils and his stony glare. However, it didn't stop her from appreciating his granite features and breathlessly swooning good looks. Lord, how she missed him. She wanted to smile but dared not.

“This woman”—Rochester suddenly pointed to her—“can speak for herself.”

Evelyn’s eyes went wide, and her breath caught. She cautiously lifted the black veil from her eyes and heard the baron gasp. “Excuse me, Lord Cumberland,” she said. “Mr. Rochester, here, is correct. I stand here today to appeal the banns and the promise of marriage. And to offer my apologies because I hadn’t intended it to be so public.”

“The contracts are signed,” Cumberland blustered more to Rochester than Evelyn while the congregation watched, their gazes ping-ponging about the room like a poorly shot cue ball banking wildly off the bumpers.

It didn’t matter who won this round because Evelyn intended to win the match. She continued, “But I did not sign them, Lord Cumberland.”

“But I’ve seen the contract,” the minister added, unnecessarily.

She turned to Dalton. “What are the grounds for your appeal, Mr. Rochester?”

His gaze softened as it rested on her. “On the grounds that I am in love with you, Miss Markham.”

“So, there you have it.” She tugged at her gloves, then folded her hands, confident Rochester’s admission would be enough. It admittedly did her heart good.

But then the minister added, “And, once again, I say, we have spoken of this, young man. Love is certainly desirable, but not every marriage begins this way, and so it cannot be appealed for lack of it either.” The man made it sound simple, and stifling, and static.

“I—there is—there are,” Cumberland stammered.

“I see,” Evelyn said. “Then it’s my dowry you love and not me?”

“Now see here, Miss Markham.” Cumberland’s entire body went rigidly indignant. “I am not in need of your dowry.”

“Then what exactly do you require of me that another cannot provide? If you have no love for me, then what do you have to offer?”

“My good name.” Cumberland held his arms straight at his sides, and his chin came up two inches.

Evelyn shot Rochester a quick look. His sneering gaze shredded the other man.

She turned back to Cumberland, squaring her shoulders and close to revealing the whole truth. “And what do I have to offer you, if not my dowry, my lord?” From the corner of her eye, she could see Rochester roll his head to glare at her in disbelief. Half a pew stood between them.

Cumberland shouted, “You offer your good name as well.”

She gave Rochester a side-glance. He tilted his head, pulling his mouth into a grim line, and fixed her with a meaningful glower that screamed no!

She kept her eyes on Rochester but pointed her comment to Cumberland. “What if my name is not all that good?”

She heard the growling sigh at the exact moment Rochester bounded toward her and simultaneously grabbed her elbow with one hand and, with the other, flipped the black veil to cover her face.

“Excuse us,” Rochester called to the minister.

As he quickly dragged her from the church, she saw Cumberland's face redden, but she hadn't enough time to decipher if he was merely embarrassed at her outburst or enraged.

Probably both.

"What's the matter with you?" Rochester heaved under his breath as they cleared the back door.

"Dalton," she pleaded, removing the veil as he dragged her along.

"Do not call me that here," he hissed, hurrying her down the steps and into the churchyard.

Her chest hurt while her heart made a plummeting frown. A stupid thing to be crushed by a name, she thought while trying to collect herself, but she couldn't stop the anger rising through the haze of confusion she'd just created. "I apologize, Mr. Rochester," she spat back, feeling attacked and marooned.

"Exactly!" shouted Cumberland from the small landing just outside the church doors.

She and Rochester turned at once.

Cumberland marched down the steps toward them. "You are Mr. Rochester. I am Lord Cumberland. And Miss Markham is promised to me, so get your hands off her this instant."

For a man who had barely spoken a complete sentence to her, he fought like a man possessed. What on earth did he want from her? He barely knew her. She turned to see the muscle in Rochester's cheek popping intensely.

“You”—Rochester pointed to Cumberland—“have no right to this woman without her consent.”

“I am not the one standing here without a contract fighting a losing battle,” Cumberland had the audacity to say.

The challenge was enough for a duel, and as if thinking it could bring it about, Rochester ground out, “How do you like pistols, Lord Cumberland?”

“As much as the next wise man. Only fools would suggest death.”

“I suggest I’d rather die than live without her. What have you to say?” Rochester’s response had come immediately, without thought, without a pause, and Evelyn wanted to cry because the last person who offered their life for hers was her mother. That’s how deeply he loved her.

“Wise indeed,” she said. “He speaks of passion and love. And you, Lord Cumberland, speak of contracts and arrangements. I am not chattel. Not for either one of you.” She looked between Rochester and Cumberland both. “Nor do I require your life,” she said to Rochester.

“But she has it nonetheless,” Rochester blasted the comment to Cumberland.

Cumberland then looked with accusation at Evelyn. “Miss Markham, what exactly did you mean by ‘not good’?”

She felt her face grow hot. The moment of reckoning was upon her.

Before she could answer, Rochester said, “She means that she’s impetuous and headstrong. Is that what you want? Or do you imply something else, Lord Cumberland, because I’d still be happy to oblige you at dawn?”

Cumberland visibly pulled back. “I—it—I addressed her,” he bumbled through another sentence.

Evelyn took a deep breath. “Lord Cumberland?—”

“This is a churchyard,” Mr. Hartley called out, strolling toward them, carrying a hoe from the north corner of the building. “This is not a court. There shall be no judgment here, Lord Cumberland. And this fine lady needn’t answer another question nor endure her questions being answered by another.” Her godfather pointed the last of the comment toward Rochester. “If she’s headstrong, then she is strong enough to choose her own words.”

Evelyn stood a little taller, and Rochester humbly bowed to her. “My apologies, Miss Markham. Evelyn.”

“Thank you,” she whispered. Then, to everyone, she said, “Although it may charge a girl’s esteem to have two men fighting for her, it leaves one in a terrible spot. Believe me, Lord Cumberland, I am not only appreciative for the opportunity, but I am also sorry that I cannot oblige your proposal.”

“Which I doubt he ever asked,” Rochester was foolhardy enough to add. She gave him a stern look but wanted to hug him all the same.

“You are correct,” Cumberland conceded, then bowed to Evelyn. “I had assumed you were happy with the arrangement since your name was signed to the betrothal. My mistake, apparently.”

Evelyn stood there stunned. If the contract bore her signature, then her father was to blame for the obvious forgery.

Her godfather put a hand on her wrist. “Let’s not make assumptions on that account.

Let's move forward." He turned his attention to Lord Cumberland. "Is there anything else you'd like to declare?"

"No. Of course not. I humbly withdraw for the sake of Miss Markham. It would seem we have both been the victim of a puppeteer."

She swallowed hard. "You are too kind, Lord Cumberland." She couldn't blame the man for something her father had manipulated.

"I shall contact your father about dissolving the contract, and we shall keep our peace, Miss Markham."

She knew what that meant. There was bound to be some public embarrassment, and the baron was asking her not to add insult to injury by defaming his name, although she had more to lose on that account than he did.

"My wish is the same," she said to Cumberland. "As for me, I will spend the rest of this Season with my brother and sister-in-law awaiting their new arrival. No one will question that."

Then Cumberland did something unusual. He held out his hand in agreement, and Evelyn placed her hand in his and shook. This was a day for women everywhere when a man such as the baron would make himself respectfully equal to a woman.

She waited for Cumberland to leave before she turned around. Behind her, she heard Rochester breathing furiously during the entire unconventional exchange.

"I have work to finish. I trust you two will find yourselves home safely?" Mr. Hartley dismissed himself.

"Are you angry with me?" Evelyn asked Rochester.

“No. Why would you think so?”

“Because you’re breathing like a bull.” She tilted her head.

“I don’t want to lose you, Evelyn.” His words were filled with pain.

“May I call you Dalton again?” she asked shyly, sending out her words like a gentle hug.

He sighed. His eyes closed with remorse, and he pulled at his nose as if to feel for the bull’s ring. “You know what I’d like to do?”

“Kiss me into submission?”

He chuckled, looking at her through his lashes. “Only if there’s a bed nearby.”

“There’s a coach.” She lifted a brow, sliding her hand down his forearm to his hand. He braided her fingers with his.

“You’re incorrigible, you know that?”

She nodded, a smile playing on her lips.

“I’m sorry, Goose. I truly am.” He smoothed a stray hair from her face. “Don’t ever stop calling me Dalton.”

“Only if you never stop calling me goose .”

He looked side to side, then hurried her behind a hedgerow tall enough to hide them from view and kissed her.

CHAPTER 26

“Why not return with me to Rosewood? We can both speak to my father.” Evelyn made a good argument, but Rochester had a meeting to attend in Mayfair.

“There’s more to this marriage thing than the banns, I vow.” He started guiding her toward the carriage driver she’d bribed to bring her to church this morning.

“What more can there be besides convincing my father? And if we’re both there, we can show a united front.” She turned to face him before they were within hearing distance of the driver.

“Are you afraid? How angry will he be with you?” The only example Rochester had to glean from was his own father, who lacked in every way.

“He’ll be like an angry hornet but hardly surprised. In time, he’ll get over it. You’ll see.”

Rochester had always considered Mr. Markham a hard man because he’d exiled his only son over a poor mistake. A very poor mistake from which Winn seemed to have recovered. If everything Evelyn’s father had done had been for her, then there must be hope.

“What does that feel like?” he asked, his curiosity unrelenting on the subject of fathers since he hoped to join those ranks someday.

“What do you mean?”

“To have a father forgive you?” The palm she rested on his cheek felt cool and comforting. Her expressive eyes held no pity, just honest concern.

“What happened to you as a little boy?”

“You already know my story, love.”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t. I know about one event. One very heart-wrenching event. But I know nothing about your childhood nor why you choose to live in the city.”

“I like Mayfair. I like having my own place and not sharing it.”

“You share it with Hudson, and for a time, you shared it with Mrs. Hawke, too. And what about me?”

He kissed her palm. “Everything I have is yours, such as it is. Hudson inherited his family estate, but he chooses to live in the city. What purpose would it serve for him to rent a townhome when I have room. So, yes, I suppose I do like sharing with the right people. My childhood home is not a healthy place for me to live.”

“But someday it will be yours. Will you not live there then?”

“We will not. My brother is currently the acting steward, and he’s welcome to live there and keep the place as long as he cares to.”

“Do you see? You never speak of him.”

“Someday I will. Not today.” He smiled and kissed her nose. “Today, I need to know you will be safe.”

“Always. My father is not a bad man.”

“I never said he was. He has plenty of good reasons not to like me.”

“And one very big reason to adore you. For goodness’ sake, all that nonsense with Winn and Darrington happened almost five years ago, and Papa has forgiven Winn, even I can see that. What if you paid him back?”

He held up a hand.

She pulled it down. “Don’t say something idiotic like I cannot understand finance or that I shouldn’t worry because I’m a woman.”

“Evelyn, you challenge my manhood at every turn.”

She gave him a sidelong glance and a tilted smile.

“I accept the challenge as usual.” He shook his boot and pointed with a quirked eyebrow toward the ground. “I left a draft with your father for payment in full, including any fines, and offered to pay whatever fine Cumberland may bring. Which I assure you he will.”

“He took it? Because I thought you told me that he wouldn’t.”

“He never has before, but I gave him little to no choice this time. Unfortunately, at the time, I had no idea that my father had drained the funds from Heavenly House. I may not wish to live there, but the upkeep is still my responsibility.”

“Your father should be doing that with your brother’s help.”

“In a perfect world of which we do not live. I cannot stop the inheritance of title, nor

can our son.” When he said that, she beamed. “So you see, Goose, the house might someday belong to little Albert.”

She giggled. “Not Albert.”

“What’s wrong with Albert? It sounds noble.”

“It sounds ordinary. Our children will not be ordinary.”

“Perhaps not, but they will be loved.” He searched her eyes for a promise, a silent pledge to help him be a good father because he had no life lessons, no mentor, no tutor on that account. The idea scared him more than he’d like to admit.

She rubbed the webs between his fingers, centering her concentration there—an obvious distraction. “I’ll speak to my father. Perhaps he’ll advance me my dowry.”

Rochester looked toward the sky, sighing and shaking his head. “You’ll no doubt have your hands full explaining this little excursion. Leave the rest alone, please. I’ll deal with it.”

“You take care of your business, and I’ll take care of mine. Namely, Papa.” She gripped his lapel with both hands, giving it a smart jerk. “Come for a visit soon. I’ll do my best to smooth things with Papa. And before you say a word, I will explain and take the blame for this little excursion.”

“How noble of you since I had nothing to do with your plan.” He smiled, burying his nose in her hair, holding her head against his chest, and breathing her in. “But I’ll never forget it either. Thank you, love.”

Rochester returned to his home in Mayfair with one victory in his pocket, a shilling in his shoe, and several more shots to go before the game was finished.

“You’ve put me in a real bind,” Hudson said later that evening when he found Rochester tossing an ivory ball between the bumpers of his fancy billiard table and wondering how much he could sell it for. He looked up when Hud entered but didn’t stop his habitual rolling of the ball.

“It seems I do naught but apologize these days,” Rochester said.

“To everyone but me. You owe me a dozen at least.”

Rochester breathed a tired sigh. “I’d love a day free of complaints.”

“Remind me when it’s your birthday, and I’ll see what I can do,” Hudson said tongue in cheek. “Currently, I have only pity available. Would you like me to feel sorry for you?”

“Why not? I’ve become quite pathetic, don’t you think?”

“Yes, you have, and I for one hate it.”

Rochester caught the ball on the next bounce off the bumper, left it sedentary on the baize, then walked to the bar and poured himself a double shot of whiskey.

Hudson watched him, his eyebrows drawn as he progressed farther into the room. “What the hell happened?”

“The banns have been canceled. Evelyn showed up at the church to appeal them herself, the goose. And Cumberland’s claim on her is void.”

“Good news, then. So why are you here sulking?”

Rochester shot him a look. “Am I?” He poured another drink for his cousin and

handed it to him. “I suppose you’re right. Pathetic, as I said.”

“Surely you have a plan to court her and woo her father into blessing the marriage. Or just elope, for God’s sake.”

Every nerve ending in his back pulled tight, and his jaw ached from biting down. “Oh, how I wish it were that simple. Unfortunately, even the emergency—whimsical as Evelyn calls it—elopement plan is off the table. An officially impossible shot, my friend. My only hope is to convince her father that... oh, hell, I don’t know.” He ran a hand through his hair and downed the rest of his drink.

Hudson leaned against the high bar, folding his arms, and studied Rochester. “I would expect you to be celebrating after successfully foiling the banns, but here you are throwing back drinks and wasting time on the boredom of tossing expensive billiard balls about. Who could stop an elopement? Scandalous, yes, I suppose, but unstoppable all the same. Obviously, something took place between the banns and here. So, what was it?”

“Nothing really, just my future plans going to hell in a handbasket. What if I have to sell this place? I cannot—I will not take a wife to my family home. Not only is it full of ghosts for me, but it’s not livable, especially once children come. How can I take a wife when the only promise I can make is that I love her?”

“That sounds like the most important thing.”

“Love tears people apart. I’ve seen it, and so have you. And here I am, making the mistake of falling hard.”

Hudson took a seat, his glass dangling from his fingertips. He swirled the liquid around, hypnotically staring into the tumbler. “I know you don’t believe that.”

“You never commented on my brother’s questionable parentage.”

“Probably because deep down, I suspected something of the sort. If I was one to deplete my good humor with the past, I might hate your father more than you do, but Rochester, it’s not worth it. Can’t you see that?”

“Yes. After this last trip, I do see it, but I still would not take a wife there.”

“My house is virtually empty. You know you’re as welcome there as I am here. Blood is thick between our families.”

“A husband wants to feel like a man.”

“What exactly does that mean if it keeps you from wedding or from living?”

“How would you feel if you couldn’t provide for the ones you love? If you couldn’t put a roof over your children’s heads. I know I have places to go. But I wanted things to be perfect.”

“Oh, well, just perfect is all.” Hudson pulled back the entire contents of his glass. “Why didn’t you say so? Perfection is my specialty.”

“You’re an ass, Hud.”

Hudson chuckled, placing his glass on the lamp table.

“Darrington has an in with a group of investors responsible for the new Belgravia. It’s a long game, but it would secure my name in the community and give me leverage to borrow when needed, like now. I’m happy I paid Mr. Markham, truly I am, but if I’d been apprised of the condition of my familial home at the time, I’d have thought twice.”

“I know you, and you’d have paid your debt first. So, do the obvious, Cousin, borrow it from me.”

“No,” Rochester said flatly without a pause.

“Why not? Give me a good reason.”

“I’ll give you the same reason I gave Darrington when he offered the same solution. Friendship. Simple as that.”

“That’s humbug, and you know it. We aren’t friends—we’re family.”

“An even better reason to leave it alone.”

“I see,” Hudson said, picking at a tiny thread poking from the seam of the armchair. “You’d rather sell off this place and live in a rundown estate with a raving lunatic? Which, by the way, would force me to purchase this house because if you plan to remain on the gaming circuit, both of us need a place in the city to live. And I warn you, this beautiful, perfectly built-to-your-specs billiard table is going to see more action because I plan to abuse it regularly with my mistress.” Hudson sat back smartly, folding his arms and legs and looking quite satisfied.

“As if you had one,” Rochester smirked.

“I don’t know all your secrets, and you certainly don’t know all of mine. Although I’m not sure whether I can afford to buy a house and afford to keep a mistress. My tastes are rather expensive. Just keep that in mind while you do your best to ruin my life along with yours. We can’t all be charmed.” Hudson shrugged as if it were all child’s play.

But Rochester knew he was serious, at least about the house. And he was also correct.

They both needed a place to live in London.

“If I agree to give it some thought,” Rochester said. “Will you stop needling me like a fish wife?”

“That is the goal, yes.”

In the end, Rochester accepted a portion from Hudson and a quarter from Darrington, then he met with Mr. Torrent and Lord Bastion, making a deal—an investment in the development of Belgrave Square.

Darrington’s warning of a long return was accurate, but the arrangement did for Rochester’s name exactly what he had hoped it would. It elevated his business position, and the banks opened their doors, allowing him to borrow enough to see Heavenly House repaired, the property turned around, and to procure a physician for his father.

Unfortunately, it still left him short of funds, and keeping his Mayfair home was a stretch, not to mention adding the cost of a family. He felt the tangled web of debt closing around his neck. This was a complicated game calling for precise movements like juggling balls that had been lit on fire one by one until every toss threatened to burn him down.

Heavenly House would eventually turn a profit with Noah now on Rochester’s side. The Belgravia project would subsequently produce a fine future. But with everything going off at once, it was conceivable he’d be forced to consult Evelyn for help, after all.

Hadn’t this all begun with those four little letters?

HELP.

CHAPTER 27

After Evelyn's outrageous actions at the church, challenging the banns, she had returned home to a quiet house. Although it brimmed with servants along with her father in residence, Rosewood Manor could not have been any more silent. Her father had received word of her shenanigans before she had a chance to explain and refused to speak to her.

In fact, she abandoned her place at the dining room table where her papa's silence had become oppressive and continued her meals in her room. So when she heard her name bellowed, echoing from the foyer, bouncing off the high ceiling, and ricocheting off the second-floor walls, she jumped to her feet, dropping a book of short stories from her lap. She hurried from her room, dashing down the hallway until she practically slid into the polished railing that surrounded the gallery.

In the middle of the foyer, her father stood as stony-faced as the marble floor. With his neck tipped back to see her and his jaw resolute, he yelled, "Are you happy now?"

Seeking a proper response from her bumbling head when they hadn't spoken for almost a week was nearly impossible.

"Get down here," her father said, pointing to the floor, then he marched in the direction of his study, out of sight before Evelyn moved from the balcony.

She proceeded on shaky limbs, her soft slippers shushing along the waxed floor. The doors to the study stood open, and her father had already taken his place of authority at the hearth. Sitting at his desk would have been better for her nerves, but the mantel

generally meant a tedious lecture. Now, if there were only a bust of Wellington opposite his stance, he would look official. The ridiculous mental picture lifted her spirits.

She sat on the sofa facing her father, her hands primly folded and waited for the storm.

“Do you know what this is?” Her father held up a folded piece of paper, shaking it as he spoke.

“A contract?”

“Does it look like a contract?”

“I wouldn’t know since I’ve never been consulted on one.”

“You’re not clever enough for that, dear girl,” her father said, leaning in for emphasis.

“The contract or the cheeky response?”

“Evelyn Markham, you try my patience, and I’m not certain you want to do that.”

She sighed while readjusting her skirts. “My apologies, but you haven’t spoken a word to me since I’ve returned, and I know for a fact you’re aware of my actions at the church.”

“Your foolish actions? Yes, I’m aware and am paying for it now, quite literally.” He tossed the paper on the table.

It was from Cumberland, an official cancellation of the betrothal contract, and a fine

for breaking it.

“What say you now?”

“I still say I did not see a contract or sign one. Can you imagine my embarrassment when it took a trip to our local parish to appeal the banns?”

Her father shook his head to clear whatever words were about to fall out of his mouth. No doubt they would not have been kind. “Evelyn,” he said slowly, more controlled than before. “Let us not speak of embarrassment, shall we? I think it best if we agree on that.”

“I concede that point.”

“Lovely. Then tell me why you would stand up in a church—our church—and announce that you’re not in love with Lord Cumberland?”

“I don’t believe those were the words I actually said. But I did ask if he loved me or my dowry more, in not so many words.”

“How could you? Why not?—”

“Come to you, Papa? What a notion when that is the first thing I did.”

“Oh, no, my dear. You did not come to me. You went to him .”

Him being Rochester, of course. “I went to the man who could and would help me. A man I happen to love with all my heart, by the way, which you might have known had you consulted me about Cumberland in the first place.”

“I didn’t think you’d object to being a baroness. But I see a viscountess was more to

your liking.” He shook his head vigorously as she sat with her mouth agape. Her father held up a hand. “That was not called for, I know. My apologies, but for God’s sake, I swear I don’t have a clue how to do this.” He looked wildly about the room, his eyes batting away a watery sheen. “I’m just a man who hasn’t the foggiest notion how to raise a daughter in these times.”

Once again, Evelyn’s throat constricted at the depth of her father’s grief. She couldn’t fault him for it, but she shouldn’t be made a victim of it either. “Aren’t we all learning, Papa? You most of all. If you think you’ve been a poor father, then you’re gravely mistaken. But in the matter of my happiness, I should imagine that I am a better judge.”

He gave her a half smile and a glance full of devotion. “Do you think I want anything else? I need to know you’ll be taken care of, and love isn’t always the most reliable source.”

“Nor is money. And I’m sure Rochester will pay the fine.”

“He has said as much, but Lord Cumberland wants a thousand pounds for his damaged pride.”

“I spoke with Lord Cumberland, and he has no ill-will toward me. He was under the impression that I agreed on the contract, and that I signed it.” She held her father’s gaze. “Did I sign it? Did it carry my signature?”

Her father rubbed his forearm. “Not exactly your signature if not your name. I believe the handwriting was mine.” His voice grew quiet.

She smiled. “As I suspected. I can’t imagine why you didn’t consult me first. I admit it angered me to hear it, but I know you want the best for me. What I don’t understand is why it can’t be Rochester. Has he not made amends?”

“Has he told you the whole story of his part in the debacle that Winn got himself wrapped up in?”

“I believe he has.” She fell silent, waiting as her father’s temper cooled.

“He did come here and force money upon me.”

“How dare he,” she said sheepishly. Her father tried not to smile.

“A man capable of squandering such a fortune on a game of chance is not trustworthy or disciplined enough to support a family. He can’t know what that means.”

“What about Winn? Is he not a good husband for Adeline because he manipulated a card game to even the odds because his friends had been taken advantage of?”

“His friends were drunk. Did he tell you that too?”

She laughed, shaking her head, feeling a loose curl tickle her neck and wishing Rochester was there. “Drunk young men. How scandalous. And normal.”

“How foolish. And childish.”

“Have you never done anything so foolish in your life?”

“No,” he said, then softened his gaze. “But your mother’s father might have said differently. And I will admit that my part in this fiasco was too foolish by half. Control is difficult to relinquish when a father is talking about his favorite daughter.”

“His only daughter.” She wanted to cry. She could see his heart opening, and his soul bared to all the pain and loss he’d experienced. She felt it, too. “You like him, Papa, but your pride won’t say so. He’s paid you back, and he’s made amends. Can we not

forgive and start again? Will you please reconsider Rochester?"

"I'd be surprised if you hadn't planned an elopement." He turned away and sat on an adjacent chair to the sofa. "Before you reply, please know I want to see my daughter walk down the aisle, and I would be humble enough to beg that you not elope."

"No one is eloping." It might be a lie; she wasn't quite sure. Not yet. "If Rochester pays the fine as promised, will you bless us?"

He scratched his forehead. "We shall see."

"May I ask a favor?"

He gave a simple nod.

"Would you make my dowry available to use as I please?"

His eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"Because I wish to be a helpmate to my husband."

"Number one: you do not have a husband. Number two: your dowry is to be your future should you ever need it. So, the answer is no. And do not ask me again." He added as an afterthought. "Did he ask for your dowry?"

"Absolutely not."

"Has he bothered to ask for your hand?"

Evelyn grimaced.

“I didn’t think so.”

How could she explain to her papa that Rochester’s actions spoke volumes of love that went far beyond any formal gesture. He’d rescued her time and again. He’d loved her so completely and thoroughly, and he’d been her safe place to fall, quite literally. “If you will but hear me out before you pass judgment, perhaps I can persuade you to give him a chance. There are things I think you should know. Information that would help you understand what kind of man he is.”

He lifted his hands helplessly. “How much worse can it get? I’m listening.”

CHAPTER 28

“A ha!” Rochester exclaimed, reading through the morning mail.

Hudson looked up from the sofa. “Good news, I take it?”

“The best. Well, almost. Lord Bastion wants to host a night of billiards, and he’s insisting I must come. It’s working, Hud.”

“He’s just looking for entertainment.”

“What does it matter when he wants me there, rubbing my aristocratic elbows with all his business cronies?” He shifted his feet flat on the floor and felt Evelyn’s shilling slide under his big toe. This game he played was for them both, and the sooner he fell into step with Bastion’s partners, the closer he came to having a plan that not even Mr. Markham could turn away. He flipped through the customary correspondence: a ball at the Pemberley’s, a musicale, and tea at Mrs. Drake’s—no doubt, with a dozen single young ladies vying for his future.

He pulled up the next letter, uncrossed his legs, and sat forward, disregarding the rest of the post.

“What is it?” Hudson asked.

“It’s from Mr. Markham.” Rochester broke the seal and unfolded the letter. “He wants to see me.”

“When?”

“Now.” He scanned over the unimportant proper greeting. “He wants to address something of great import, and if I would like to truly rectify our relationship, I should be there no later than... Oh, God.” He hung his head, then looked up from under his brow. “He wants me there tomorrow.”

“So, what’s the problem?”

“Do you have to ask? I just said I have a meeting with Bastion the day after tomorrow, and I can’t see how I should get away in time to make that. All this travel. Dammit!” He tossed the letter on the tea table and watched it glide like a card across the polished surface. “Why must everything be so difficult?”

Without asking, Hudson picked up the letter and gave it a quick read. “Write Mr. Markham back and tell him you have business to attend that is as important to your future as a meeting with him would be.”

“Really? You think he’ll take kindly to that after I humiliatingly ruined his arrangement with Cumberland in public?”

“Cumberland,” they both said simultaneously, obviously coming to the same conclusion.

“The contract has been broken, and the jackass is fining him,” Rochester said.

“Who’s the jackass? Mr. Henry Markham or Lord Cumberland?”

“Neither, I suppose. More like I am the ass in this scenario.” He fell back, facing the ceiling and nervously running his palms back and forth over the arms of the chair. “I promised to pay the fine if there were any. Unless he’s decided to bless a marriage

between Evelyn and me, which I don't get the feeling from that letter he intends to do without addressing this mystery first. Oh, bloody hell. Why? Why now?" He tipped his boot heel to the floor and felt the shilling slide against the bottom of his foot.

Hudson suddenly sat up. "I have an idea."

Rochester tucked in his chin and regarded his cousin with caution.

"Send Remington."

"Hawke? How would I explain that?"

"He plays as well as you do. You must admit. Let him charm them. You agreed yourself it's entertainment. The man is smart and runs a business on two continents. And he's your cousin by marriage and my brother-in-law. I should think that's enough."

"And I've already made the deal with Bastion." Rochester began to see a clear solution. He sat forward again. "The more family tied to this endeavor, the better. How should we word it?"

"I'll take care of it. You pack."

"What if Hawke doesn't come?"

"Quit with the doom and gloom. He'll come, Rochester. Let me get to the note, so we can send a messenger."

"Two days. It can be done, right?"

"Yes."

Rochester had to believe it because he couldn't miss the meeting with Markham. Of course, it was more important than business, except that his future was tied to the good name he'd been trying to build, which in turn was connected to the business of marrying Evelyn. What a vicious circle.

Instead of his coach, Rochester took a horse and rode hellbent from Mayfair to Rosewood Manor, changing horses often and arriving at the Markham's by nightfall. As a result, he looked a disgrace. When he dropped the rein into the hands of a footman, he wondered if he'd made a mistake not stopping at the inn to wash up. He brought with him a nice change of clothes and hoped he would have time to have them brushed out. Then again, if Mr. Markham noted Rochester's disheveled appearance, perhaps he'd attribute it to his agreeable response to the letter.

As he walked to the front door, where a butler awaited him, he brushed hopelessly at his riding breeches.

"You look a sight," Evelyn greeted him in the foyer.

He grimaced. "That bad?"

She laughed, ran into his arms, and breathed him in. "Leather and horse, the best thing I've smelled all day."

He looked about, wondering if a stolen kiss would go unnoticed, then thought better of it, putting an arm's length between them before her father showed himself.

She looked behind her. "No one's here."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I'd love a kiss." She leaned into him and pressed a solitary kiss on his

cheek, then rubbed her palm against it. “Night beard. I miss that.”

“Do you know why your father called me here?”

“I believe I do. But first, let Mr. Holcomb show you to a room, and I’ll see to some dinner. Father usually takes port and retires by nine, and it’s almost that time now.”

Rochester more than willingly took her advice because presentation was half the battle in his world. He washed up and changed into clean trousers, a nice silver embroidered waistcoat, and a dinner jacket of black superfine. He knew the house, so finding the dining room was easy enough. It was the not knowing where Markham was that rattled him now.

The butler pushed the doors open, and relief moved through him like good brandy when he saw that the only persons present were Evelyn and two footmen.

“I’m not certain how I prefer you. There’s something intriguingly masculine and sensual about a man who’s travel-worn from riding.”

“You look lovely, too, Goose. I’ve missed you in Mayfair. The house isn’t the same.” As if he had forgotten where he was, he looked over his shoulder.

“We’re alone. Would you like to seat me?”

“I’d like to do more than that,” he said, inches from her neck as he helped her sit. They sat across from each other, avoiding the dining chairs at the ends of the long table, so they could talk without shouting.

Turnip soup and braised beef never tasted so good.

“Are you going to make me wait all night? It’s torture enough sitting here alone with

you and wondering if it shall be my last,” he said.

“You’re ridiculous.”

“You like to say that, Goose. Now, tell me why I’m here.”

“I had a very frank discussion with Papa, and I believe he’s coming around. Although he did wonder why you hadn’t proposed yet.”

Rochester set his fork down and straightened. “Surely, you jest.”

She shook her head. “He asked rather accusatory if you must know.”

“That sounds more like it.”

“Also”—she put her utensils aside, keeping her gaze on her plate—“I may have told him a few things to encourage his agreement. I’m not certain it made him more agreeable, however, but it did clarify some matters.” She looked up under her lashes. “Would you care for a drink first?”

“Is it that bad?”

“I don’t think so.” She put a hand to her chest, looking hopeful. “I thought if he knew....”

She trailed off as Rochester began to understand the extent of her conversation with her father. “For the love of God, Evelyn, you told your father? Why would you do that?”

“I actually didn’t have to say a thing.”

“No, you didn’t.” He checked himself before shouting and bringing the house down around them.

She pulled her mouth in a line, clearly irritated. “Are you finished? Or do you plan on interrupting me after every third word?”

He sat back against the chair and flung a hand toward her before tucking it in the crook of his tightly crossed arms while he worked his jaw back and forth. His gaze darted over her face as he tried to hang on to his slipping patience.

“What I was trying to say is that my father already knew. He’d guessed before I ever said a thing. But I defended you.”

“You what?”

“Defended you.”

“You begged me. Did you tell him that?”

“Well, no. That would have been foolish by half.”

“Lovely, so now the man hates me even more.”

“I doubt it. He’s rather disappointed with me, not you, because I told him about the notes. The only saving moment was the twitch of a smile I saw. Unfortunately, it didn’t last long. In truth, Dalton, I think he likes you. He’s a man who’s lost control of his family. At least that’s what my godfather tells me, and I believe him.”

“The issue is not your father. It’s the information. What we’ve shared and what’s between us is ours. It doesn’t belong to anyone else. It’s personal. I can’t believe you told him, Evelyn.”

“Wait. You think I told my father we know each other in the biblical sense?” She started to laugh. “Oh, Dalton. I love you, you ridiculous man. I told him that you hid me away in your home, which truly he may come to his own conclusions on that accord, but not from my telling. However, to my detriment, and maybe yours, I did tell him that you took me to a prize fight.”

“Oh, God.” He placed a hand over his face. “That’s nearly as bad.”

“Papa knows what a challenge I am. He even told me so. I seriously don’t think he blames you. In fact, he’s grateful I didn’t break my neck climbing out of my window. He may thank you for that.”

“I wouldn’t hold my breath if I were you.”

After the dishes were cleared and the footmen were busy, Evelyn leaned across the table as far as her seated position allowed. “I’ve no reason to hold my breath when you can take it away with a look, a kiss, a touch. Come to my room later.” Her voice was a husky whisper and very tempting.

He leaned in. “No.” He kept direct eye contact and emphasized the word slowly.

She sat back. “Coward.”

“Those are dueling words, Miss Markham.”

“I choose your rapier tongue, Mr. Rochester. You may thrash me with it repeatedly if you’d like.”

He grinned, and his pulse quickened until his body hurt. “Patience.”

“I’m running out.”

“I meant that for me.”

After their late dinner, he reluctantly left her at the top of the stairs, where the house split into two wings. She went one way and he the other.

CHAPTER 29

The request? Breakfast in the morning room, and Rochester hoped like hell it meant good news. Who plans an ambush over sunny eggs and honeyed scones?

“At least you’re on time,” Mr. Markham said when Rochester was announced.

Markham waved him over to a lovely round table set with fine china and crystal. The sun, at Markham’s back, illuminated him like the Christ child with a halo of innocence, and Rochester was glad for the view of the back gardens, a perfectly peaceful reminder to keep his temper in check today.

He didn’t feel like eating but graciously accepted the offered plate filled with buttered eggs, toast, and ham. Scones were set on the table with jam and cream, and tea was poured before either man could speak a word.

Markham used his knife to push a bite of egg onto his fork. His appetite didn’t seem to be affected by Rochester’s presence.

“I’m told you arrived late last night. I apologize I wasn’t there to greet you.”

Rochester cleared his throat and kept his hands busy spreading jam on a scone. “It’s better you didn’t. I was hardly presentable.”

“My steward tells me you rode in.”

“I took advantage of every post to change horses. Your letter sounded urgent.”

“How so since you’ve managed to effectively cancel the banns and foil my plans? It would seem I have all the time now.”

“I won’t apologize for that.”

Markham smirked. “You think that’s why I asked you here?”

“One might say demanded.”

“Feel free to interpret my underlying meaning any way you choose. It doesn’t change anything.” He took a deep breath. “Why are we always at odds?”

Rochester stayed silent. The question was meant to bait him, and he wouldn’t answer the call.

“All right, enough of that. You’ve had plenty of time to speculate. What did you come up with?”

“I can only guess.”

“The blasted banns. You had to make it public, and now Cumberland wants restitution for his time, which I can’t blame him for, but the amount is exaggerated in direct retaliation for your?—”

“Intervention?” Rochester interrupted.

Markham sat back. “Gross public display, in my opinion.”

“Which you can blame yourself for since I had no other choice after you forged a name on a contract and refused to see me. Should I take responsibility for that, too?” Rochester had offered, and at any other time, he’d be happy to pay it, but just now, he

was broke.

“Me? You blame me? Your argument might have worked better had you not locked my daughter up in your house for a week!”

Rochester rubbed the tight muscle in the back of his neck. It wouldn't do to mention she was relieved to have a week to consider her life. Not with Markham spitting fire and angry as a dragon.

“Did you think I wouldn't find out?”

With his mouth gone dry, Rochester wet his lips. “Miss Evelyn informed me of your conversation. I'm simply shocked that you would mention it?”

“Why? Because we're proper gentlemen, and we don't speak of such personal matters? Except this one concerns my daughter and the last man I would see her with. Perhaps you're feeling guilty because something else happened while she was there. Did it?”

“Not that I'm aware.” Hopefully, that sounded solid and not the lie it was because it was frankly none of his business.

“Pardon me? She was under your care, and you don't know how she fared?”

“No. I mean, of course, nothing happened.” He nervously slid a hand through his hair. In truth, it didn't matter because her presence in his house was enough to ruin her. “You know she begged me? I suppose she didn't tell you that.”

“Did she?” Markham crazily looked caught between a scowl and a smile.

“Not at all what you're thinking, sir. She was desperate to get far away, and I truly

felt as if her mental health was at?—”

“A disadvantage?” Now Markham was smiling ear to ear, but still Rochester could not decide if it carried any warmth. What was painfully clear was that Markham seemed to enjoy Rochester’s chagrin.

“If you pardon my frankness, you raised her. You know how stubborn she can be. What would you have had me do when I saw her dangling from a second-story window?”

“What were you doing here in the first place?” Before Rochester could answer, Markham continued. “Oh, yes, the notes. You simply couldn’t resist the notes.”

Rochester watched him closely, tallying the score. Markham knew about the window; he knew about her stay in Mayfair; he knew about the notes. And he must know they traveled alone but nothing else, or he’d have shot Rochester on the spot. “I could, and I did resist the first several, but the last had an edge of...”

“Desperation. Do go on. I’m fascinated.”

He sighed heavily. “Of fear.” He pinned Markham with a look and hoped he conveyed the right amount of stunned concern. “She was afraid of something, but I didn’t know if it was Cumberland. Or you.”

Markham tilted his head, grinding his brows together in a tight grip of pain and scorn. “You dare say such things in my house? She’s my daughter, Rochester. Mine.”

Rochester emotionally pulled back. The words had been unfair, but he wouldn’t take them back. “And I am not disputing that fact. Quite the opposite. I may have honored her request, but I did not intend to take her to my home. And by the way, my cousin Mrs. Lovie Hawke was also there. It’s not as if she didn’t have company, since we

both know it's my company you're worried about." He stood. He simply couldn't sit still any longer. "For God's sake, she fell out of that window—did she tell you that? Thankfully, I was there to catch her. But she refused to go back inside the house and stubbornly refused to listen to reason, so I agreed to take her to Winn's."

"I'm not sure Winn believes you." Markham stayed seated but rested his elbow against his arm and rubbed his mouth with his index finger like a man noodling through a witness's statement.

"Winn is as angry as you are, and rightfully so. Do you think I blame you or Winn? No. I do not. And I don't suffer him for the cuff he gave my jaw, either. It seemed as if I deserved it at the time, which I can promise I did not. But I took it without returning it in kind because if I were in his shoes, I'd have done the same thing."

"So what happened? Why didn't you follow through with taking her to Winn's after she fell out of her bedroom window?"

"Because of the storm. If you'll recall, it was a grave downpour."

"I'm listening."

"We became stuck. The coach wheels were sunk in mud like quicksand. If we hadn't acted fast, we'd have been stranded for the night in the middle of nowhere. We couldn't continue on, and I couldn't bring her back here. She was soaked even though I insisted she stay in the coach. She was determined to help. It was cold. An argument would have gained nothing, so I did the only thing I could. After that, it didn't seem to matter if she stayed one day or a week because the damage, if anyone found out, had been done."

"But she wasn't ruined?"

“No. I like to think I’m a man of honor.” He tried not to roll his eyes and look guilty. In his playbook, he had honored her with his love. “I realize my past will be hard forgotten, but being drunk and losing money is not a crime.”

“No, you left the business of crime to your friend. My son.” He batted a hand in his direction. “Stupidity should be a crime.”

“And I’ve paid my penance for it and you as well.”

“Not quite. There is still the matter of Cumberland.”

Rochester had avoided the subject because he didn’t have the means to make good on his word. If Cumberland chose to file against Markham for breach of promise, it had to be a goodly amount—else, why try?

“Do you recall our conversation?” Markham asked.

He turned his back to the room and to Markham. “I do.”

“And?”

He folded his arms tightly. “What’s the fine?” He threw the question over his shoulder.

“A thousand pounds.”

Rochester flinched. A thousand bloody pounds after the fortune he’d just paid. He didn’t have it and had no way of getting his hands on it. Hudson and Darrington had already fronted him money. His father certainly didn’t have it, quite the opposite. And he couldn’t ask Hawke; his cousin-in-law had a family to protect. “I’ll find a way to pay you back. You have my word.”

“As if that’s good enough.”

Rochester turned, his jaw grinding back and forth. “I believe I’m finished with this conversation. I’ll send the funds as soon as I can. I’ll see my way out.” He quit the room without apology and went in search of Evelyn. He planned to say goodbye and be done. If they had to elope, then so be it.

After grabbing his things from his room, he left a message that Evelyn should meet him in the back gardens before he left Rosewood. Already he’d been standing for thirty minutes near the hedgerow that bordered the walkway leading to the stable.

Evelyn skipped down the terrace steps, elated after having a grand conversation with her father. She expected a lover’s rendezvous but was sorely disappointed when she saw Dalton tapping his foot and shading his eyes while looking toward the sun. “You’re scowling,” she said with a decided upbeat in her voice.

“There you are. I sent that note half an hour ago. Where have you been?” His hands went to his lean hips, and his demeanor demanded attention.

She stopped three steps away. “I don’t care for your attitude.”

“I don’t care for your father’s. He practically threw me out, and I thought it best to say goodbye first.”

She backed up another step, her hand pressed to her chest. “Goodbye? But why? I just came from Papa’s study, and we discussed your finances.”

His face turned an angry red, and his eyes pinned her to the spot. “My finances! What do you know of my finances, and what gives you the right to discuss them with my enemies?”

“My father is not your enemy, and neither am I. Now, I can understand why you’d say that after everything we’ve been through, what with the banns and the betrothal to Cumberland, but I certainly don’t deserve your anger. I’d think you’d be grateful.”

Tilting his head, he squinted at her. “What exactly did you say to him?”

“I told him that you’re a bit cash-poor, currently, and that if he had any notion of you paying Cumberland’s fine, he should forget it, at least for now. I think he’s close to blessing this wedding.”

“What wedding? At this rate, there won’t be one.”

“Dalton?”

He gave her a menacing look that spoke volumes.

She raised one eyebrow and refused to be intimidated. “What? Am I to be punished for calling you Dalton again?” She delivered the question with cheeky hauteur.

He closed his eyes slowly as if gathering the storm he was stewing in. Then he stalked her. “You try me, Evelyn, you truly do.”

She stood her ground and let him reach for her, his hands warm but firm on her upper arms. “I’d just as soon you kiss me than shout, but do your best, darling.” She calmly measured each word, bravely holding his stern gaze.

He sighed, pulled her forward, and kissed her forehead. He also visibly relaxed. “What did you hope to gain by speaking to your father about my business?”

“A blessing.”

“He’ll never bless us. He doesn’t trust me, and he never will.”

“He’s agreed to give your money back.” She thought her simple statement would put a smile on his face.

“Oh, for the love of God, Evelyn, I won’t take his money.” He pinched the bridge of his nose and walked several feet away, his back partially turned from her.

“Why?” She truly did not understand. She saw her father’s willingness to help as an olive branch.

“Because I don’t want it.”

“It’s your money.” She leaned to see around his shoulder, her brows knit with concern.

He turned and faced her. “It’s not mine, Evelyn. I owed it to him. He doesn’t owe it back.”

She felt defeated again, like they were always at odds. “At least he wants the best for me. What do you want?”

“Are you trying to wound me?” His hazel eyes penetrated her, and he reached out, grazing her cheek with his knuckles. “I want you. I want to provide for our family. I want to start a life without being indebted to your father.”

“Because of pride? It’s misplaced, Dalton. I can’t believe your unwillingness to accept his offer. What if we have a family right now, inside me?”

“Don’t play me with guilt, please. It’s too early to tell, and besides, children do not make a family. Believe me, I know. People who love each other and want the best for

one another. That's what makes a family."

She watched him for a quiet moment, then shook her head. "I'm not in the mood for one of your distracting life lessons."

"Listen to me. I want a life with you, not your father." He held her face between his palms. "With you," he whispered. "I can't do that with money looming over my head."

She wrapped her arms around his middle and gazed up at him. "Because your father is the kind of man who would lord it over you does not mean that mine will. I don't say that to hurt you."

He hugged her to him, resting his chin on her head. His chest expanded with a deep breath, and his arms grew tighter. "Is that what you want? To start a life where your father is still taking care of you?"

She turned her face up, bumping his chin. "You apparently do not understand women."

That got her a smile.

"Because if you did, you would know what it's like to depend on others all the time." She reluctantly pulled out of his arms and walked to a bench. She sat, her fingers gripping the edge of the wooden slats. "What I hear is that you think I'm a spoiled girl because I don't want to wait to marry you."

"I don't believe I've ever called you a girl." His eyebrows raised matter-of-factly.

She scowled at him. "How does your boot taste?"

He rolled his eyes, chuckling. “The same as always, and that was not a strike against your age. If anything, it was a compliment.”

“There are times when you are incapable of a compliment.”

“I cannot argue that.” He ran a hand through his thick, wavy hair.

She watched a spider crawl into the flower bed. “If you won’t elope with me and you refuse to take money, then I am left to assume you don’t care for my opinion on the matter. What I want is unimportant. My wishes are like chaff in the wind, and all the blustering hot air is coming from you.”

He looked side to side, then pointed to his chest. “Am I blustering?”

“You were. And despite what you think, I am trying to understand. It’s your pride and your risk.”

“No.” He shook his head and sat beside her. “Evelyn, we’re partners. That’s how I see it. This decision is for you as well as me and our children because if something should happen to us, then our children would assume the damages and debt. I can’t start a life that way.”

“An excellent reason, I agree, and I am all for creating a solid foundation for our family, but your argument assumes a single key for a lock that has many. Our family is bigger than us.”

“We are not starting a family with your father. I cannot allow his say in my ventures. Our ventures.”

“Fine, then we’ll start with my dowry.” She knew her father would not agree to that, but she also knew Dalton would disagree as well. She sighed dramatically, pushing

his limits on purpose. “I’m so happy that’s settled.”

He rolled his head to the side and gaped at her. “Far from settled. I dare to tell you that I am not accustomed to the happenings between husbands and wives. My own mentors were nonexistent on that account, but I cannot dislike your independent shortcomings.” He grinned.

She gave him a dry look, silently screaming solidarity for all women. “Shortcomings, indeed. You don’t seem to mind my independent shortcomings in bed.”

“Never.” He tilted her chin and kissed her softly. “I’ll consider your offer and maybe your father’s. Is that a good start?”

“Well, you’d better consider it quickly before I rescind it.” She laced her fingers with his. “Dalton, I can’t know your feelings, but I can understand wanting the best for those you love. And I love you. I don’t care how we get married, and I don’t care where we live—the city, the country—it doesn’t matter. Do you know why? Please say that you do.”

“I can’t live without you either, Goose.”

“Then we look at all the options, and we make it happen. Together. If we go into debt, we do it together. If we sell a property, we do it together. If we buy a bloody candlestick, we do it together.” She smiled and squeezed his hand for emphasis.

He leaned close, his mouth almost touching hers. “On one condition.”

“Anything,” she breathed.

“If we have children, we do it together.”

“I’m willing to practice and work very hard on that.”

He met her lips, and she ignored their proximity to the house, kissing him back with her whole soul. She wrapped her arms around him. He tasted like love and life. When she put her hand on his thigh, he grabbed it, chuckling into her mouth, and she burned for him. All of him, rich or poor.

CHAPTER 30

“Miss Evelyn,” Mr. Holcomb said, hurrying to a stop, his face respectfully turned away and partially hidden by the hedgerow where she and Dalton sat close together.

Dalton helped her stand.

“What’s the urgency, Mr. Holcomb?”

“It’s Master Winn and Mistress Adeline. They request your immediate presence.”

She turned to Dalton. “It must be the baby. You can’t leave now.” She tried to keep desperation from seeping through, but she couldn’t face her father alone at a time like this. His worry could fill an ocean.

“Of course, I’m staying.” And then to the butler, he said, “We’ll be right there.”

Evelyn held tight to Rochester’s hand as they entered the study, where Mr. Holcomb informed them her father was waiting. She left Rochester several feet behind her and stepped forward to ease her father’s concerns, which were written in the pull of his brow and the bobbing of his Adam’s apple. “What’s the news?”

Her father looked from her to Rochester. “It would seem the babe is coming.”

“What can we do?” Rochester moved farther into the room.

“She’ll need you, Evelyn. Can you handle it?”

Her father spoke more of himself than Evelyn. She wondered how he would handle a babe coming into the world seemingly early. She nodded. “What did the letter say?”

“Winn wrote that Adeline wishes you there, and I am to bring you as soon as possible.”

“I’m not leaving Rochester here. We’re all going, and I won’t hear another word about it. I need his support, Papa.”

Her father looked astutely toward Rochester. “Winn is your friend. I’m certain he could use the distraction. We’re leaving as soon as the horses are harnessed, so I suggest you pack Evelyn,” her father announced, leaving no room to argue.

“With all due respect, sir, I have a horse.”

“Congratulations,” her father said blandly. “You’re the budding owner of a horse. Believe me when I say your choice is my preference, but my daughter will be an unbearable travel companion if I allow it, and I’m too worried, if you must know, to argue with either one of you.”

Evelyn shot Dalton a pleading look while she reassured her father. “I’m sure the doctor is there, and everything will be fine.”

“I’ll see to the horses and help with any luggage,” Dalton said. “Why don’t you have a seat, sir?”

“Yes, Papa, you’re as pale as an eighteenth-century powdered dandy.”

He smiled weakly at that. “And just as handsome.”

“Always,” she said as she patted the back of a well-stuffed chair. Rochester dipped

his head furtively toward her, and she mouthed thank you before he quit the room.

Evelyn requested the butler to keep a sharp eye on her father, who seemed to be preoccupied with his own memories, while she packed a small valise and transported it out front where Dalton was loading the coach.

“I’ll get Papa, and we can be on our way.”

After passing off the last bag, Dalton turned and quickly grabbed her arm, his brows drawn. “Are you worried? Or did you expect this?”

She knew what he was asking. Was the babe on time? Or was it early? “I’m not worried,” she reassured him. He seemed to relax a little.

“This trip is going to be hell, you know that, don’t you?”

“Only because he’s fearful and distressed. There are many ghosts here for him, so whatever you do, do not upset him. Please? For my sake?”

He rubbed her cheek. “I’ll do my best, Goose.”

Evelyn sat next to her father while Dalton took up the opposite seat. She was desperate to ease her father’s fear and searched for a safe topic for conversation, anything but betrothals, contracts, and investments. All subjects that women were encouraged to avoid. She caught Dalton’s gaze and gave him a barely noticeable prodding nod.

He cleared his throat. “What an exciting event. I know Evelyn is beside herself with joy at becoming an aunt. I can only guess what you must feel like, sir, to be made a grandfather. A great privilege.”

With Evelyn's arm linked through her father's, she felt tension and his thumping pulse under her hand.

"A very great privilege, let's hope." The cryptic response spoke volumes, and an eerie silence fell over the cabin.

Evelyn tried to ignore it. The echoing chasm between the two men was greater than the distance between the coach seats.

Her father's coach was almost as luxurious as Dalton's. The tufted squabs were a more conservative tan color, but the brass buttons were an accent above most because they were embossed with her mother's favorite flower, a tulip. The studs were her father's choice over the customary silk-covered ones that the trimmer had argued for.

The well-padded walls muffled the sounds of jingling tack and made the occasional creak of the wheels less noticeable. The cabin bounced on its springs as they drove over a rough patch, reminding her of the ride with Dalton the night they escaped from Rosewood in the rain.

Across the expanse, his boot bumped against her foot, grabbing her attention. Dalton raised a solitary eyebrow; his arms were folded, and she imagined him thinking about the same incident where they passed this particular part of the road. The coach swayed and dipped as Dalton grabbed the strap for leverage, and Evelyn gripped her father more securely.

She took the opportunity to lean close to the window and peer out. "Papa." She patted his arm as she continued to watch the terrain pass. Trees lined the way, and deep ditches ran parallel to the road for collecting rainwater. Her heart lurched when she realized how close they'd come that night to falling into a trench, something she had failed to notice before.

Evelyn tugged her father's coat sleeve. "This is where we became stuck. Do you see how the road has dried in cakes? It's been repaired nicely, but there are still remnants of the horrible storm."

Her father leaned toward the opposite window and explored for himself. He grunted, and to Evelyn's surprise, her father knocked on the roof.

Dalton caught her eye and shrugged.

"Put the steps down," her father called to the footman as he moved from his seat, preparing to leave. Barely waiting for the steps, he lunged forward and left her and Dalton alone, staring at one another.

"What do you think he's doing out there?" she asked Dalton.

He turned up an ironic smile. "Isn't it obvious? He's looking for proof to corroborate the story."

"Do you think it wise if you show him precisely where the wheels sank and perhaps the drive where we turned about?"

"I'm not showing him a thing. If my word is not good enough, I'd just as soon not say another." He folded his arms again. Everything about him was closed off, even to her. His smile lacked sparkle, and his gaze was indifferent.

She bit her lip. "Dalton?"

He gazed at her, and for a moment, she saw him as he was that night. The man so concerned for her well-being that he'd stolen away with her in the middle of a storm that had quickly turned her life into a hurricane—wild, unpredictable, and frightening at times. Her heart gave an aching leap.

“Thank you for coming. I know how difficult this must be for you. It means a lot to me that you’d agree to ride with us.”

He fanned his fingers where they gripped his folded arms. “I’m not good with fathers, and the reasons for that have little to do with yours. Although, I’m not denying he has been a thorn in my side.”

“What happened when you went home?”

He gave her a penetrating look and then sighed, uncrossing his arms. “Nothing. Now’s not a good time to discuss my home life or my upbringing. Which I’m sure you’d agree is not all glitter and cakes.”

“I wouldn’t say so. But I would say that you are a stubborn man.”

“Touché, my dear.”

“Will you promise, when you’re ready, to share your past with me? Someday? A decade from now will do.” She wobbled a smile.

His beautiful mouth, that kissed her so tenderly and ravished her with heat and desire, was now resolute and hard as granite, seeming to hold in pain more than anger. He looked away. “Someday.” As if he regretted his tone, his gaze swept back to her. He reached across the seats and took her hands in his. “I’m sorry. I survived my childhood because I had Lovie and Hudson, not because I had a good father or even a brother.” He gave her hands a little tug. “But Noah and I have come to an agreement, and I think there’s hope on that account.”

She wanted to cry because that was more than he’d ever said before. “Thank you for trusting me.”

He let go and sat back, leaning his head against the squabs, watching her leisurely with a rakehell smile. "I don't trust you, my dear. You stole my heart when I thought I'd guarded it rather well."

"And I'm not giving it back, but I will be happy to pay the fine."

"With interest."

"I shall bring my best negotiator."

"You may bring the goose but not your father." He winked, preferring her goose-like behavior above everything.

They smiled secretly as Evelyn's father opened the door and placed himself effectively between their lover's discussion.

"Well, it would seem there are a good many deep gutters out there."

She glared at Dalton as he rolled his eyes, but she spoke to her father. "Can you see how dangerous it was for us?"

"I grudgingly concede, my dear."

"I suppose it's too much for you to apologize to Dalton?"

"Dalton? I see where this is going."

Dalton rubbed his eye with an index finger. "I don't need your father's concession or an apology for something I had no control over."

Her father grunted.

“You two are very much alike, do you know that?”

Both men looked at Evelyn.

“You are. And I’m not certain it’s a good thing. Stubborn to a fault.”

Now Dalton and her father looked at each other. Her father smirked, and Dalton chuckled, and before she knew what happened, they were both grinning and laughing.

“If I’d known an insult would have you men acting so agreeable, I’d have thrown you plenty several weeks ago.”

“I’m not sure about you, Mr. Rochester, but she’s thrown plenty my way.”

“Oh, I’ve had my share, I vow.”

Evelyn let out a hardy breath. She wanted to fold her arms and glare at them, but her heart raced with the joy of seeing the two most important men in her life laughing, even if it was only nerves that caused it.

She rubbed her earlobe, hiding a smile. For the rest of the journey, there was companionable silence, the sort of quiet that amiable travelers partake in.

CHAPTER 31

As expected, when the Markhams' coach arrived, they were met in the drive by an eager butler and a harassed housekeeper. Rochester stood back while Evelyn and her father were ushered into the house. Without looking back, Evelyn followed a maid up the stairs, and Rochester assumed it would be awhile before he saw any sign of her again. He had no idea how long the process of birthing babes took and even less an idea of how long his abbreviated truce with Mr. Markham would last.

Thankfully, the drawing room had been amply supplied with several forms of liquid courage. "Whiskey, please," he said to a footman. "Mr. Markham, may I bring you one?"

"Two drams if you don't mind."

Rochester followed the footman to the bar, thanked him for pouring, and then carried a napkin with the double shot of whiskey to Evelyn's father.

"I'll take one," Winn said as he strolled in, a bit red in the face, dressed in trousers and shirtsleeves. Frazzled at best.

"I'll get that." Rochester was up before he had a chance to sit, serving Winn and expecting to play host because he was the only horse not in this race.

"I thanked Evelyn for bringing you. She's with Adeline now along with Addy's mother. Addy's father is waiting in a room upstairs noticeably frayed."

“You look as if you need to sit,” Rochester said.

“I’m exhausted if you must know. She’s been having pains since yesterday but said nothing.”

Rochester glanced at Mr. Markham. He looked pale and distant. “And the doctor is with her, yes?” He hoped that Winn would put the room at ease.

“Doctor? No. She insisted on only a midwife.”

“What?” Mr. Markham asked. “And you listened?”

“She was insistent. Honestly,” Winn sighed between words. “I’m told she’s doing remarkably well. But what would I know? They won’t even let me in the room.”

“I want to see this midwife,” Markham said, getting to his feet.

“I wouldn’t go up there if I were you. The midwife is an Irish hellion and has taken command of everything, but Adeline adores her.”

“No doctor and an Irish woman?”

Rochester jumped into the fray. “I’m relatively certain that a woman is a woman. I don’t believe they make them any differently in Ireland.”

“He does have a point, Father,” Winn said.

“I expect you’ve met few Irish women. They’re hard-headed and outspoken.”

Winn said, “If that were so, then Evelyn must be Irish as well because she’s as stubborn a woman as I’ve ever met.”

“Evelyn is your mother’s daughter, and I wouldn’t be surprised to find she had some distant relative raised on Irish ale.” As if that were enough said, Markham turned white as a sheet.

“Father, you need to sit. There’s no reason for concern.”

“No? My grandchild is two months early.”

“Well, that may be, but there is no room for catastrophizing at the moment.”

Rochester shot Winn a questioning raise of his brow.

Winn gave a cursory look, then his gaze snapped back as if he had just understood the unasked question. “Rochester, I need your opinion on something.” He motioned for Rochester to follow.

Winn led him to the study and shut the door. “For God’s sake, you’d think he’d have figured it out by now. No doubt everyone else has.”

“Can you be more specific?” Rochester thought he knew but didn’t dare suggest it before Winn admitted it.

Winn picked up a book and nervously shoved it between two books on the shelf behind the mahogany desk, which was littered with paperwork.

“Is this your mess?”

“Yes. And all done today if you can imagine. I think I’m nervous.”

“Do you?”

“Rochester”—Winn pivoted—“I want to apologize for hitting you. I had no right. No proof, and I am the last person who should be throwing stones. Except that she is my sister.”

He obviously spoke of Evelyn. “I wouldn’t have expected anything less of you under the circumstances.”

“What I’m trying to say is something I shouldn’t be saying.”

“If you’ll excuse my abruptness. Is it safe to say the babe is on time?”

“Very.”

“Why don’t you tell your father. He’s not that old, Winn. The man is in his fifties, and I’m certain he’s well aware of how these things happen.”

“I don’t want to embarrass Adeline. It’s my honor in question, not hers.”

“Neither of you is in question. For God’s sake, the two of you were meant for each other long ago. Who could blame you? Least of all your father who is reliving probably the worst day of his life.”

“You’re right. How was he during the trip here?”

“Quiet, cantankerous. But of course, that’s nothing unusual.” Rochester couldn’t help but add that last part. “And nervous, I believe.”

“I’ll speak with him. If you could give me a few minutes.”

Rochester left the study after Winn disappeared. He walked through the foyer, his bootheels echoing off the marble floor, and stood at the foot of the stairs, willing

Evelyn to come down. He didn't see her, but he did see the housekeeper. "Excuse me, ma'am. But I'm looking for Miss Evelyn. May I impose upon you to ask after her and whether she has a moment for a word with Mr. Rochester."

"I can try, sir."

She rushed on, and Rochester waited impatiently until he decided to mount the stairs but didn't dare go any farther than the gallery.

As soon as she appeared coming toward him, his body relaxed into a long sigh.

"How is my father?" she asked in a loud whisper before she reached him.

"Winn is speaking to him right now and reassuring him that everything is as it should be."

"Good."

"And is it?" He couldn't help it; he wasn't convinced himself. He'd never been in a house while a birth was taking place. The whole thing unsettled him.

"She's doing splendidly, and she has a wonderful midwife. Not to mention her mother has been present for many a birth."

"Your father isn't easily persuaded. He wanted a word with the midwife."

"Perhaps that's a good idea."

"Perhaps it's not. He's a man, and these are womanly things."

"You're a prude, Dalton." She chuckled, putting a hand on his cheek.

“Am I? I wager you’re wrong, my dear, and I dare you to give me five minutes to prove otherwise.” He snatched her about the waist, drawing her against his body.

“No need, I’m sure. But I wager I’m correct about the midwife. In fact, I’m going to ask her to reassure my father. She’ll understand.” She tried to pull away, but he pinned one of her arms behind her back and leaned over her.

“First, kiss me. I miss the hell out of you.”

“Can I have my arm back?”

“After the kiss.”

“Rogue.” Her mouth was a saucy pout just before her lips softened over his.

Rochester rejoined the men who were beginning to show signs of wear and tear. Winn paced a track in the nap of the plush carpet, and Mr. Markham, with his thick head of brown hair, looked as if he’d run a hand through it more than a few times. A smudge of gray at his sideburns and strands of salt and pepper usually made him look more distinguished. Today, he looked harassed.

As promised, Evelyn apparently sent the midwife when Rochester spied a tall woman with red hair marching toward the drawing room. He ducked back inside to avoid the storm he saw in her eyes.

“Ever’ one of you can stay right here as I speak.” The midwife directed that statement at Rochester before turning to the room at large. “Men are right simple-minded beasts, so let me make this clear as rain. Yer wife and yer daughter, sir, are quite well. As birthin’ goes, she’s makin’ grand time. We’ll have a babe here soon enough, so if ye’d like to hold the wee one, ye’d best be off the whiskey. I don’t permit drunken fathers or grandfathers near my lady’s babe. Are we clear now? Or do ye think a man

could do a better job? Speak up.”

Rochester wouldn't describe her as a hellion exactly, but he would agree that she had everything under control. After she left, they all let out a collective breath.

“Well, if that isn't an Irish hellion, I don't know what is.” Mr. Markham may not have changed his mind on that accord, but he did look a great deal less nervous.

“I heard that,” the hellion said as she marched back into the drawing room. “Mr. Markham, come hold your wife's hand a bit, if you will,” she addressed Winn.

Winn didn't look back. He left the room with the redheaded hellion, who, in Rochester's opinion, was rather pretty.

“She seems to know what she's doing, Mr. Markham. And she's a handsome woman for a spinster.”

Markham looked at him sharply. “What makes you think she's a spinster?”

“Because I can't imagine the man who could tame her.” He watched Mr. Markham closely as his mouth turned up slightly, and he glanced at the empty doorway.

“You're a pup, Rochester.” Markham sat back, resting his head against the high-backed chair.

For once, Rochester thought he looked relaxed. Not angry, not irritated, and not worried.

Markham flipped his wrist toward the other chair. “You might as well sit. These things take time.”

Rochester obeyed but didn't take his eyes from the older man.

"My daughter tells me you've invested with Mr. Darrington."

It didn't go without notice that Markham called Evelyn his daughter, no doubt to drive home that she was still under his care. "Mr. Darrington and I share the same investment interests, but we are each a separate entity. I've found his intuition to be lucrative more often than not, although he isn't afraid of taking a few risks either."

Markham straightened. "I hear he's thrown in with the Belgravia project. And you?"

"The same." Rochester wasn't sure what the man was getting at, but he had a feeling his answers were important.

"And that's where your finances have gone." He held up a hand. "That wasn't a question. I'm not so old that I lack intuition of my own."

Rochester respectfully dipped his head over steeped fingers. "That is the reason for the delay in repaying Cumberland's fine."

"Cumberland is my affair, not yours. I take the blame for not consulting Evelyn in the first place. Not that it's any business of yours, mind you."

Rochester straightened in his seat. "And would her opinion have mattered? Not that it's any business of mine," Rochester repeated the phrase. "Except that I am in love with her." He cocked a brow as if the two were dueling.

"Oh, dear boy, what you're asking is if I would have accepted your match. I'm no dolt. Wisdom tends to make walls transparent. Regardless, it's something we'll never know since no steps were taken to ask for her."

Rochester opened his mouth, staring agog at the man who had done more damage than good, in his opinion. “If?—”

“Don’t be a jackass and ask now. Not while we sit here waiting for news.”

“No, I agree. But would you be open to another time?” Rochester’s pulse quickened, suddenly nervous and wanting to know precisely what Markham would say.

“Did I not just say so?”

Rochester grunted the beginnings of several thoughts and then settled on a nod.

“I can’t imagine what you’re living on,” Markham said, getting up for another drink, this time a glass of water. “You want your seven-thousand-pound bank draft back?” Markham threw the words over his shoulder while he poured.

“No, absolutely not. Why would you think so?”

“Because you must be broke. How the hell do you plan on keeping a wife, raising a family”—he flipped his hand toward the ceiling—“and taking care of your father?”

Rochester stiffened at the mention of his father. He ground his teeth until the muscle in his cheek hurt.

“Did you never consider asking me for help?” Markham stood in front of Rochester’s chair, staring him into participating in a conversation he didn’t wish to have.

Rochester swallowed. “Why would I do that?”

“Oh, my living God, dear boy, why would you not?” Markham played a game of eye sabers with him and then shrugged and took his seat again. “Clearly, you’re afraid of

me.”

“Well, you are a bit frightening.” Rochester scratched his forehead. “But no, I’m not afraid of you . I’m afraid of losing her .”

They both paused like they’d had the same epiphany.

Then Rochester continued, “Just like you are.”

“Something we finally agree on,” Markham said, staring straight ahead.

“Winn, if you’re going to faint, perhaps you should... oh, another one.” Adeline Markham, fully in labor and actively giving birth, lay in her bed, commanding the room.

Evelyn sidled to her brother and whispered, “Please don’t leave. Not many men get to see this.”

Winn swallowed audibly. “How many births have you seen?”

“None, that’s why it’s so fascinating.” She took Winn’s arm. “You faint now, and I will go straight downstairs and tell everyone what a coward you are.”

“Damn you, Evelyn.” He tried to smile. “You’re right.”

Another moan came from the bed and then a near scream, and Evelyn thought her brother looked ready to strangle the person causing his wife such pain.

With Addy’s mother on one side of the bed, Winn hurried to Adeline’s other side, held her hand, and did exactly what the midwife demanded. He held his wife’s legs. He held her hand. And he held in his own nausea if Evelyn was correct. But no one

could hold in their tears the moment a baby's shriek broke the air.

Evelyn's cheeks were wet, and her brother was smiling and crying. She'd never seen him cry. Never. And her friend just looked relieved and not just a little in love.

Evelyn tripped down the stairs, pulling off her apron. She handed it to a footman before she passed into the drawing room. "She did it! Oh, Papa, you are a grandfather. Can you believe it?"

Tears misted his eyes, and he barely gulped out, "Well, for heaven's sake, what is it?"

"Oh, Lord, I forgot to ask."

She heard the butler clear his voice. "The babe is a boy."

"Thank you, Mr. Allen. A boy," she said again to her father, and then she turned to Dalton. "A boy, Dalton. A beautiful baby boy, and Adeline looks as healthy as peaches and cream. A little tired, yes, but she was so brave."

"Sit down before you fall down," Dalton said, helping her to the settee while she burst into tears of pure joy. But it was more than that. It was the fear for her father if anything went wrong. It was her own ghosts when she looked at Adeline in pain and imagined her mother in that bed. Oh, but the joy. It was also the joy in that moment and something she'd never forget. She'd hold it in her heart to heal the secret place that hurt. She'd been strong for her father over the years, but now all she could do was sob. Dalton sat beside her and took her in his arms. With his chin on the top of her head, he rocked her.

Through sniffles and the time it took Dalton to produce a handkerchief, she glanced at her father. Tears streamed down his cheeks, and he looked in a trance as he watched her. Then he smiled, and his throat convulsed.

“Ahem,” her father cleared his throat. “If you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll take the air.”

She moved to stand, but Dalton stayed her. “Let him be, Goose. Give him time for joy and grief.”

She nodded, drying her eyes. “You spent hours down here with him, and I can’t thank you enough. I owe you so much for this.”

“I’m reluctant to say you owe me nothing. There was plenty to occupy our time.”

“What did you talk about after Winn left the room? Or was there silence like in the coach?”

“Some silence, but we had some good discussions. Fruitful ones, I’d say.”

“Oh?” Her voice no longer held tears. Something in her fluttered to life, and she couldn’t wait to hear everything.

CHAPTER 32

“Well?” Evelyn asked Dalton when he stepped into the little arbor in the back gardens of Rosewood Manor. She couldn’t wait in the house, not if her father were going to rail. She didn’t wish to hear another argument between her papa and the man she loved with all her heart. And she had never been more nervous in her life. It wasn’t that she wouldn’t relish the scandalously delicious idea of eloping with Dalton, but she had hoped to have her family by her side. Winn and Adeline, and even little Chase. She wanted to send word to Clover that everything had turned out perfectly and that she should be preparing to help with her trousseau. More than anything, she wanted her papa there. She wanted to see him proud and happy like he’d been when Chase was born a week ago.

The first thing she noticed was Dalton’s frown, and her heart nearly sank. “Please tell me you have good news.”

“The good news is that you are mine, and I am yours. Is there anything more important than that?” Dalton said with enough gravity to throw Evelyn off a beat.

She growled with a sigh, her shoulders in a frustrated slump, her fingers crushing a plume of wisteria. “Seriously, Dalton.”

He shut his eyes slowly and grinned from ear to ear, a show of trying to bite back his joy for the sake of teasing her. When he opened his eyes, she ran into his arms, leaping a few inches off the ground and falling into him. She hit hard muscle, and unlike the day she toppled him when she fell from the trellis outside her window, today he stood his ground, solid as an oak. She kissed his smiling mouth and didn’t

give a wit who saw.

“Your father wants to pay for a license and forgo the banns this time. I think he’s worried you might back out again because of the fiasco with that poor simpering baron. Is his concern justified? I told him I couldn’t know since his daughter is a mystery. He called it stubbornness. I called it a crazy goose chase.”

“I feel like I can finally shout that you’re mine, and all you want to do is tease me.” She pulled back, her arms still wrapped around his neck.

He rubbed a sculpted jaw against her cheek and whispered in her ear, “I can’t wait to tease you, my love.”

“I could meet you on the bench behind the hedgerow.”

“That hard bench? With your wild movements? My backside would not survive.”

“Then we’ll stand.”

“And risk my lumbar being thrown out of whack?” He exaggerated a grunt, pressing his hand into his side and bending slightly backward for emphasis.

“Is marriage to be all obstacles? If so, I’d rather be your mistress. I had great fun pretending to be your kept woman for a week.”

He looked at her lips, then he slid his hand down her arm. Neither of them were wearing gloves, and his heated fingers on her skin were almost as compelling as the seductive gleam in his gold-flecked green eyes.

The arbor was covered with mature wisteria. The thick shrub bore May’s first glorious colors of lavender, and the vines had been tended well for many years.

Certainly long enough for the canopied structure to be amply covered in foliage and for the convenient redwood bench to be hidden from view. But the possibility of someone finding them there was greater than if he had taken her suggestion and headed for the hedgerow.

Evelyn didn't care, though; she willingly followed him to the bench, catching the scent of wisteria mingled with the spicy notes of sandalwood that was all Dalton. He pulled her onto his lap and seared her mouth with kisses. She adjusted her skirts and straddled him. This was not an unfamiliar position for them. They had liberated a chair in the billiard parlor at Rochester's house during her short stay.

Dalton pulled at her bodice, exposing her flesh for his eyes, his mouth, his tongue, and those wicked teeth that he managed to use with such devoted skill. A subtle thrill of audible joy came from her throat as he grazed her nipple between his straight white teeth and flicked the tip with his tongue. Then, her favorite part. The part when he sucked the sensitive tight bead into his mouth, and she gasped. It felt like forever since they'd been together. The last time they had any intimacy at all had been in her room at Adeline's before the babe was born. There, he'd made certain they would have to wed, but every time before that, he had refused to finish an act that would lead to children. Not that they both didn't want them, but Dalton had wanted so fiercely to keep her to himself that they had spoken of waiting to bring babies into the world.

She began to pant when he pulled her hard against his groin. She could feel the length of him through her petticoats and didn't want to stop. No proximity was too close when it came to his embrace, and just now, she wanted his hot erection in all the best places. She pulled at her dress, fighting to free the tangled fabric from her legs, then practically ripped the buttons from his breeches.

He stalled her hands, and she looked up suddenly, ready to plead with him. "I don't care who sees."

“Good, because I like to watch.” He smiled, holding her hands out to the sides. “Let’s not go to the altar pregnant. That’s all I’m saying.”

“My flux is due tomorrow, is that close enough?”

“Damn sure,” he growled and then undid his own buttons.

When he’d released himself, she wasted no time, taking him inside with greedy thrusts, straining and reaching for every inch of him. Wanting to feel him at her core. She came too quickly for her liking, but this man could send her into pulsating pleasure with a look. She had the erotic memory to savor and prove it true. Of course, she may have been helping it along at the time, but the way he watched her encouraged her to do all manner of wickedly delightful things.

He tried to hold her still, thinking she wanted that. “Don’t stop, Dalton. Harder. It makes it so real. And, and... oh hell, it makes me want you everywhere.” She slid along him, slowly, seducing him until he was working at it with a fever.

The last thrust forced a gasp from her and a loud groan from him. Dalton clutched her to him. Between short, breathless sighs, he said, “I love you, Goose, so damn much.”

“You better, Dalton Rochester, because you ruined me with that game of draughts.”

A chuckle rolled from his chest, deep and satisfying. “Draughts,” he said in disbelief. “You took me down with a shilling.”

“One that you still owe me.”

“I missed the damn shot on purpose. It belongs to me.”

“I knew it. Dalton Rochester was afraid of a girl,” she replied with a giggle as she

stood and fixed her skirts, and he rushed to put his breeches back together again.

“Not a girl.”

“Oh? A woman then.”

“A goose.”

“I’ll accept that, but only from you.”

“I forgot there’s one more thing. Your father did have a stipulation.”

She looked up from smoothing her skirts. “Something doable, I hope.”

“Not sure.”

“You’re worrying me needlessly,” she said, reaching toward him and smoothing a reckless lock of hair from his forehead. She took the opportunity to twirl the curling end around her finger like he’d done to her so many times. “This feels powerful. No wonder you do this to my hair all the time. A little twirl and one little tug.”

He bit his lip. “Like the rein on a horse, my dear.”

She pinched his chin and gave it a little shake. “You’re too bad. Now, what’s the stipulation?”

His hands stroked her arms with reassurance, and he pressed his forehead to hers. “That we take in a couple of tenants.”

“Tenants? Where will we put them?”

“Mayfair, I imagine, unless you have plans to live elsewhere.”

“Oh, for the love of... must everyone live with us?”

“It would seem so.” He gave her a squeeze. “Two chaps named Gaz and Bernard. Remind me which relatives those are?”

“My dogs?”

“Your dogs. He says they are driving him mad, and he promises to set them out if we don’t take them in.”

“Papa always says that. What do you think? Do you like dogs?”

“I like anything that’s yours.”

“My father?”

“I’m getting there, Goose. I truly am. I think the babe softened him.”

The next time Rochester stepped into the parish church where the banns had been challenged, it was with Evelyn on his arm and Lord Cumberland nowhere in sight. Mr. Hartley greeted them at the door, and they took a seat in the second row. It was a comfort to sit in church without the wrath of God breathing down Rochester’s neck. He gave the perfect knot in his cravat a short tug for the fourth time since they’d sat down.

“Stop fidgeting,” Evelyn whispered, leaning into him. “Are you a child?”

“Possibly,” he murmured. “I don’t like that your father is seated across the aisle.”

“Stop being suspicious and bow your head, for heaven’s sake. We’re praying.”

He felt like a child, peeking out over the congregation and seeing the vicar, eyes open, praying and watching Rochester fight his nerves to sit still. He wobbled a smile and squeezed his eyes closed.

The next he knew, they were singing hymns, which did nothing to calm his nerves since he imagined they had been invited to attend this particular service for a reason.

“And now is the time we mention any banns that are currently awaiting approval. Today, however, there is only one. There has been a concern brought to the forefront that perhaps needs clarification. I don’t think I need to say which concern.” The vicar tipped his head conspiratorially toward the crowd, eyeing them with unabashed glee.

Rochester nudged Evelyn. “Did you know about this? I thought there was to be no banns?”

Evelyn shrugged and stammered under her breath. “I... I can’t imagine what he’s doing. Papa’s been a free spirit, a new man since Chase was born.”

“I’d like to take the moment to introduce a very special parishioner this morning.” The vicar welcomed Evelyn’s father to the dais. “And you might be surprised to hear a familiar name, too.” The vicar winked. Actually winked.

Rochester glanced behind him, trying to locate Mr. Hartley. The gentleman was in the back row as if he were waiting for Rochester to seek him out. Mr. Hartley gave a bow of his head while wearing a joyous smile. Rochester felt, almost, as if a wedding was to take place that morning. And if he were not certain that Evelyn had been making plans for a more lavish affair, he’d have believed it so.

“I am Mr. Henry Markham, for those of you who may not know me.”

A ray of sunshine passed through the stained-glass window behind the pulpit, and Mr. Markham was suddenly enveloped by an orange halo like a fire had been lit behind him and set him aglow. A bit like the burning bush in Exodus.

“I asked to speak today on behalf of my daughter, whose name has been repeated thrice in the calling of banns this last month. Evelyn Markham, will you stand, my dear?” Evelyn’s father nodded at her until she nervously complied.

She looked over her shoulder at Rochester, silently pleading, but he only gave her a confused expression, shrugging his shoulders imperceptibly. Evelyn primly folded her hands at her middle, her reticule swinging from her wrist on a dainty yellow ribbon.

“My dear, today I wanted to read the only banns that will be allowed and the last to be read with your name. Although I’ve already paid for a license, I thought it might be nice if I made my acceptance public.” He turned his gaze to Dalton. “Mr. Rochester, would you mind?” Mr. Markham raised his hands like the conductor of an orchestra, motioning for him to stand.

Evelyn didn’t look at Rochester, and from the corner of his eye, he could see her hand fighting to keep from reaching for his.

“Thank you for indulging me today,” Markham said as he unfolded a piece of rattling paper and cleared his throat. “I publish the only banns of Miss Evelyn Markham”—he paused and cleared the emotion from his throat—“and Mr. Dalton Rochester.”

Rochester’s gut dropped as it had the first time he’d heard Evelyn’s name put to the banns. But this time, instead of his heart hammering in fear, it soared with joyous relief.

“There is no cause or just impediment to keep these two apart. I declare that love is the only argument for marriage. It is a safe place. A trusting lead into a future that cannot be predicted, which is why when two people are willing to set a congregation on fire with a claim to it, there is nothing to be done other than to honor a vow already taken. As someone who has loved deeply, it is a life force recognizable even in a storm. And there will be stormy weather ahead, my dear,” Markham said with a smile at Evelyn. “These are the last and final banns to be read. I declare it so. And Mr. Rochester, your love for my daughter is as complete a pledge as I’ve ever seen.”

Evelyn wiped tears from her cheeks. Rochester handed her a handkerchief as he fought himself for the need to use it. He had never made his own father proud. He had never been trusted without fault.

Not until now. Not that it hadn’t taken an act of God to cultivate it. And for all that, it gave him hope concerning his own father.

Today, he made his future father-in-law a permanent place in his heart.

It was a place where Evelyn had already been for an eternity.

He took the hand of his future wife and whispered a thanksgiving to God. To Evelyn he kissed her cheek and took the opportunity to say, “I love you, Evelyn Markham. My funny goose. You have always been my forever.”

“And you, my happily ever after.”

EPILOGUE

A utumn collided with winter in a gust of rain, threatening Evelyn and Dalton's trip to Heavenly House. For three months since their wedding, she had been urging her husband to pay a visit to his brother Noah.

"Now, look where we are?" Dalton's nerves had made him especially grumpy the entire way from Mayfair. "When you see the place, you'll understand why I fear losing Mayfair. Although, this storm may threaten our path through."

"Only because you hope it will."

"I cannot deny that."

She shrugged and gave a coy smile. "If we get stuck, this time we're both waiting it out in the coach. I'm certain we can find something to pass the time."

He unfolded his arms, a lopsided grin sneaking up his cheek.

The sound of wings thrashing the side of the covered crate at her feet got both their attention. A honk and an irritated flutter came next.

"She wants out," Evelyn said.

"Not in the coach."

"Dalton, she's scared." She soothed, patting her hands lightly on the wooden crate.

“We’re almost there, Paradise.”

Dalton lifted his brow, mouthing the words, you’re lying .

Evelyn shushed him with a finger to her lips.

He whispered, “Who names a duck Paradise?”

“Obviously, I do. And she’s not a duck. She’s a goose. Besides, I like the name. Paradise goes well with Heavenly House. It’s almost like an omen.”

“The mere mention of an omen sort of cancels out the heavenly part, don’t you think?”

“Semantics. And I like it. It reminds me of that shiny green waistcoat with the bird of paradise on it. She’s a goose, but I think of her as something more colorful. She’s already beautiful.”

“You do know what the bird of paradise represents, don’t you?”

She looked up, her forehead drawn. “What do you mean?”

“I never told you because you were in a boxing club, lying naked at the time, and I was afraid of distracting you into another lengthy conversation. But the bird of paradise is the symbol for a promiscuous woman.”

She sat back, letting that sink in and remembering that he’d worn the green waistcoat the night he had kissed her neck in the alcove and then again at the boxing club.

He folded his arms smartly and looked completely satisfied.

“Then I suppose she needs a gander.”

They had planned to visit Heavenly House after the wedding. Noah had attended the service, but Lord Rochester had not made it. Deep inside, Evelyn knew that Dalton was worried. No matter what Lord Rochester felt, Dalton had refused to believe he would have missed the wedding without a reason, and Noah had informed them that the doctor released him to go but had suggested he not.

When they arrived at Heavenly House, Noah greeted them in the drive.

“So, this is the infamous goose I’ve heard so much about.” Noah stood with hands on his hips, examining the crate.

“Yes,” Evelyn said. “Her name is Paradise. Heavenly House and all that.” The explanation made perfect sense to her.

“Oh?” Noah glanced from Dalton to Evelyn as he and his brother unloaded the covered crate that held one disgruntled goose.

“Don’t ask,” Dalton said.

“Does she know?” Noah asked with a guilty look of conspiracy in his laughing eyes.

“She knows. She thinks Paradise needs a gander.”

They broke into a spell of hooting laughter while Evelyn watched them, hardly irritated because from the time they’d met, Dalton rarely spoke of his family and never so well. But he and Noah had come to a truce of sorts. It made visiting easier and very pleasant.

“I apologize, my lady.” Noah gave a sympathetic bow. “When you’re ready, I’ll show you where Paradise will live.”

“I’m ready now.” Evelyn clapped her hands. “She wants out of that box.”

The men hauled the crate up the drive, setting it down when they reached the front steps. Rochester took Evelyn's hand, pulled her close, and kissed her cheek. He held her gaze for a moment. "Noah will see to the goose."

"I'm going with him."

"I know you are. But I am not. I'm anxious to see how my father is getting along. You three enjoy yourselves." He looked pointedly at the goose, including Paradise as one of the three. He gave her chin a playful stroke of his thumb, then took a deep breath, and stepped back.

Rochester could sink a cue ball blindfolded, thanks to Lovie's husband. He could make a point without error in a room full of boisterous men all deep in their cups and without increasing his heart rate. But his nerves today were frayed because he'd brought Evelyn to the place where he'd grown up. A place that pained his heart.

Over the last several months, his judgment of his father had changed, in part softened by the relationship he and Noah had recently built. He had never seen his brother so often in such a short amount of time, and to have him at their wedding had been a balm to his wounded soul. Noah had been a healing presence.

Now, he was eager to see what state his father was in before Evelyn met him. He found the viscount in the family parlor seated next to a window that looked out over the front drive.

"The prodigal son has returned, Father," Rochester said in a cheery tone.

"About time. That nasty sawbones suggested I stay home."

His father appeared frail, and Rochester hoped he was simply tired. On a good note, his color was better than when he saw him last.

“I’m happy the doctor requested you stay in. You’ll meet Evelyn soon enough, I promise.”

“Where did she go? I caught a glimpse of her as you arrived. Noah said she was a pretty thing, but I couldn’t see her face with her bonnet covering her.”

“She’s beautiful, and she can’t wait to meet you.” Rochester made a show of peeking out the window so it wouldn’t seem awkward that he was standing so close to his father.

“Ha! Then I assume you haven’t told her about me.”

“Evelyn and I have no secrets.” His father actually looked worried. “And still, she is enthusiastic about this trip.” Rochester smiled uneasily. He tried for teasing but wasn’t sure if he had succeeded. This new side of his father was unconventional from what Rochester was accustomed to.

“Dalton, I never thought I’d see you married, and now that you are, I’ve decided to make some repairs on the place. When you have a son, he doesn’t deserve to inherit a crumbling estate.”

Rochester knew they didn’t have the funds for it. It would take selling his home in Mayfair to make it happen. He worked at not being resentful because the old man had stepped up with a concern he’d never seen before. And he was right. His and Evelyn’s future son would inherit Heavenly House someday.

“I wanted you to be involved in the restorations, or I would have surprised you as a wedding gift. A late one, admittedly.”

Rochester suddenly noticed there was no glass of hard spirits on the table beside his father. And the bar had been removed. He took a deep breath, feigning travel weariness to see if he could detect the smell of alcohol on his father. But there was

none.

“You look well, Father.”

“Oh, I feel fine. I’ve been fine. There was no need for you to send a doctor.”

“I think the doctor has helped, as well as the new steward, from what I can see.”

“Well, it will only get better from here, I promise you that. With the money you sent, this place will shine again.” His father looked away like it pained him. “I should have never allowed it to fall.” The word fall rang heavy in the air. And for the first time, Rochester believed his uncle’s death may have truly been an accident. His father had never been violent; he always knew that. Just angry. Now, he seemed to be apologizing in the only way he knew how.

But the money? What money? He didn’t want to upset the mood and ask, so he saved his questions for Noah.

That evening, after his father retired, he and Evelyn, along with Noah, gathered in the family drawing room after supper.

“It’s been an age since I dined with my family, with the exception of Lovie and Hudson,” Rochester said, seated next to Evelyn on the sofa.

“He’s different since you wed. He’s not the same man. If you hadn’t noticed, there’s no alcohol in the house, or I’d offer you something to drink.”

“I prefer it this way. Tea and lemonade. I can live with that. Tell me something, Noah. He keeps speaking of money and thanked me for sending it, but I don’t know what he’s talking about or where the money could have come from.”

“Ask your wife.” Noah motioned to Evelyn, toasting her with a cup of tea.

“I didn’t want to tell you before we arrived, but I meant to say something before your father did.”

“You have a secret stash I don’t know about?”

She chuckled. “Only a shilling for rainy days.” She set her tea down. “Please don’t be angry.”

He squinted his eyes, puzzled.

“You remember the money you paid my father? Well, he sent it to me. He said it was to be a wedding present, and I took the liberty of contacting your brother because even though the Mayfair house needs work, I thought this place could use it more. Was I wrong?”

“And you knew about this?” Rochester asked Noah.

Noah nodded. “I think this might be a good time for me to say goodnight. It’s been a pleasure, my dear.” He bowed to Evelyn, then he rested a hand on Rochester’s shoulder. “If you want to talk about it or wish the funds returned, I have all day tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Noah. I have a feeling everything will be all right.”

When Noah left the room, Evelyn looked at her husband warily. She couldn’t read his mood. He didn’t appear angry, although she’d never really seen him bluster or lose his temper, except possibly with her when she’d climbed out that window. “Please hear me out.”

“Please, please, please. You throw this word around a good deal. So let me say it for a change.”

She braced herself and decided that whatever feelings came up now would settle later.

“ Please thank your father for me. Please never stop being the goose I fell in love with. Please , above all else,” he stopped to swallow hard. He turned his eyes toward the ceiling, and she reached over to brush a tear on his cheek. “Please never stop loving me.”

“You will never be rid of me, Dalton Rochester.”

“I’m betting my whole life on that, Goose.”

She wrapped her arms snugly around his neck. “I’ll take that bet, my love, but it will cost the shilling in your shoe.”

“I’m not worried, Goose.” He kissed her gently, then grinned like a rogue. “I’ll have it back before dawn.”

THE END