



# For the Love of Clover (Breaking the Rules of the Beau Monde #4)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** “There certainly wasn’t anything between Clover Dunhurst and Hugo Darrington except an inappropriate conversation before a fountain, a search for a private garden, and a quick lesson in how to throw a punch.

No. Nothing but that.”

When a reckless wager is placed at Brook’s on Lady Clover Dunhurst’s virtue, Hugo Darrington can’t resist getting involved. After all, Lady Clover is the sister of his business partner, the Duke of Kingsley. Darrington can weigh the risk and set the odds for any investment except one: a forced marriage to a woman who plays chess alone and demands answers to the most wanton questions. She was nothing he expected and everything he needed.

With a duke for a brother and a legacy to uphold, Clover Dunhurst was groomed to avoid any impropriety. However, at a weekend house party, her life takes an unexpected turn when she finds herself caught in a moment of intrigue with the dashing Hugo Darrington, a man as formidable as the marble statue she was admiring. Soon, she’ll be embroiled in an impossible scandal leading to a forced marriage to a man who dared to set the odds on her virtue.

In the game of love, sometimes the risk is worth the scandal.

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## CHAPTER 1

England 1824

The happiest day and the worst luck hit Lady Clover Dunhurst in the same week. The former sat with her now. The latter gained force as she visited with her friends Adeline Markham and Evelyn Rochester.

“Isn’t he the most precious thing you ever laid eyes on?” Adeline Markham said to Evelyn Rochester as Clover sat back in awe, watching a squirming, chunky, smiling four-month-old’s wonder capture the room with one tiny coo.

These women were her dearest friends. She could not remember a day when the three of them did not know each other. They had been together for every foible, every misdemeanor of their childhood. Even the time when Evelyn had allowed them into her brother Winn’s bedchamber to fill his tub with frogs. Evelyn had screamed when a green-legged prince leaped, landing on her beautiful cheek, his sticky toes pulling at the soft skin under her right eye. Just another opportunity for Winn and his friends, Rochester and Darrington, to see what unsophisticated moppets they really were.

The infamous moment had taken place when Clover was ten years old. It was also the last time she had seen Hugo Darrington before her come out eight years later. And it would be another three years until she saw him again. Now, with Adeline married to Winn and Evelyn recently married to Rochester, Clover felt like a third wheel. In a perfect, girlish world, she would have married Darrington. Her childhood infatuation with him had felt real at the time. Now, as an adult, she couldn’t deny an attraction to the man, but she wasn’t foolish enough to think she was in love with him. Besides,

since the Christmas party where she and her friends had agreed to break the rules of the beau monde, Darrington had shown no interest in her. He had seemed preoccupied most of the time.

Then again, perhaps she was no longer interesting—if ever she had been. Her brother, the Duke of Kingsley, sheltered her while her position in this aristocratic lineage lent itself to overly boring, good manners. No one could call her a bad student. The death of her parents four years prior had silenced her rebellious nature. Mostly, though, she felt compassion for her brother, whose friends played at the game of life while Stratford Dunhurst shed his youthful veneer for his new ducal responsibilities, which—unfortunately for Clover—included her. Now, she was on her best behavior. In other words, no more frogs.

Today, gripping the cushioned edge of a green velvet sofa, she sat with Adeline Markham in her boudoir, admiring a downy-cheeked baby. Clover gazed at little Chase Markham. Her smile was genuine, but her heart sank to think she had less in common with her best friends than she had two years ago.

“Oh, Addy, he is perfection,” Evelyn said. “I am in heaven to be his aunt.” Evelyn chuckled when the baby took hold of her index finger, wrapping his tiny hand around it as he moved about unpredictably.

Of the three, Evelyn was the natural beauty, with hair the perfect shade of medium blonde and a figure to rival the most sought-after mistress in London. Adeline’s dark-brown locks had a touch of curling whimsy at the ends. And then there was Clover. Late bloomer and destined to stay that way. However, her friends were not her competition. They were simply a reminder that the world was passing her by once again. With the same shade of blonde as half the eligible women of the ton, she melted into the landscape, and her good manners made her completely invisible.

Both Evelyn and Addy looked Clover’s way with a mixture of glee, hope, and

sympathy. “It will happen for you soon. I’m certain of it,” Addy said to Clover.

“Not the way Rochester does it,” Evelyn volleyed. Dalton Rochester and Evelyn were newly wed, and Clover imagined as busy as rabbits if one could measure the gleam in their eyes when their gazes met.

Clover’s friends giggled, looking at each other knowingly. A secret obviously shared between brides and one she remained ignorant of. Even the secrets of mistresses were foreign to Clover. No woman with such brazen knowledge would be so gauche as to speak freely in front of an untried young woman. For a moment, Clover cursed her own virginity.

Her friends finally noticed she did not partake in the humor and did not share their private smiles.

Addy handed the babe into Evelyn’s eager arms and said to Clover, “Darling, it will happen for you, too.”

Clover smiled weakly, her stomach achy with embarrassment and nerves. “I am not envious because of the babe. I’m jealous because after sharing everything for so much of our lives, I am now left in the dark because I have no idea what either of you are talking about, or laughing about, or alluding to.” She tried not to sound pathetic but couldn’t help the exasperation.

“I am sorry, love,” Addy said. “I didn’t stop to think what a selfish conversation this might be. And hurtful.” She finished with a dip of her head that bordered on condescending if Clover didn’t know her better. Addy wouldn’t purposely be unkind, nor would Evelyn.

“No, I’m not hurt,” she tried to assure. “Really, I’m not. But I am frustrated. What is Rochester not doing?” Clover sat forward, bringing her hands to rest in her lap and

pushing down the impatient note behind the question.

Evelyn licked her lips as she looked uncertainly from Addy to Clover. A deep blush broke out on her cheeks. It must be something terribly wicked because Evelyn was not the blushing type. After all, it was Evelyn who initiated the rule-breaking game two Christmastides ago, where the three of them agreed that a holiday party was the perfect opportunity to behave scandalously. Apparently, Evelyn had placed an indecent wager with Rochester, and Adeline had spent a good deal of time with her now husband, Winn. The kind that demands a wedding and ends with a baby.

But Clover had done nothing—unless one could call accepting too many turns about the dance floor from Hugo Darrington something scandalous.

Clover scrunched her brow, trying to understand what Evelyn meant by “not the way Rochester does it.” “Oh,” she breathed in a low growl when it dawned on her what Evelyn meant. “He’s not?—”

“Remaining deeply involved for the entire act? No, he’s finishing elsewhere but very nearby.” Evelyn’s eyes were round and owlish, and she grimaced with her mouth.

“Oh,” Clover repeated on a high note this time. “I was actually going to say he was not performing his marital duty?”

“Rogue that he is, he’s performing, I assure you, just not in a way that is likely to produce a child.”

“I’ll refrain from asking how since I rather think I’d be up to my gills with a mortifying blush.”

“Clover?” Adeline asked. “Have you not considered any prospects? Clearly, you want to marry, so why have you not pursued it?”

“Marriage?” Clover asked. “I suppose I want to marry, but mostly, I want to know what these secrets are, and I want to know it with someone I like.”

Evelyn cleared her throat and busied herself with the cooing baby, obviously avoiding any further conversation on such a blushing subject.

Clover continued, “But no one of my interest is interested in me. I thought he was, only to find out?—”

“That you were courting the favor of the wrong person,” Evelyn finished for her again. She gave Clover a sturdy, meaningful slant of her mouth and cocked an eyebrow as the now-sleeping baby snuggled in the crook of her arm.

“Who?” Addy passed a look between Evelyn and Clover. “Now I am apparently on the outside of the conversation. Don’t forget, I was home the entire Season. Someone, please tell me what happened.”

Clover sighed heavily, rolling her eyes. “At the Baileys’ ball, I accepted a dance from Mr. Franklin. And not just any dance, but a waltz.”

“Egad. Albert Franklin? A man almost twice your age?”

Evelyn gave her another determined stare. “Are you going to tell her?”

Addy looked thoroughly confused. “Where was Darrington? You had a partiality for him a year ago if I remember correctly.”

“And?” Evelyn coaxed Clover along.

Clover exaggerated another sigh, loud enough to stir the baby momentarily. “The waltz was a mistake.”

“Clearly,” Addy emphasized, flaring her eyes to their largest potential.

“She thought he was Mr. Darrington.”

Both Addy and Evelyn’s husbands were close friends with Mr. Darrington. Clover could only surmise that her friends wished for her to wed Darrington so the three of them would be eternally connected even more so than now.

Addy’s jaw dropped open. “Mr. Franklin? She thought Mr. Albert Franklin was Mr. Darrington?” Addy asked Evelyn in disbelief.

“In my defense”—Clover laid a hand over her heart—“he was all the way across a ballroom in a wash of people standing on the tips of his toes. So, yes. He looked as tall as Mr. Darrington.”

“Mr. Franklin is old and bald. Mr. Darrington is tall and has an unmistakable full head of nut-brown hair.” Addy’s confusion was understandable.

Clover bobbed her head side to side, her mouth digging into a slant. “The man was wearing a beaver hat.”

“Indoors? At a ball? For heaven’s sake, this is not getting better.”

“I did mention he was far away, and I made the mistake of fluttering my fan when he lifted a hand and waved.”

“First of all, waving across a crowded ballroom does not sound like Mr. Darrington.”

“Obviously, because it wasn’t,” Evelyn cut in.

“Well, it looked as much to me. It was an honest mistake.”

“Not entirely,” Evelyn continued. “It was a mistake, yes. But an honest one? No. And why not? Because she cannot see a blasted thing.” The baby began to squirm, and Adeline called for the nurse.

“It’s not as bad as all that,” Clover pinned Evelyn with a look and hid her discomfort by taking up her cup and saucer of lukewarm tea.

Addy kissed the baby’s downy-soft head before the little dear was taken off to nap. She tucked a few errant strands of her dark-brown hair back into place and joined them again at the quaint sitting area in her room. “Why has His Grace not taken you to see an oculist or, in the least, a jeweler?”

Evelyn folded her hands patiently while silently encouraging her to tell the truth.

Clover felt like the tea leaves settling gently at the bottom of her cup. Her friends had always been her soft place to land. She set the cup back on the table, keeping her gaze fixed on the swirling leaves. “My brother has not called upon the physician because he does not know. And I am not interested?—”

“In what? Seeing?” Evelyn asked, but not unkindly. She had been exasperated with Clover since the incident with Mr. Franklin. “Let’s play this scenario to its finale, shall we? If you do not get measured for spectacles—and I mean quickly—you will find yourself at the altar with someone worse than Mr. Franklin. And, if history is any indication, it will be your wedding night with the man before you discover his true identity. That’s how badly she needs spectacles,” Evelyn directed the last part at Addy.

Clover’s head popped up. “On my wedding night? Isn’t it dark on your wedding night?” Forget that Evelyn was speaking of the boorish Mr. Franklin. She was now more interested in the process of newlywed bed sport.



Evelyn and Addy looked aimlessly about the room, purposely avoiding eye contact until their gazes settled on each other. Addy gave a shrug.

“You mean to tell me you do this thing in the light?” Clover asked, a measure of satisfied shock in her voice. “Interesting.”

“The details don’t matter.” Addy waved away the derailing conversation. “What truly matters is you need the help of an eye physician.”

“And then no man will be interested in me at all. Least of all Mr. Darrington.”

“I have it on good authority that Mr. Hugo Darrington hates his name. It should give you something in common to talk about. The fact that you will hate your spectacles, and he already hates his name. It’s perfect.” Addy suggested kindly, even if it did sound far-fetched and bizarre.

“No need for all that since we already have something in common.”

All eyes were on her, and Evelyn asked impatiently, “Well? What is it?”

“We are both fond of boxing.”

“You want to engage in a pugilist exercise?”

Clover laughed, feeling as she always had with her friends, comfortable, accepted, and heard. “No, of course not. I want to watch a match.”

“How do you know you want to watch? Have you seen one before? And how on earth did you get around Kingsley?” Evelyn asked.

“I didn’t have to get around my brother because he was the one delivering the cuff.”

“That sounds like a fight. Or was it a bout?”

“Perhaps a little of both. It took place in the fully enclosed fence of the back garden. I was hiding behind a closed window and a sheer curtain. The raucous broke out between Darrington and Kingsley. Before that, there had been a measure of shouting, although I couldn’t say whether it was all in good fun or not. Before I knew it, they had divested themselves of their waistcoats, their cravats, and eventually their shirts,” Clover finished, energized by the turn in conversation.

Addy sat forward. “The duke let you remain to watch a half-naked man throw punches while glistening in sweat?”

Clover raised her eyebrows and grinned. “I avoided the lecture because Kingsley didn’t know I was there. It was over before it began, ending with both men bent at the waist, holding their knees, and laughing.

“Was Rochester there?” Evelyn asked.

“I don’t believe so.” Clover took a satisfying breath and sat back, a smile pinned to her cheeks. “I confess I had never seen a man’s bare chest before.”

“Not even your brother when you were children?”

“No. I have been quite protected—coddled, some would say—and I am sorely tired of it all. Where’s my adventure? And why should I need a husband for it?”

“I never thought you were the kind.” Addy regarded her, a tilt of her head as if she were recalling every event they’d ever shared, looking for a hint of daring behavior.

“Oh yes, she is,” Evelyn said. “Her newfound shyness, which developed after being propelled from childhood to adulthood in one afternoon, has overshadowed her

whimsical side. The mischief maker is still in there, I suspect. Remember, Addy? When we were young girls, we stole Mr. Meyer's sheet music?"

"That was your idea," Addy said to Evelyn.

"To hide it, yes, but it was Clover who suggested we make subtle changes, turning the sharps flat and the flats sharp."

Addy started to laugh, holding a hand against her mouth. "And he began the recital with that piece and spent the next hour trying to understand what happened."

"He did." Clover chortled. "He spent half that time with his head under the piano lid checking the tuning pins. I don't believe he suspected us."

"Certainly not you," Addy said.

Clover sobered, catching her breath. "Since Stratford became duke, I have been set upon a different course. No more piano shenanigans for me. It's quite dreary." Clover quieted into introspection. "I doubt I will ever get used to calling him Kingsley."

The room grew solemn.

Addy stood and crossed to where Clover sat. She leaned her hip against the chair and put a supportive arm about Clover's shoulders. "We must get you away from your brother. I know he means well. He's been forced to be a parental figure. But if you expect to snag a husband, you need a modicum of freedom for at least a little flirtatious banter."

"I hate that phrase. I don't want to snag a husband." She looked up coyly from under her lashes, her mouth spreading wide with a wicked grin. "I want a man to snag me."

“And marry you,” Addy insisted.

“If it is agreeable to us both, otherwise I haven’t thought that far.”

Addy looked conspiratorially at Evelyn. “I suppose we aren’t the ones to speak since we have both broken the rule of rules.”

Evelyn grinned. “Yes.” She turned toward Clover. “And some of those rules were broken in the presence of a boxing match.”

“Evelyn,” Clover giggled. She pressed a hand to her mouth, her eyes watering, which was her normal nervous response to everything. “Where?”

“Strong’s,” Evelyn whispered. “And do you know who was there?”

“Rochester, I hope,” Clover said.

“Rochester took me there to watch his friend fight.” Evelyn raised her eyebrows and folded her arms. “His friend... Hugo Darrington.”

Again, Clover smacked a hand over her mouth. “You little minx. Should I call you out for gaping at Mr. Darrington’s remarkable physique?”

“Honestly, I was too far to notice much and was being kissed to distraction at the time.” Evelyn bit her lip.

“Bravo,” Addy said through peals of laughter.

Clover had been back in Mayfair for nearly a week since visiting with her friends at Adeline Markham’s country home. She had hoped the titillating conversation she’d shared with Evelyn and Addy would have dissipated at least a little by now. But it

had done the opposite. Time had greedily catered to her burgeoning imagination, and who could blame her when her brain was clouded with thoughts of being kissed to distraction? Evelyn had made it all sound so sinfully delicious.

With the Season all but over, she would have to rely on the infamous summer house party or a small country masquerade. She preferred the idea of a house party because her brother wasn't likely to attend. One could hide behind a mask, but a country house party put the guests in constant contact with one another, and that was something Stratford could not abide. If nothing else, Stratford preferred to be alone more now than ever.

After their parents died, he'd retreated into his title and she into her position. In many ways, they had each relinquished a significant part of their formative years. Newly graduated from university, Stratford had left his carefree life as a young man behind. His friends went on to accomplish all manner of capers, and her brother had resolved to be worthy of the esteemed title of duke, ensuring their family legacy would endure. The family name must be maintained.

As for Clover, she passed up the year before her come out and took her responsibility for managing a home seriously. She'd even missed the beginning months of her first Season. Evelyn had been correct when she suggested Clover's shy side had overshadowed her whimsical nature. Clover had almost forgotten how to have fun. She'd lost her spontaneity for life. But it wasn't shyness that did it. It was self-preservation because allowing herself too much freedom only reminded her that her life had drastically changed when her parents died. It was better to be the woman she was expected to be than to play at being the girl she'd lost. The weight of her family's title bore heavily on her shoulders as well as Stratford's.

Her brother was well aware of her change in disposition. As a result, he doted on her with a steel resolve to see her ridiculously happy. Unfortunately, his idea of protecting her from harm meant that she rarely had any fun. And now with her friends

married and busy with their families, Clover was convinced she would die a bored spinster.

In truth, she didn't mind the spinster part. It was the bored part that had her scheming and plotting ways to explore her independence or lack thereof.

Even Evelyn had been to a boxing match.

Clover would pay her entire allowance to see just one bout with Mr. Darrington at the ropes. Evelyn would suggest it was because of an old infatuation with the man, but it was more than that. It was said the handsome rogue was unbeatable, and that was something she must see.

### CHAPTER 2

Hugo Darrington could not account for the foolish decision to join a house party at the end of the Season, except he was working an angle with the largest silent investors to the upcoming Belgravia renovations. He had been biding his time for such an opportunity. It was bound to cost him more than he had to liquidate, but despite his reckless rakehell days, he'd managed to repair most of his reputation with the financial community. There was little reason for the banks to consider him a risk. His father was alive and tending to Darrington's three sisters. Or so the institutions would believe. Darrington rented his townhouse in order to give himself more breathing room if the time should call for him to move home and save himself the cost of London. He had no family of his own. No wife. No children. And most importantly, no prospects.

He kept an eye on Mr. Silas Torrent, one of the leading investors in the Belgravia project. The man scanned the crowd, then disappeared into the billiard room. Darrington couldn't be happier. He had enjoyed more than one game of billiards with Mr. Torrent at the home of the Duke of Kingsley. In fact, Darrington had spoken with Kingsley just before leaving London so they would both be of the same mind.

He shifted his weight, more than ready to leave the confines of the ballroom where their hostess, Mrs. Anna LaDow, stood in the middle of the dance floor, surrounded by her guests, holding the posture of one who was about to make an announcement. He gave a short bow of his head to a passing woman when the glare of a blinking sunbeam, coursing through a wall of windows, nailed him in the eye, momentarily blinding him. He winked to clear the dark halo imprinted with a flash of light from behind his eyelids, and just before he took a step in the direction of the gaming room,

he saw her.

What the hell was the duke's sister, Lady Clover Dunhurst, doing at a summer house party? Especially this one, when he knew her usual circle of friends was not in attendance. What was Kingsley thinking to allow it? Mrs. LaDow, a young widow with an inheritance that left her plenty of room to play, did not throw the kind of parties that nice, innocent young women would attend without a horde of chaperones. He looked about to see if any old biddies were hovering over her. Certainly, she wouldn't be there without a chaperone in tow.

It had been almost two years since he'd paid any attention to Lady Clover. He'd been invited to tag along to a Christmas party hosted by her brother two Christmastides ago. It was there that Lady Clover, Evelyn Markham, and Adeline Priestley had invented a game to break the rules of the beau monde. No harm had come from it. Nothing really happened, except his friend Winn Markham ended up married to Adeline Priestley months later. And then, of course, Dalton Rochester had fallen next for Evelyn Markham, Winn's sister. It was as complicated as it sounded. Thankfully, Lady Clover had not required much from him at that party except a dance or two. It was a pleasant time, and it was also the place where he had met Kingsley, Lady Clover's brother. He and the duke were now friends and on the cusp of being business partners.

He smiled, remembering her, which was why he wondered about her presence here. Now, she stood across the polished marble floor as the guests gathered close. She looked older, more sophisticated than when he'd last seen her. She had been a pretty thing then. She was beautiful now. Her shimmering gold hair looked longer, twisted about her head with a satin, pale-blue ribbon that matched her day dress. He had never been attracted to fainting-prone debutantes, but at three-and-twenty, Lady Clover was no longer a young thing. Innocent, perhaps, but old enough to be interesting.



And completely off-limits.

He allowed himself a slow perusal of her body to wash any inappropriate thoughts from his head, to remind him that quiet and mousy girls had never been his type. With her arms tightly crossed and a slight scowl, she held off any admirers who dared to look. Unfortunately, drinking her in did not flush or simplify his previous opinion. The way her arms cradled her breasts gave him pause. This was not a girl. Lady Clover Dunhurst had grown up.

Quiet and mousy suddenly became interesting. If not a little shallow, he did appreciate a sinfully beautiful woman.

The gaming room had nothing on this view as Mrs. LaDow began the rules of a new game.

“I hope you all brought your finest hunting talents and your appetite,” Mrs. LaDow said, properly dressed in soft cream silk with a lavender overskirt, belying the angelic facade with a daring grin.

Darrington hardly listened.

“Today, we play a game of cat and mouse. And it shall be—” She eyed the room side to side without moving one mahogany curl. “*Hunt the Squirrel!*”

The small crowd gathered in the ballroom roared. The echo so complete that it drew the men from the game room, some still holding a cue stick.

“If you have not played since childhood, let me refresh your memories. We will pick one guest from a hat who will be the prey. He or she”—Mrs. LaDow stopped to look meaningfully around the circle—“will hide, and the rest of us lucky hunters will seek them out. When and if you find them, you will join in the hiding place until all the

players have discovered the debauched prey.” She laughed. “Did I say debauched? I meant the chosen prey. Let’s not be too quick in the finding, hmm? Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a hat with tokens unless, of course, someone would like to volunteer?” She stalled, pressed a finger to her lips, then continued, “On second thought, to keep the game somewhat appropriate, we will only draw from the men’s tokens. We wouldn’t wish a lone lady to be waiting for a pack of men to find her, now, would we?”

Hugo rubbed his lean jaw, watching Lady Clover’s reaction. She really shouldn’t be here. He hadn’t thought to take part in the guest amusements beyond the game room. Cards and billiards provided the perfect backdrop for cultivating business relationships. Lady Clover cinched her arms tighter and looked at the man beside her, from his scuffed boots to his beady little eyes. The fool was staring back at her, his growing smile pushing up the greased edges of his mustache.

Hugo’s fists literally itched to pummel the man. His fingers curled, and he felt his lip twitch in a sneer. There was a need in him to protect her for the sake of his friendship with Kingsley. Not to mention, he was acquainted with her and didn’t wish for any woman to fall prey to an uninvited pursuit.

Her focus shifted across the room at that moment, and their eyes met. She simply stared, and Hugo felt the overwhelming urge to wave for some bloody reason, like an imbecile. As if his mind was not connected to his limbs, he lifted his arm and gave a small shake of his hand. From her came no wave, no nod, no flip of a fan, and as far as he could tell, no blink to acknowledge him. Damn curious. She knew him. Why would she cut him that way? He watched her turn to leave as a name was announced.

“Mr. Albert Franklin,” Mrs. LaDow’s voice rose above the crowd. “You may take twenty minutes to change, freshen up, have a bite to eat, and find a hiding place.” The woman raised the token in hand. “My dears,” she called. “Let the games begin. And be polite if you must.”

Laughter and a cacophony of jabber erupted at once. Lady Clover stopped with her back to the room, then pivoted quickly around when Mr. Franklin's name was called. Jerking her head about, her eyes grazed the occupants as if she were looking for someone. It was either excitement or panic. He couldn't decide.

"Excuse me," he said to a gentleman to his left as he bumped his elbow, deciding to follow Lady Clover from the room. There were simply too many people between him and the double doors. When he couldn't see her in the hall, he listened for her sweet, soft voice. Innocent. Untried. So proper she couldn't bear to break a rule, which had been the game at the last party he attended with her.

To the guests, he smiled absently, craning for a peek of her blonde hair, then decided she must have gone to her room. He did the same. Having chosen against bringing his valet, he double-checked the shave he'd given himself this morning. Thankfully, he had stowed away a tin of Gerard's special boot polish. Hugo didn't care to guess at the concoction. He only knew that it worked. Gerard had even seen fit to infuse it with the oil from Hugo's specially made cologne. His perfumer had designed the scent with bay rum and a hint of cinnamon.

Hugo smiled to himself as he retied his cravat because his perfumer was also Gerard. The valet was rather talented at chemistry.

A splash of fresh water cleared his head, and he realized he needed to find Lady Clover before the fool, who had been close enough to look down the bodice of her dress, found her.

He measured the crowd, splitting them into groups of those looking for a liaison, clearly not seeking the prey, those who wished to win the favor of Mrs. LaDow, and lastly, those who wished to vanish for an afternoon. He put Clover in the latter. Most of those in attendance did not look like her type of company. At least, he hoped not.

He dipped his head to Mrs. LaDow as he passed her along the backcourt garden path.

“Mr. Darrington, is there someone you’re specifically seeking today?”

“Not in the slightest, Mrs. LaDow. Unless, of course, you consider yourself.”

She smiled openly, without a hint of blush to her cheeks for his comment. “You would do me a service to be true.”

“The pleasure would be all mine, I assure you.” He stopped to kiss her hand. It was all talk and nonsense, as they both well knew. Wanton flirtation was expected at these affairs and rarely taken seriously.

He vaguely enjoyed the scent of roses and the visual delight of sculpted shrubbery. There was even a beautiful, tiered fountain in the middle where the path took off in four directions. He didn’t pause to choose but took the path leading to the hedge maze. If anyone were to get lost, it would be in there. Although, he highly expected to find a few interludes before the day ended.

The flagstone gave way to finely ground gravel. Marble benches guarded the entrance to the hedgerow labyrinth, which stood tall enough to conceal a grown man. He edged his way through, keeping his arm close to the dividing wall of greenery on his right to spare himself from repeating the same path. It worked to a point until the clever creator of this particular maze saw fit to break the mundane and add more complicated designs that broke from the continuous wall and led toward the center.

The middle of the maze opened into an inviting courtyard with flora, miniature trees, and another bubbling fountain. At the middle, a large urn flowed into the reservoir at the fountain’s base, where a marble statue of a half-dressed woman stood. One sculpted arm provocatively covered a breast, her face with a vague expression of pleasure. Water trickled in little waves at her feet, and he followed the circular

reservoir to the other side, where another statue, this one of a naked man, stood erect.

To his astonishment, standing directly in front of the statue with a look of awe about her was none other than Lady Clover. Hugo smiled and cleared his throat, wringing a look of priceless surprise from her face. Her pouting lips parted. Her eyes flew open, and she nervously blinked between gawking at the Greek-like god in front of her and then back to Hugo, who stood at her left.

“Mr. Darrington. I didn’t see you.” She licked her lips, which only added to the wantonly liberal way she studied the sculpted man. Something he wasn’t likely to forget.

“It wasn’t my intent to intrude.”

“I was just admiring the workmanship.” She smiled uneasily.

With his hands clasped behind him, he strolled around the fountain’s edge until he also stood facing the sculpture. Four inches separated his shoulder from hers as they examined it as a museum piece in preparation for sharing a critical opinion. Her head tilted, and he realized that amid the fountain of free-flowing water surrounding the two works of art, a single trickle was bleeding out of the statue somewhere above the waist. The water hugged the marble in a stream that ran down every groove following the line of the figure’s hip and out onto the underwhelming, under-sculpted cock of the stone man.

The only thing that would have made it more impressive is if the spray were coming directly out of the head of his underrated manhood.

Lady Clover folded her arms. “Is it me? Or does he look to be pissing?”

He almost spat out a chuckle but stayed true to the unusual moment, crossing his

arms and trying very hard not to laugh out loud. With a moody studying stance, he rested an elbow on one arm and covered his mouth with his hand. “I’d say you may have something there, Lady Clover. A good eye for art. The artist’s portrayal is quite sincere. I believe it’s become quite the rage to piss haphazardly wherever the need arises.” He heard a hiccup of a giggle from her and then an outright laugh. His chest rumbled, and he couldn’t help himself. “I apologize. Not the language for a lady to hear.”

“It is when the lady says it first.” She dared to look him in the eye when he turned his gaze on her.

He heard a titter and the crunch of bootheels on the finely pebbled path. Quickly, he grabbed Lady Clover’s elbow and ushered her behind a shrub, pulling her down to a crouch just before a couple emerged from one of two walkways leading to the central fountain. He put a finger to his lips in the universal gesture of shushing and she answered with a nod.

For the next five minutes, the couple played a bit of mutually permissible cat and mouse while sitting on one of the marble benches. The woman turned her face away from a kiss but belied the action by placing a daring hand on the man’s thigh, which he did not remove. By leaning closer, he successfully drew the woman’s dangerously close grip to his crotch. The woman turned back, and Hugo knew a kiss was in the air and probably more than that if the position of the woman’s hand was any indication. Hugo could not stop the visceral reaction the scene caused just by thinking about it.

He was trapped by the couple and couldn’t move his legs enough to relieve the discomfort of his cock bent in a disagreeable direction. He held on to a grunt, biting his tongue and thinking about puppies and kittens and tiny sailboats to clear his coiled mind. All the while, the woman next to him smelled delicious, like sweet vanilla and lavender, which did no favors to his current position.

He held his breath for fear of sighing too loudly and risking the lovers finding them. From the corner of his eye, Lady Clover moved an inch closer, drawing her brows together while she peered through the brush. He wondered if her body was as conflicted as his.

### CHAPTER 3

Clover didn't have time to feel embarrassed when Mr. Darrington first arrived at the centrally located fountain in the hedge maze. She had hoped to avoid the gameplay and thought getting lost in the labyrinth would be an easy excuse.

But then, Mr. Darrington had wandered in. She couldn't say he'd found her since she seriously doubted he had been looking for her. Speaking her mind and saying things she should not have said in the company of a man, or anyone for that matter, had not been her intent, but she was pleased when he didn't seem to care or notice. Her stomach fluttered and her cheeks felt warm.

No one had been there when she first came upon the clearing, so she had openly examined both statues. She was, of course, familiar with a woman's body but was intrigued by the sculptor's depiction where one breast displayed a stiff, erect nipple and the other was covered by an arm, the fingers of the figure wrapped around the side like the woman was holding herself in place and seeming quite pleased about it. The woman's other hand was partially covered by the carved scarf that barely shielded her womanly parts and seemingly fell from her hips.

It was erotic. At first glance, it appeared innocent enough, but then the more she studied it, the warmer she felt.

That was before she discovered the male counterpart. The sculpture mesmerized her. She'd heard of Michaelangelo's David, but she'd never seen it. The figure in this scene was not David, but it was a man. Naked. Completely and utterly naked without so much as a hint of proprietary embarrassment or shame. He stood there in all his



glory. In Clover's opinion, she could not understand what all the fuss was, except she'd never seen a fully naked man before. That interested her. But she could not bring herself to find it erotically pleasing. No warmth had bloomed in her like the figure of the woman had inspired. In her head, she had gone over the things her friends had said, but their fascination and knowing smiles seemed exaggerated if this man was the epitome of a sexual encounter.

She wasn't completely ignorant. She knew what went where. She simply didn't understand how or why you'd want it there.

"How long do you think this will last?" she whispered almost imperceptibly, unsure whether Mr. Darrington heard.

"Not long if she moves that hand again."

Clover positioned her head to see through the shrubs, bumping Mr. Darrington's chin in the process. He was good enough not to grunt or move. She wanted to know what he meant by the statement. One of the woman's hands was twirling a thread of golden hair, and the other was brazenly on the man's thigh. Leaning in, Clover almost lost her balance, saved by an arm like steel slipping about her waist, steadying her. Mr. Darrington's near embrace had been necessary, but she felt that little flip in her stomach all the same, and she had no guard against the security she felt from his reaction, either.

The woman laughed, removed her hand, and the couple proceeded to depart, leaving Clover the distinct impression they were headed for a private rendezvous.

She took a deep breath, more aware of Mr. Darrington's arm about her. The sensation tickled her stomach. The tips of his fingers dug in not uncomfortably at her waist. Just when she was about to ask for help standing, more guests entered the small courtyard. They couldn't rise now. Not without bringing censure down upon them

both and causing a yarn of gossip thick enough to knit a sweater.

She folded into Mr. Darrington, assured he must have felt the same about the intruders. This time, it was not a couple looking for privacy. Two men walked the perimeter, gesturing at the statues, smiling at the figure of the woman. One stood on the edge of the marble well, where the water created a small pond. He reached up toward the figure and pressed a finger on the tip of the carved breast.

The other man guffawed. “You’re going to fall in and for what, a hard stone diddy? You can’t find anything softer? And I’m not talking about the piss-proud cock in your trousers.”

The vulgar man, with his hand at the breast of the figure, pulled the pad of his thumb across the woman’s nipple and then licked his thumb. “There’s wishing it true, my friend.”

“This weekend? And who would have you?”

Both men sounded deep in their cups, and the one leaning over the fountain all but lost his footing before he found his way back to solid ground. They then edged around to the male figure.

“Flaccid prick. Why do you think he’s shooting off his pearly shower alone for? What a waste.”

Clover pulled back slightly, not sure if she should be utterly disgusted with the talk or if it wasn’t as bad as it sounded. Her familiarity with vulgar words was limited.

“Nodcocks,” Mr. Darrington mumbled.

“I’ve had most of the women here,” one man said.

“You’re a fanciful dreamer. Women revile you.”

“And you can do better?”

“A virgin.”

Clover understood that word well enough. She swallowed hard, not liking the turn of this conversation. By the flex of Mr. Darrington’s fingers, he apparently wasn’t keen on it either. But neither said a thing because to be found by these nodcocks, as Mr. Darrington had so nicely mocked the idiots, would be a disgrace to Clover and her brother.

“Here? I dare you to find one.”

“I know a very pretty one who’s grown up into quite a woman.”

“Who? And what makes you think you’re worthy?”

“I never said I was worthy. She’s as innocent as they come and would be easily seduced.”

“I’m listening.”

“ And she’s the sister of a duke.” That got the man’s attention. It also got Clover’s attention. There could be no mistake they meant her.

Her breath picked up a beat. She felt lightheaded.

“Fine. I challenge you to it.”

“I’ll do better. I’ll set a wager on her maidenhead.”

“Oh? Now you have my interest. Who is the chit?”

“Kingsley’s sister is here. Have you met her?”

“No. But I’ve seen her. She’s pretty enough. Are you sure of her virtue?” the idiot snarked.

“If she’s here, she’s game. Too bad she’s not the lucky squirrel in today’s competition.”

“I’ll wager ten pounds on the first kiss of lucky Clover.”

“I’ll wager a hundred for a lucky pluck.” They guffawed, stumbling into one another.

Clover could have sworn Mr. Darrington hissed a curse.

The men walked within a foot of the hedge where she and Mr. Darrington hid before they staggered out of range and back into the maze.

“Damn, foolish bastards,” Mr. Darrington said as he moved to help Clover stand.

She was shaken by the events and belatedly embarrassed for her words and her actions today. She wouldn’t blame Mr. Darrington if he accused her of encouraging the vulgar behavior after she’d stood in front of the naked sculpture brazenly speaking of pissing.

“I’m sorry you had to hear that.” Mr. Darrington brushed off his breeches.

“The part where you called them bastards or the part where they made such vulgar suggestions about my person?”

“Vulgar indeed. They won’t last the night before I lay them out.”

“Don’t. Don’t say a thing. It’s humiliating enough. Lord knows I shouldn’t have come.” She brushed off her skirts and avoided looking at him. “How long do you think we can stay here? I wasn’t in the mood for games. I’m less so now.”

“Is all night too long?” And then he cringed as if he just realized what he’d said. “That wasn’t what I meant.”

“I know, Mr. Darrington. I’m just embarrassed. And honestly, all night sounds perfect because I am in no hurry to return, nor perhaps should I.”

“Drunken idiots. If you’d give me permission, I’d make certain they leave posthaste.

“I didn’t take you for the permission kind.” She bent, smoothing her long skirt. When she straightened, their gazes clashed, and he looked like a man ready to do bodily harm. She lifted a brow. “That wasn’t a challenge, just an observation.”

“Trust me when I say I’d take great pleasure in beating them beyond the ability to apologize.”

She allowed the thought to take root, but not in a vengeful way. No, the idea of watching Mr. Darrington fight sent her heart beating in her throat, and adrenaline-laced excitement warmed her limbs. She blinked it away. “Hurting them would do more harm than good. I’m not even sure what they meant by some of it. What’s a pearl shower?” She rested her hands on her hips, curiosity overriding her pique.

Mr. Darrington rolled his eyes shut, pinching the bridge of his nose. He sighed with vigor. “Do me a kindness and do not under any circumstance repeat that last bit. Not to anyone, especially your brother. And while you make that list, add me as well.”

“May I ask my friends?”

“Clover!” he said too loudly for her liking, his closed eyes flying open and pinning her with meaning. The force of the outburst added to the impact of using her name.

“Since you’re acting like my keeper, I thought it prudent to ask before I did something of my own volition.” Her voice made a mockery of the statement, making it clear she meant the opposite.

He flattened his palms out in front of him. “I’m just trying to help.”

“Then tell me what it means, Hugo .”

He had the grace to wince. “My apologies, Lady Clover.”

She compressed her mouth while holding his gaze hostage with contempt. “Not necessary, Mr . Darrington.”

They both simultaneously turned their heads at the sound of distant laughter.

“We need to get out of here,” Mr. Darrington advised, forcefully gripping her by the elbow.

She yanked her arm free, took one last memorizing peek at the naked statue, and followed Mr. Darrington from the courtyard in the opposite direction of the sounds of revelry. She lengthened her stride to keep up and assumed Mr. Darrington was teaching her some kind of childish lesson for disallowing his help.

“Stop,” she insisted. Several paces back, she planted her heels and looked about her.

“The sound is too near. We need to find another way out.” He looked about for

another route.

“And you know the way?” She didn’t wait for an answer, just mumbled, “Right, left, another left.”

“What are you doing?”

“Shush, Mr. Darrington, and let me think.” She made little walking gestures, her fingers going over the path they had just traversed in her head. She pivoted toward Mr. Darrington. “Was it two lefts or one?”

He looked momentarily stunned. His brow froze half cocked before he blinked it away and craned his neck, searching the ground around him and following the footprints with his eyes. “Do you have a map?” he turned back to ask.

“In my head.” She tapped two fingertips to her temple, then pointed her index finger at him. “You should listen more often or at least ask a question or two before you take off in random directions. If you don’t know where we’re going, perhaps I do. Or didn’t you think of that?”

He huffed, leaving her the impression that she’d exasperated him. “You shouldn’t point. It’s rude.”

She looked at her hand and smiled because his deflecting comment told her everything she needed to know. “Go ahead, ask me for directions. I dare you.”

“I dare you to stand there a second longer and be found by half the guests here who will, without a doubt, wonder what you and I have been up to all alone.”

That bit of truth did get her attention. “Mrs. LaDow gave me a clue should I get lost. I think she knew I’d rather not be bothered. This whole weekend was not my idea, you

see. So, the hedge maze seemed the safest place to hide. That is until I found you. Now, if you're lost and would care to apologize again, we'll find the way through." She ended the explanation on a jestingly high note.

He gave a short bow, with a mocking sweep of his arm. "Lead the way, Lady Clover."

His smiling green eyes always had a way of stopping her. They looked like the turquoise of coastal waters. Not quite green and never fully blue. It reminded her how infatuated she'd been as a young debutante before Darrington, Markham, and Rochester had disappeared for three years. And that Christmas party at her family estate two Christmastides ago had been a bruise to her ego when Darrington had gladly danced with her and entertained her on occasion but didn't seem otherwise interested. Her infatuation had been superficial, and so had his friendship.

His gravelly voice brought her back. "Well?" He flared those beautiful eyes at her. "Are you going to stop staring at me like I'm a perfect imbecile and say something?"

"A perfect imbecile. Remind me to ask you about that later."

"You're lost."

"I'm not. I'm waiting for your help."

"I just said our last turn had been a left. You are clearly not listening, now, little mouse."

Hmm, little mouse. She'd have to ask about that one later as well. "Then right it is. We follow this direction until we reach the east hedge wall. This path should be a straight shot there. Are you coming?" she asked as he looked at her strangely. She walked toward him, took his hand, and pointed. "This way."



When they reached the outer hedge enclosure, she saw the pots of burnt orange azaleas lining the wall. “Look for the clover.”

“You’re standing right here.”

She gave him a ridiculous look. “Between the pots. There should be a place where it sprouts from.”

“It’s all over.” He sounded amusingly exasperated. “The clover is all over. That rhymes.”

“We’ll discuss your intelligent quips later.”

“Along with your language.” He continued to look. “Here it is. It’s coming from the edge of the hedge.” He cleared his throat. She stopped until he caught her eye, and they both burst into laughter.

“You must stop rhyming.”

“Truly, it’s a coincidence. Now, what is this clue?”

“There should be a gate here.” She reached for the hedge and then looked at her gloves.

Darrington removed his gloves, sacrificing his hands, he gingerly stuck them through the greenery.

### CHAPTER 4

The hedge was green and lush at first view, but the inside branches scraped at Hugo's hands with a vengeance. However, the search paid off, and so did Lady Clover's clue. He felt a weighted cord and tugged on it. Something inside the shrub clicked, the foliage moving a little, and Hugo gave a shove, his shoulder smarting at the hedge until it opened outward. He raised his eyebrows at Lady Clover. "After you?"

She fit through the opening nicely, but it took him some fancy finagling to draw himself through without the jaws of a monstrous hedge tearing away at his jacket.

"Are you all right?" he asked as they emerged on the other side in what looked like a private garden.

"I hope so. Is my dress damaged anywhere," she asked, twirling halfway around while looking over her shoulder, the blue flouncy hem drawn up, giving him glimpses of her white stockinged ankles.

He hardly had time after the visual permission to leisurely inspect her from head to toe. "Everything looks to be in order." Indeed, it did. When she clutched at her dress, pulling it sideways, the outline of her lovely derriere was more than perfection, like a puffy pale-blue cloud that one might lie in the grass and contemplate all day. After closing the gate, he swiped at his thighs, pulling back when he caught sight of a red smear. "Dammit."

"What is it?" She hurried to his side.

“Nothing. Just a scratch.” Blood, darker than crimson velvet, beaded along a small stinging slice on his palm.

“Let me see it.” She grabbed his hand before he could protest or retrieve the handkerchief from his inside pocket.

The sight of her delicate hand in his made his pulse throb tenfold. He could see glimpses of skin between the cream lace of her fingerless gloves, and his mind couldn’t stop conjuring up the image of her in lace with no underskirt. Why? Why had his mind gone there? Because he was alone with a beautiful woman, and it would be unusual for him not to think such things. It was the only explanation he was willing to consider.

With her head bent over the task, her piled blonde hair tickled his nose with the teasing scent of lavender. He closed his eyes briefly, allowing it to clear his head of the lingering smell of the underside of a hedgerow, the musky scent most likely embedded in his tailored jacket. Her golden tresses looked darker from a distance, but up close, they shined as if they had absorbed the sun.

“It’s nothing. Truly. And now your lace mitts are stained with my blood.” He whipped the white kerchief, embroidered with his initials, from his pocket and tried to dab at the blood seeping through the careful filet lace pattern. “If you’ll leave them with me, I’ll have them cleaned or replaced.”

“There’s no need.”

“Believe me, my valet can get blood out of anything.” He folded up the handkerchief carefully before stuffing it inside his breast pocket. When he looked away, he felt something disturb his hair like a fluttering butterfly. He jerked his head when he realized it was her plucking fingers.

She quickly snatched her hand back. "I'm sorry, but you have leaves in your hair."

"By all means." He lowered his head for her to continue and enjoyed a juvenile perusal of her decolletage. When he lifted his eyes level with hers and smiled outrageously, she gave him an exasperated look that said his little game had not gone unnoticed. He licked his lips. "May I?" He gestured at her head, and her hand automatically went to her hair.

"I'm sure I don't have anything so interesting to look at as perhaps you did." She bowed her head slightly. He stood tall enough to see the whole of it without trouble.

He cleared his throat. "I don't know what you mean by that." Which was, of course, a lie. "This tangle here may take a bit of surgical skill." He looked about them for a place where she could sit so he could remove the twigs and bramble easier, and for the first time, he took in their surroundings.

The gate had opened into a fully enclosed, overgrown garden as if it were meant to be that way. Pathways with clover sprouting between stepping stones wound in a willy-nilly trail. There were trees, and along the edge, gooseberry bushes picked clean of fruit attested to the practical use of the space or perhaps a bird sanctuary.

"It's like a fairy garden. Mrs. LaDow said as much, but I didn't give it much heed. What do you think?"

What Hugo thought was that Lady Clover Dunhurst was a gorgeous nymph, standing there with her profile turned to him with her enchanting bright blue eyes spellbound by the scene. "It's a secret garden." He gazed at her while he said it as if he knew the moment was something to put to memory.

"Yes. It is, isn't it? I'm going to suggest this idea to the gardening staff at Kingsley."

“Before you do that, let’s untangle the twig buried like treasure in your hair.”

She giggled like a hiccup she couldn’t squelch. “If I sit, will that help?”

He nodded toward a wooden bench under the cover of a small tree he couldn’t name. Gardening was not his strong suit. She sat on the bench, and he stood directly before her, bent to his task and asking her to hold her head still. Several twigs with lacing tendrils, some with leaves still attached, were planted in her coiffure like so many pins.

“If you don’t sit still, this hair sculpture will be ruined.”

She chuckled again, a whimsical sound he was beginning to recognize as Lady Clover’s nervous chirp. “It’s a coiffure.”

“I’m aware of what it is.”

“Speaking of, do you ever plan to explain what happened in the maze?”

With her head in a very provocative position and the mention of the naked statues, his stance stiffened all over.

“If you don’t want me to repeat the words, then at least tell me what they mean.”

“The men were spewing phrases not intended for delicate ears.”

“You mean the ears of a woman who asked you if the naked man in the fountain was pissing to the sky gods?”

He unraveled the last of the stems braided through her hair. Lifting her chin with his thumb and forefinger, he hoped to intimidate her with a glare. But she would have

none of it. “What happened to the shy, reserved Lady Clover I met during that Christmas party at Kingsley Manor two years ago?”

“It’s highly unlikely she ever existed.” She swatted his hand away.

With her face turned up to his and her mouth parted, he wanted to kiss her. He truly did. What an idiot. To even imagine it would have the duke blacklisting him in the foreseeable future.

“Why are you staring at my mouth?”

He shook her off, pulled back, and took a few physical and mental steps away. “Perhaps I’m trying to understand why you would keep me on a subject you know isn’t appropriate and one your brother would have my hide for.”

“Tell me something, Mr. Darrington. Why is it that women—especially unmarried women—are kept from every interesting conversation that involves the opposite sex? Which makes little sense when you consider I am fifty percent of that scenario. I would happily read a book if I could find one with the answers to my questions. Like, what does the pearl shower mean?”

“Oh, for the love of the everlasting God, please don’t say that.”

She shrugged. “Two simple words. Pearl. Shower. I’ve used them both in conversation, but apparently, together, they are a scandal. I’ll ask my married friends who happen to be married to your friends, Winn Markham and Dalton Rochester. You do remember them, don’t you?” She dared to threaten him a little. “Well, I promise if I ask my friends, and they don’t know the answer, who do you think they’ll ask next?”

His friends, of course. He felt his teeth digging painfully into the side of his cheek.

“You would risk my neck for your curiosity?”

“Come now, it can’t be that serious.”

Come now . Did she have to say that?

“I’ll let you call me Clover without the pomp if you tell me.” Her tone coaxed him. Her eyes dared him like the devil on his shoulder.

“Believe me, if I told you, there would be little else to call you. Besides, I’m afraid it will only lead to more curiosity, which is nowhere near my place to satisfy.” He gave her a meaningful look. “Lady Clover.”

She pulled her lovely mouth to the side and folded her arms, and his gaze fell of its own accord to her straining bosom. Which, of course, she noticed. “And?”

He returned his gaze to hers. “It’s a vulgar name for something that a man does when he’s busy with a woman. Or more to the point, finished with one. Intimately. Biblically.”

And off she went, laughing again. If he hadn’t heard the same giggles earlier, he might have been insulted. But the blush she wore in tandem proved she was more embarrassed by what he said than he was by saying it.

“I can see you understand.”

“I believe so. I promise I won’t say a word to His Grace.”

“You call your brother His Grace?”

“Not at home. Truly, I wish we could go back a few years before our parents died

because I miss calling him Stratford. We were much less formal then. He's so broody now and overprotective of me, which is precisely why I'm here."

Her admission shocked him. This party was in no way an innocent affair, and Hugo could not imagine Kingsley knew Mrs. LaDow that well if he allowed Clover here without a bevy of nursemaids to travel with her. Case in point, he was alone in a garden with her where the two weren't likely to be found. And the men in the maze would most likely not have been so crude even among themselves if they had been attending a more appropriate house party.

"As for the imbeciles in the maze," he said. "Even drunk, a gentleman should know better. One could imagine they'll forget by the time they're sober, but I plan to have a conversation with our hostess."

"No!" She rushed out, nearly leaving her seat. "Mrs. LaDow is fond of Kingsley, and he always speaks kindly of her. Their friendship is the reason he sent me here. He's often too busy for the Season's amusements, and I think he feels sorry for me because my friends are married. This was supposed to be a nice diversion. I came because I was afraid he'd find something else for me to do—like join the Ladies Auxiliary for the Abolishment of the Waltz—or something just as ridiculous."

That statement made Hugo wonder just how fond the duke and Mrs. LaDow really were. If he read between Clover's words, it appeared the duke knew their hostess quite well. At least, that was the only believable explanation as to why the duke would allow his innocent, unattached sister to a party such as this. He decided it was the better part of wisdom to let it go for now.

He rested his hands on his hips, pushing back his dark-turquoise jacket, and cast a gaze over the lush garden. He couldn't name the vivid flowering plants or the more exotic trees. The only growth he was certain of was the clover that spread out between the foliage and scattered pleasingly on the dirt trail. He watched her silently,



stretching her neck to see the corners of the garden behind her. The creamy curve from her ear to the part of her shoulder buried beneath her pale-blue dress made him want to secure a miniature of her in such a pose.

“You say Mrs. LaDow gave you directions to this place?”

She looked at him and nodded. “Why do you ask?”

“No reason. Just that you mentioned your brother knew her, and perhaps she thought to protect you from the guests by giving you a private place?—”

“To hide?” She interrupted. “I’m not hiding. I’m avoiding. Something else is on your mind. You might as well say it. I’m sure I cannot be more shocked than I already have been today.”

He rested a foot beside her on the bench, crossing his arms negligently over his bent knee. They were close enough for a kiss. “This crowd is not your crowd. This social circle is not yours.”

“It’s yours, but not mine?”

“Precisely.”

She wet her lips and smiled distractingly. “Why, Mr. Darrington, your name does suit you then. Daring Darrington. The man who would dare to do anything like show up at an innocent house party and call it fast just for his presence alone.”

He held her gaze. “You are nothing like I remember.”

Looking up at him, she swallowed hard. “That’s only because you don’t know me.” She blinked and sat back. “What made you think you ever did?”

He watched her closely, his gaze darting between her eyes, falling to her lips and back to her eyes again. “You don’t belong here, Clover.”

She looked around and whispered, “And neither do you, Hugo.” Her gaze fell back to his.

He shook his head slowly, his mouth curving up in a roguish smile. All the while, her directness, her eyes, her mouth, her words, turned his rioting pulse into a hot river of lust. If he didn’t break the spell, he was about to kiss her senseless.

### CHAPTER 5

Lord have mercy, Clover could feel the heat radiating from him. His gaze consumed her. Mr. Darrington wanted to do something, anything, maybe even kiss her. And shamefully, she wished he would. She wanted to know what the kiss of a scoundrel was like.

She and Darrington stared at one another. He was far too close and too handsome for comfort. She couldn't look away with his booted foot placed next to her on the bench, his arms folded over his knee, and his strong jaw set with a smile. He'd called her Clover, and she liked it too much. And she dared to call him Hugo, a name she rarely heard his friends use.

"Did you know I was going to be here?" she asked, too breathless for her own good.

"No. Did you know I was going to be here?"

She shook her head.

"I didn't think so." He stood on both feet and put his hands behind him. A safer posture, to be sure. "When I saw you across the ballroom, it seemed you didn't recognize me."

She turned her head, wildly contemplating whether he referenced the ball where she mistook Mr. Franklin for Darrington. But how could he? Only Evelyn knew that. Her mind was muddled with infatuation and a flirtatious game she didn't understand.

"You mean here?"

“Where else?”

“I... Did I see you?”

“You looked straight at me, and I waved.”

She vaguely recalled a blurry vision from across the ballroom, making a movement with what looked like a limb, a hand, an arm? She bit her lip. She grimaced. “I didn’t acknowledge you, did I?”

“No. My ego was crushed, I assure you.”

She laughed. “It was not. Your confidence precedes you.”

He scratched the side of his head and then swiped his hand down his neck. The few inches stretched above his white cravat were sun-kissed. “Do you mind?” He pointed to the seat beside her.

She shook her head and scooted over a few inches. “My thoughts must have been elsewhere.”

“As in thinking ahead to where you might run when the Hunt for the Squirrel began?”

“Something like that.”

“Your brother is acquainted with Mrs. LaDow,” he said more to himself, and Clover wondered how much she should say.

“She is a widow.” As if that were an explanation.

His head rolled to the left, and he raised a brow. “Are you implying what I think

you're implying?"

"I've said nothing wrong. I simply stated the facts. After her husband passed on, Stratford invited her for dinner several times. He said she needed company, and we both understood the loneliness of losing a special person. She and my brother formed a friendship, and I imagine a trust, too."

"Does she come to dinner anymore?"

Clover smiled and tipped her head. "That's an unkind question and one I'm not quite ignorant enough to answer."

"I meant nothing by it."

"You surely did."

"You're wiser than your years, Lady Clover."

"Thank you." Not wise enough, however, to leave the garden and Hugo Darrington behind. "You know, you are not the person I remember at that Christmas party, either."

"How so? Not charming enough for you?"

"Not nearly."

He chuckled, turning sideways. He unbuttoned his jacket and rested an arm on the back of the bench. "How shall I make it up?"

"Evelyn Rochester suggested we break the rules that week. I suggested we didn't break enough. My only faux pas was recklessly allowing you three dances in one

evening.”

“If you would recall the entire rules of the game, you women were breaking the rules, and we men were to be doubly on our best behavior. You broke the rules that govern dancing thrice with one man. But I tell you, I was not the one who asked for them because I was on my best gentlemanly behavior, as the men in the group had decided.” His demeanor was matter-of-fact and all the more challenging.

“ I asked you to dance?”

“You did.”

“Three times?” Her memory must be failing. Now, she turned in her seat and mirrored his position, her elbow resting on the back of the bench.

“You brought me your dance card, already signed thrice by you, with my name at the top.”

She put a hand to her mouth to try to stave off the rattling nervous chirp that followed. “A small infraction. Hardly scandalous.” She shrugged.

He was watching her mouth again. “Too bad we’re not at that party. What scandalous rule would you break here? More than dancing too often with the same man, I hope.”

She leaned in a touch and licked her lips. “We—and when I say we, I mean my friends and I—decided at that time to kiss and tell. I had nothing to tell. I suspect Adeline did, and even Evelyn kissed Rochester on the cheek. But I was as well-behaved as a church mouse.”

His gaze caressed her face, and her throat went dry. “Lady Clover, do you want to kiss me?”

“I’d just as soon you kiss me since I don’t know how to do it.”

He leaned forward until their noses practically touched. “Not a chance in hell.”

“Right here.” She put a finger between their mouths and tapped her lips. “I dare you, Mr. Darrington.”

“If you’d called me Hugo, I might have obliged.”

“Hugo,” she said without pause. She hardly had time to breathe before he put a finger to her chin and touched his lips, very briefly, to hers.

He watched her closely. “Satisfied?”

“I’m not sure. Was I to feel something stir inside me? I’m confused.” She wasn’t, of course. Even that innocent kiss stirred something inside her, like a dawning realization that there was something more to this game besides lips that meet. Her mouth watered, and suddenly she felt thirsty.

He sat back and sighed. “That kiss was not meant to be effective.”

“If you were not affected by it, then do you think you won the wager made in the garden?” She referenced the conversation between the drunk men in the maze.

That broke the spell. He rolled his eyes and sat straight again. “If you ever speak of those men again to anyone, and I do mean your friends as well, you’re liable to find your feet in the fire of the scandal sheets.”

“What about our kiss?”

He dipped his head sideways to see her. “Don’t start.”

“You act as if I’m trouble.”

“Because you are, my sweet. And this party is the wrong place to break any rules at all. Including that one.” He looked between them, indicating the kiss.

She blinked with nonchalance and looked at his mouth.

He shook his head.

She changed the subject. “All right, Mr. Darrington. How long do you suggest we wait before leaving this fairy-tale garden?”

“First of all, I do prefer Hugo. And secondly, I believe there’s a picnic on the west lawns in about an hour.”

Hugo. He wanted her to call him Hugo when she knew for a fact he didn’t like his name. Perhaps Addy and Evelyn were wrong. “How do we safely get from here to the picnic without being seen? I don’t think it prudent to use the maze again.”

“I don’t either. We can use that gate.” He pointed to something blurry in the distance, and Clover thought it best just to nod. He looked at the sun. “Shall we stay for another forty minutes?”

“A solid plan,” she agreed.

A solid plan like hell, Hugo thought. Forty more minutes. Why on earth had he suggested that? He should have insisted they leave immediately, even before he sat down.

Especially before he sat down.



That ridiculous whisper of a kiss may not have affected her in the slightest, but it had him imagining deeper kisses, more kisses, joining kisses. He was profoundly in trouble.

“Would you care to hear a secret while we wait?”

He massaged his forehead. “I’m certain I should not. You are a little frightening today.” He smiled pleasantly. “I jest. Please, continue.” He rolled his hand.

“I once saw you and Kingsley involved in fisticuffs.”

Nothing could have startled him more if she’d sprouted fairy wings. His eyes went wide, and he reminded himself to shut his mouth. “A match? Where?”

“I doubt it was a match. You were in the back garden at our London address, and I was in the library that overlooks the yard, peering through a sheer curtain.”

His brow wrinkled, and he pulled back an inch. Scratching his chin, he asked, “How did I do?” It was purely for fun, but in truth, he was curious. He remembered that fight. It had started with harmless ribbing and ended with too much brandy-laced port.

“I couldn’t be sure. By the end, you both looked winded. Do pugilists keep score, or is it all about knocking the other fighter down?”

He might have laughed, but she looked so serious, her pupils dilated with curiosity, her brow crinkled with thought, and the idea of talking with her about a subject he loved pleased him. “There are rules and points. The loser isn’t always laid out flat.”

“I’ve heard my brother mention that you box for more than the sport of it. That you fight in tournaments for money.”

“I do.”

“And you win.” She put a finger to her plump bottom lip. “Or so I’m told. Kingsley refuses to let me see a bout.”

“That’s probably wise.”

“Instead of the dance card, I should have made you promise to sneak me into the arena to watch.”

“I promise you were more likely to get a dance than a seat at the ring.”

“You wouldn’t invite me to watch, even now?”

“Especially now.”

“Then tell me why you like to watch.”

He couldn’t dwell on the erotic notion that she clearly didn’t mean. “For the passion of the sport.”

“I would just like a chance to know a little of the passion that seems relegated to men only.”

“Not only.” Not in his camp, anyway. However, he was thinking of something far more daring and intimate, like disrobing her inch by inch. “There are a few women who are pugilists.”

“Really?”

“Their bouts are illegal, and I’ve never seen one, but I have little doubt they will be

permitted someday.”

She shook a fist in the air. “Another win for women everywhere,” she said with force.

He liked this side of her. If she’d been this outspoken at the holiday party, he’d have signed his own dance card for her and more. Unfortunately, he now had more important things to keep him occupied, like staying in good graces with the Duke of Kingsley and their other business partners, including Rochester. He had already invested a fortune in the Belgravia project. He hoped to live there someday. As for now, he enjoyed renting a townhouse in London. If all went to hell, it would be easy to let it go and move back to his family estate near Bedfordshire. His future was riding on this project. Not that he didn’t have more investments. There just weren’t any like the development of Belgravia.

The time came to leave this little happy secret behind. For the rest of the party, he would purpose to stay far away from Clover Dunhurst.

## Page 6

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### CHAPTER 6

Hugo did not sit with Lady Clover during the picnic that afternoon, but he did keep a glaring eye on the two men who had defamed her name. Sober now, they looked harmless, and he sorely hoped they were because he had no qualms about shoving a fist in their mouth and taking a few teeth with it. Three days remained.

Three days to watch over her.

Three nights to be tempted by her.

Three words to remember about her. Completely. Off. Limits.

Simple as that. Except that evening, she joined the party in the dining room wearing a gown, a shade darker than her bright blue eyes, which rivaled any he'd ever seen. He didn't stop to wonder if his opinion was biased based on his attraction to her. Did other men see her as he did? Probably not. He knew too much about her now to be safe around her. Or from her. He chanted Belgrave Square repeatedly in his mind every time the woman reached for a glass of wine, and her outstretched arm exposed a fraction more of her lovely skin. The creamy perfection looked like silk. He breathed in the image of her like an intoxicating dream, imagining his nose between her breasts and her body smelling of lavender and sweet erotic passion. He could almost taste her on his tongue.

Belgravia. He breathed again.

"Mr. Darrington, do you dance?" Miss Louisa Hodge, a fairly attractive brunette

sitting beside him at the long dinner table, asked a ridiculous question in hopes, no doubt, that he would ask her to dance. He shot a look down the table again at Lady Clover and then said, “Yes. My dear.” He turned back to Miss Hodge. “Do I dare ask you to save one for me?”

The woman giggled, irritatingly so. It did not sound like tinkling wind chimes or the voice of a wood sprite in his ear. It sounded like whistling through a whirligig. He hated giggling. So why didn’t Lady Clover’s little chirps bother him?

For one, because she obviously couldn’t help it. They were not primed to win favor. Nor fake. They were simply her.

This attraction was turning into an outright infatuation. Summer parties often had that effect. But generally speaking, the infatuations also had a blooming chance of becoming a dalliance.

This one should not, could not, as far as he could manage.

Some guests gathered in a small ballroom, others in the billiard parlor, and more in a room set for whist. Hugo decided to get his one obligated dance out of the way before he resigned to play billiards and drink. Surreptitiously, he looked for Clover but didn’t see her. At least she wasn’t dancing in the arms of the miscreants from the maze. Still, he would feel better if he knew where she’d gone before he spent the rest of his night drinking and gaming.

He found her in the whist room, standing on the sidelines like a wallflower and looking every bit as he’d always seen her. Timid. Shy. Quiet. Reserved. Oh, he could go on, except now he knew there was more to that pretty, innocuous smile. Again, like this morning, he caught her eye across the room. Again, he waved like a fool. And again, she ignored him.

He weaved his way around the audience of whist players seated almost back-to-back. A few tables were nearly impossible to skirt.

“Lady Clover, I see you’re ignoring me again.”

The only clue she heard him was the jolting, wide-eyed surprise she served. “Was I? Do you mean at dinner? We were sitting too far apart for a proper conversation.”

“I waved at you just now from across the room.” He pointed a look toward the open door.

“Oh, yes. I saw that. Forgive me, I was completely enthralled in the game between...” She faltered, fanning a hand toward the nearest table. “These lovely ladies and gentlemen.” She finished with a pained expression, drawing her bottom lip downward in a quirky half frown.

“You don’t even know their names,” he whispered, edging closer to her.

“Does it make them less interesting? Did you know the name of your dance partner?”

“Yes. I did,” he said, more confused than ever. Clover was a contradiction. “You saw me dance. Knew it was me. But refused to acknowledge me across a room? I think we should avoid one another the rest of our time.” He was teasing her but still wondered how he had missed her in the ballroom.

“Don’t say that. You’re practically the only one I know in the whole bunch except for our hostess, who is busy being a hostess.”

“If you’re so in need of a friend, I’m happy to play the part. But only if you’ll stop ignoring me.”

She turned to him. “You sound like a woman.”

He chuckled and wished he had a glass of wine to toast her. “If it’s good enough for a woman’s moody disposition, then it’s good enough for a man’s.”

She folded her arms. “You don’t give up easily, do you?”

“No. I wouldn’t be a good boxer if I did.”

“Then I’ll tell you another secret. But not here.” She nodded toward the door.

Hugo was not sure he could take another secret.

Clover was happy for the reprieve Darrington offered. She had been standing in the whist room for nearly thirty minutes without speaking or being spoken to. No one had asked her to play or partner with them at their table, and had they done so, she would have happily declined. When the time was appropriate, she planned to retire. Thankfully, the men who had spoken poorly of her that morning did not appear too anxious for her company. Perhaps Mr. Darrington had been correct, and the buffoons had forgotten as they sobered. She truly hoped so. It had made for an interesting conversation with Mr. Darrington, but she was not keen on the comments or suggestions, nor would her brother be if he found out.

Until Mr. Darrington arrived at her side, she had been looking for an appropriate moment to retire early. Now, she wasn’t sure she wanted to.

He gave her a skeptical look as they left the room.

“Do you think we could play billiards?”

“No. After today, I don’t think it wise for you to engage in risky behavior.”

“Lord, I had no idea you were puppeteering Kingsley. You do that well, you know,” she said, leaning in conspiratorially as they quit the parlor. Warmth radiated from him, engaging all her worldly senses. Intoxicating feelings surged through her and made her feel lightheaded on the scent of bay rum.

“Please do not refer to me as a nursemaid.”

“I wouldn’t dare. You look nothing like my childhood nurses.” She stopped, and he halted a few steps ahead, pivoting on his heel to face her. “Rugged jaw with a hint of shadow. Lashes to envy. And definitely a strong mouth. No. You do not look like any nursemaid I’ve ever met.”

His gaze caressed her face like a tangible thing, and she wondered if he was counting her flaws. “Lashes to envy?”

“Absolutely.” She nodded for emphasis. “I know I envy them. I cannot be the only one.”

“Who are you, Lady Clover?”

“Right now? I am a woman bored silly. And maybe a silly woman.” She smirked. “You know, Kingsley allows me to play billiards. I’m not very good. He lets me win most of the time. So you see, the billiard room would not make me swoon. I promise.”

He bowed to a couple strolling by. “I thought you had a secret to tell. The billiard room is not a good place for clandestine affairs.”

“Good thing we’re not having an affair, Mr. Darrington.” She pulled herself together, took a deep breath, and blinked away the stimulating yet inappropriate conversation. “Do you think there’s something else to do besides dance, play cards, and watch



billiards?”

He looked behind and to the side, examining the space around him like a map maker.

“There must be a draught board here somewhere.”

“Do you think they have a chess set behind one of these doors?”

He echoed her hopeful look. “No question. Let’s find it.”

This game was almost more exciting than chess promised to be. She fought to keep her feet from hurrying. Chess partners were few, and Clover often played against herself if the gardener wasn’t available. Her father may have taught her to play, but it was Mr. Troy who took the time to explain the strategy for different openings. He had told her that it wasn’t your partner you played so much as yourself. The diversion had been a lifeline.

Mr. Darrington was good to formally greet or bow to guests as Clover smiled like a woman taking a leisurely, mindless stroll. He tried two rooms before they found one with a table and a chess set. To cover, Mr. Darrington asked several people if they were interested in a game, but it was clear this was not that kind of party.

“White or black?”

“I’ll take the advantage if you’re offering.”

“Either can be an advantage, but I assume that means you’ll take the first move.”

“Of course. Should I wait for you, it may take all night.”

“Oh, Lady Clover, I don’t need any more ideas.” The board was set, but Mr. Darrington moved each piece until he was satisfied they were evenly spaced.

Clover opened, taking a center square, while Mr. Darrington immediately developed a knight. He was a formidable player, and by their third game, his brow was drawn in morbid concentration, and she leaned unladylike with her elbow on the table, her chin resting on her fist. “You devil. You’ve stolen my queen again.” Her heart pounded, not because of the handsome man seated across from her, but because her aching need to win this dratted game pierced her soul every time he cornered her queen. She ground her teeth, examining the pieces.

“You fault me because you left your queen exposed?”

“Mr. Darrington, please. I’m concentrating.” She felt her breath coming harder, and panic seized her because, in four moves, he would have her. She had one rook, two bishops, and no knights. Bishops were good to keep early on, but she had never developed a keen strategy for winning with them. If she could just corner his king, she might do it. But her only hope was an unfair, womanly distraction so he would overlook her game strategy.

She wet her lips and leaned into the table on both arms, stretching forward to maximize her body’s potential. She dared a glance. His mouth curled up on one side, and he raised a brow.

“Do you have a move?” he asked.

“I’m working it through if you’d be patient.” She took a heaving breath and saw his eyes fall to her cleavage. Move one worked. Oh, it wasn’t chess; it was something riskier. Like lust. “Oh, my secret, I forgot.”

“You’re stalling.”

“No, I’m thinking.” She looked through her lashes at him. He still held that crooked grin. “As to my secret, I couldn’t see you because I’m afraid I need spectacles.” She

glanced again, but he hadn't changed except to cross his arms like he didn't believe her. Move two did not work. She regarded the board again, tilting her head coyly. "Hugo?" she used his name, hoping to startle him. "About that kiss in the garden. The one you said didn't affect you?" She leveled him with a triumphant stare. "You were lying."

He unfolded his arms and leaned across the table, forcing her to look up at him. "Clover, so were you."

She lost the confident, coy tilt of her head. She lost her breath. And she lost the game.

### CHAPTER 7

Hugo almost gave her the game when she purposely displayed her charms for his feasting view. Now he was thrilled for his patience because her last move was definitely a checkmate in the game of life. It was also a warning to take care. She was a vixen. Who would have guessed that mousy little Clover would be such a prize?

The blush of her cheeks alone had him wondering what her flesh looked like, rosy with passion. And then he remembered the crude remarks of the bumble heads in the maze. He needed their names because, after this trivial party, he planned to investigate their little wager and the reasons why they thought to make it. Perhaps Hugo was the last to know of the fire beneath Clover's innocent facade.

However, something inside him screamed it wasn't a facade. That the Clover he met in that garden was as much a secret as the garden itself had been. Why would she trust him? He was no saint. She had to know that. Being here without her friends could have made her vulnerable enough to form a false bond with him because he was the only friendly acquaintance she had besides Mrs. LaDow.

On further reflection, he realized if she'd ever shown this part of herself anywhere else, even at home, Kingsley would not have allowed her to attend this affair. She couldn't know the danger of creating such lust in a man. They weren't all honorable gentlemen.

Two weeks back in London, and thankfully, Hugo's ardor had significantly cooled.

With Markham and Rochester now married, Hugo spent his time making business

acquaintances, which meant he attended the waning parties scattered over the summer, where he couldn't help but look for Lady Clover.

He scanned the crowd at one such event as if thinking of her could conjure the scent of lavender.

"Excuse me," a soft, familiar voice whispered from behind, and then there was the telltale poke of a finger on his shoulder. It couldn't be anyone but her.

He held back the urge to whip around and leisurely spun on his heels. "Lady Clover." He didn't have time to say more before she was talking again. The words spilled out of her quickly, and he had difficulty keeping up.

"Before the room fills, I want to apologize for my behavior at the house party. It's not like me to..." She stopped to gather her thoughts, opening and closing her fan against her palm. "To speak so freely and use unscrupulous tactics to win a losing game of chess."

"You think you lost?" Her gaze met his, and he couldn't bear the worry he saw there.

"I was not on my best behavior. I know that."

"If that wasn't your best, my heart is afraid to see what is." He smiled warmly, hoping to ease her distress.

"I just wouldn't wish you to think what those men said?—"

"That was not your fault."

"I didn't encourage it. I vow, I did not."

“Did you hear me?” Before she could answer, more guests arrived, and their private talk was squelched by a gaggle of women approaching. Hugo put on his best face and watched Lady Clover shrink a little as if she hoped no one would see her. The women collectively gave her one look, then disregarded her completely, flirting with Hugo almost openly. There was nothing he could do but distract them with witty remarks about where he’d been hiding himself during the Season. And oh, how he must have missed this one or that one at the theater. The same usual drivél.

He tried to peek at Lady Clover between innocuous replies without calling attention to himself. He even considered introducing her to the conversation so the other ladies might release him from their poorly baited hooks. But he didn’t want Lady Clover a part of it. Hell, he didn’t want to be part of it.

For the next two hours, he saw very little of Lady Clover. Once again, he tried to get her attention with a wave, and once again, she did not return it. So, the little nymph was telling the truth when she said she needed spectacles. He watched her as he crossed the room to see if or when she noticed him. When she smiled, he stopped, judged the distance, and then continued, grabbing two glasses of champagne on his way.

She looked like an innocent goddess dressed in cream silk, creating a tantalizing outline of her limbs every time she took a step. The beautifully understated design skimmed her shoulders as if the sleeves would slip at any moment.

He waited until they were a foot away from one another before he bowed and handed her a drink. “Excuse me, miss, but I’m afraid I can’t place you.”

“Can you not?” She played along.

“No, in fact, I believe I’ll need a closer look to satisfy my curiosity as to who you are. You see, I am gravely blinded, perhaps by your beauty alone. Or perhaps I just need

spectacles and am in grievous denial of the prospect of looking like a bluestocking.”

That whimsical giggling sound which he had come to know her by escaped, and she pressed the back of one gloved hand to her mouth, misjudging the swing of her fan dangling from her wrist. The folded spokes struck her glass like a gong splashing wine down the front of her gown.

“Oh, fiddlesticks. This is bound to stain.”

He took her drink and offered her a handkerchief. “We’ll hide the blunder with a dance. What do you say?” He set the half-empty glasses on a table and offered his arm.

“As long as it’s just one, I may accommodate you. From what I understand, you make a custom of dancing with unsuspecting ladies who are not good with math.” She placed her gloved hand on his arm.

“I’m afraid it’s a waltz, and I don’t see your brother here to ask permission.” He stalled for a fraction of a second, giving her an out, but she only tugged at his sleeve, and he followed her lead.

“Kingsley wouldn’t mind. He knows you well enough, and I know you a little. Besides, why should a waltz scare you?” she teased him. “Everything worth doing is scary, Mr. Darrington.” She tossed him a bashful glance.

“A little?” He pulled her into position, the first rotation an invitation to the floor as they swirled around the other butterflies. Glistening gold chandeliers glittered with the lamplight of a thousand candles.

“It was barely a kiss,” she said, keeping her gaze on a distant point he was confident she could not see.

“I wasn’t speaking of that. I simply don’t recall in my good many years hearing a woman use the precise language you did in the maze.”

“As I told you, I am not usually so indecently free with my demeanor or words. I must insist you forget that weekend.”

He could no more forget it than he could forget the scent of wild lavender in her hair. “I assume you have not found another occasion to use the word piss.”

“I think not.” She glanced at her feet, and he felt her bobble.

“Now would be the time for harsh language after missing a step. It’s completely understandable. And while I’m thinking about it, how many times have you misjudged the distance in a ballroom? Perhaps that’s why you’re unmarried. You may have missed this Season’s best catch.”

“I doubt it. The embarrassing truth is I have accepted a dance with the wrong person one too many times because of a miscommunication with my fan that involved my failing eyes.”

“Failing eyes, hmm. How old are you again?”

“Poo. If we were alone, I’d cuff you.”

A chuckle welled up, catching him off guard. “I would love to see you try.” Before the music stopped, he gracefully withdrew from the floor.

“What are you doing?”

“Providing an opportunity.” Unlike the cozy house party, this ball was crowded to the gills, and they were not liable to be missed or noticed when they took the air. The



gardens were alight and peppered with couples speaking in low tones and having only eyes for one another. He ditched the central path and pulled her toward a darker corner, knowing from experience they weren't likely to be found there. Without the help of a moon, the lantern cast a shadow across her lovely face, causing her eyes to look determined and less dreamy. It helped him wrangle in his lustful attraction. No woman had ever offered to punch him, and he felt more than intrigued. He felt exhilarated and alive.

“Why am I following you?”

He looked behind him as he settled on a spot where a bench and a conveniently placed shrub reposed. “Because you're a curious little mouse looking for cheese.”

“I'm not a mouse. But I do love cheese.”

He swept her behind the bush. “All right, my dear. Take your best shot.”

“My what? You can't be serious.”

“I disparaged your age, and you won't do me the honor?” He placed his feet and stretched his arms. “I'm giving you permission. In fact, I'm begging you, Lady Clover. And I rarely beg a woman for anything.” He waggled his eyebrows.

She swept a searching gaze over the length of his body, sucking on her bottom lip. Through the flickering light, her eyes lit with pleasure. “Just Clover, if you don't mind.”

“Whatever you say, just please do your best.” He waved his hands toward his midsection.

“I can't.”

“Yes, you can,” he said, a clear invitation in the beat of his voice. His pulse began to race.

“I wouldn’t know how.” The tone of her voice was high with curiosity.

“Ball up your fist.” He emphasized with a demonstration. “And plow through.” He slowly whipped his fist through the air. “Your turn.”

“I’m liable to break a nail on the buttons of your waistcoat.”

Without another thought, he shouldered out of his jacket, pulled off his waistcoat, and unceremoniously tossed them on the bench. “Now,” he said as he rolled up his sleeves. “Quickly, before someone comes. I’m already half undressed.”

She looked behind her, then held his gaze, and he knew.

Clover had never been so tempted in her life. This was one step closer to seeing a boxing match. And zero steps closer to doing the boxing herself—not that she’d want to actually box. But Darrington was a prize. She couldn’t believe he’d disrobed for this. And he was right; they could be discovered. With him in such a state, there would be no question of scandal.

She balled up her fist, bit her lip, and plowed on. Her determination was as hard as his rock-hard body, and he absorbed the impact. He didn’t even flinch. Just gave a quick sigh when her knuckles connected with his midsection. Nothing more. Any harder, and she was liable to hurt herself.

“That wasn’t very good, was it?”

“It was a wonderful, brave try. Now, this time, don’t hesitate. Follow through with your hips.”

“My hips?” That sounded very wicked. Men did not say such words to women.

“Hips, hips,” he emphasized. “My goodness, woman. You said piss just a couple of weeks ago.”

She licked her lips. “How on earth do you follow through with your hips?” The last word came out low.

He sucked in a deep breath and held it for a second. “Loosen up and don’t stand so stiffly. Like this.” He rushed behind her. His excited movements and his commanding voice were intoxicating.

He gripped her arm just under the elbow, wrapped his other arm around her, and folded her hand in a fist. Bay rum and spice assaulted her pulse, and her neck tingled when he breathed close to her ear. But he didn’t seem to notice the way he held her. His hard chest pressed up against her back. She had the urge to back into him, to cocoon herself right there.

Her voice shook a little. “Then what?”

“Straight through. An uppercut.” He pressed her arm forward in a little cutting arc. “Moving your hips in the same direction.” To her grave surprise, his hip pushed her in time to the motion. His leg was just behind her knee. She nearly buckled.

Instead, she giggled, dropping her hand, and to her detriment, he tightened his arm around her waist, doubtless to keep her from falling over.

“And now your opponent has been taken completely off guard because you find him to be no danger to your person.”

“Oh, he’s dangerous, I grant,” the words came out in a chuckle from her throat.

“Hmm.” His lips brushed her ear. “Perhaps a little.” Then, as quickly, he let her go.

She watched in dismay as he rolled his sleeves down, ignoring the cuffs, dressing quickly. “Darrington?”

He looked up at her question while buttoning his garments.

“I want to see a bout.”

“Not possible.”

“Even if you’re the one fighting?”

“Very much not possible,” he said between buttons.

“You disappoint me.” She sighed heavily. “I’m absolutely ruined for dancing now.”

“If we don’t get back in there, we’ll both be ruined.” He finished dressing in a rush, then quickly leaned toward her and kissed her cheek. “Thank you for one of the most invigorating and entertaining evenings I’ve had in a long time. But heed what I say. Do not under any circumstance say a word to your friends and especially the duke.”

She rubbed her hands together and gave a little clap. “What wonderful blackmail fodder.”

He stopped cold, gave her a sideways glance, and cocked a challenging brow. “Oh, my dear Lady Clover. Do not start a fire you are unable to tend.”

She watched his mouth say the words and then stretch into a wicked grin. At the angle he stood, with what little light available from the lampstands, she saw the silver outline of a scar just below his bottom lip. How had she missed that? A good

reminder that he was dangerous but not a deterrent. She wanted to see him fight in the ring.

### CHAPTER 8

C lover hardly slept. That punch to his granite hard abdomen, the way his strong hands folded over her fingers, and his breath on her neck was a triple assault to her fading wisdom. She spread her arms wide, gazing up at her pale-pink canopy, and wondered if Hugo Darrington's bed was longer to accommodate every inch of his six-foot height. She turned her head on the pillow and imagined his criminally long eyelashes dusting his cheeks while he slept.

She had always been attracted to him but had never thought this far. It was the conversation with Addy and Evelyn that had her seeing him in places he did not belong. Honestly, she had never considered a man in her bed. Husbands and wives did not share a room. Lovers, she could not attest. But spouses, as far as she knew, stayed in their own suites.

She rolled over, sighing a morning sound, and reached for the little drawer in the table next to her bed. She ripped the bottom portion of a well-used sheet of paper and retrieved a short pencil. "Number one," she said to an empty room. "Ask Evelyn if she and Rochester share a room." She had questions. Her friends had answers. She suddenly felt fortunate that Addy and Evelyn married before she did. It saved her from having to wait for marriage to find the answers to her uncomfortable personal questions. There were still things she wished to accomplish before settling her life on one human being with the authority to shape her future. Hadn't Stratford done enough of that himself? If her brother's strictness were any indication of what she could expect from a husband, she'd as soon stay unmarried for a while longer.

"Number two. Ask Evelyn about the pugilist club. Number three. Ask Darrington for

an invitation.”

“To what,” her maid asked as she unceremoniously entered the room, her dark-blond hair coiled in a braid under her lace cap. Miss Esther was nearly four inches taller than Clover, thinner, and delicately pretty.

“Nowhere.” Clover flung her legs over the side of the bed and shoved the little piece of paper back in the drawer. Mentally, she made a note to keep paper and pencil handy.

“Mr. Jennings gave me a package for you.”

“Oh? From who?”

“The card just says a friend,” Esther said, turning the small rectangular box in her hands. Esther had been with her since her come out. Hiring her had been one of her mother’s last assignments, and the maid was dear to Clover because of it. Esther was ten years her senior and as trustworthy as they came.

From where Clover sat, she could see nothing fancy or unusual about the delivery. “Probably something from Evelyn.” She took it from Esther and set it aside.

“You’re not going to open it?”

“Later.”

“Perhaps it’s that invitation you were speaking of.”

“Doubtful.” Clover picked up the box again and gave it a gentle shake. “Doesn’t rattle. I think it’s the ribbon I lent Evelyn before she wed. I’d almost forgotten about that.”

Esther said no more but went about laying out Clover's dress and accouterment for the day. Every chance Clover got, she let her gaze settle on the plain brown box. The jittering tingle spreading through her stomach made her wonder if it wasn't from Evelyn after all.

Could it be from him? Would Darrington chance sending her a gift? And why? A good reason to wait until Esther left the room. She trusted her maid, but the thought of it being something unexpected gave her pause.

Clover skipped breakfast, sat on her bed, and untied the black silk ribbon. The notecard simply read: From a friend . The corners of the box fit snugly together. The longer she fought with it, the more apprehension overwrote her imagination until her nerves were raw. Folded tissue paper and a business card from Hatters were tucked inside. She gently pinched back the tissue, savoring the moment on one hand and afraid to look on the other. Her breath caught, and her mouth hung open at the sight of the most beautiful lace gloves she'd ever seen. Her hands shook, and the paper rattled as she picked up each glove and tried them on. They smelled fresh, like new bolts of fabric and something else. She took them off and brought them to her nose, practically inhaling them. She caught the striking scent of cinnamon.

She put them to her nose again.

And bay rum.

She gently laid them back in the box, popped the lid on, and tossed it on her bureau like it was on fire. It had to be Darrington. She'd all but ruined her gloves in the maze when they went through the hedges to the secret garden. Only he would have such information, condemning as it was. She paced in front of her bureau, biting her thumb and stealing glances at the box. Why would he chance sending them here?

Because it's where she lived.



True, they could still have been from Evelyn. She rushed to her nightstand. The torn paper barely had enough room for one more addition. “Number four, call on Evelyn in Mayfair.”

Usually, Darrington would take out his anxiety at Strong’s. He blamed the mirror on his dresser for the change in venue. This morning, when he checked his shave in the looking glass, he tried to imagine a black eye, a swollen lip, a bruised jaw and couldn’t bring himself to be thrilled at the prospect. Forget he was better than that. It had been ages since his face had taken a beating.

Most importantly, Strong’s had rules for pugilist exercises. Namely, no battering of heads or faces. After all, most men who used the club as a gymnasium also attended the Season. A half-moon might intrigue the right woman, but most would be appalled at a black eye.

He had a feeling that Clover was not one who would mind. Then again, why the hell did he care?

It had to be nerves over his failing judgment to send her gloves. No notecard. He was assured they had been accepted as a gift from a friend, and no thought more wicked than that would pass from butler to maid to Clover. He hoped.

He skipped Strong’s, and with Rochester busy with a new wife and Winn busy with a new babe, Hugo decided to bleed his mind of baser things with cards at Brook’s. Forget men were generally the cause of ignoble thinking.

The sounds of St. James Street soothed him. It made him feel normal, alive, prepared. Business relationships were built over decks of cards and brandy. Friendships were cultivated over betting and good-natured ribbing. He looked forward to his usual seat where he could play brag and relax with cognac.

He settled as third at the table and was stricken to notice the fourth gentleman to join was one of the sods who'd disparaged Clover's name in the maze. Hugo didn't need to examine the balding Mr. Finch from head to toe. He'd done enough of that in the days following the incident. At least tonight, the man wasn't drunk. Not yet.

"Mr. Darrington, didn't we meet at Mrs. LaDow's party?"

"Briefly." Hugo didn't see a need to expound. For one, he didn't wish to encourage a conversation about the party. And two, he was more interested in Finch's small talk than anything. More could be gathered from saying little and listening plenty.

"It was a roaring good time. Or didn't you get lucky?" Finch asked.

The table laughed with the usual ribbing and daring. Hugo nodded to the dealer to start the game. "I'm not in the habit of falsely expounding on my exploits. Which is to say, the week was amusing, nothing more."

"Nothing more? Then you did it wrong, my friend."

Hugo eyed him with boredom as he tapped the side of his cards together on the table before peeking at his hand.

"Don't tell me you forgot how to have a good time while you were away on holiday."

"I was away on business."

"For three years?"

It wasn't quite common knowledge, but neither was it a secret that he, Winn, and Rochester had spent three years away from London and home. The reasons why were a matter of unvalidated gossip concerning a certain gaming hell, the loss of ten-

thousand pounds, and the unseemly way in which Winn Markham had won the losses back. The three friends never gave the information a nod or a nay. Either would have been fodder. So, Hugo stayed silent.

“Oh, give over, Darrington.”

Before Finch could finish his sentence, the table roared. “Give over in the clover.”

Hugo’s heart stuttered. But the brag player he was, he kept his features composed. However, his fingers tightened on the cards, and in his mind, he was shoving a fist down Finch’s throat. The chant was too close not to mean something.

“With Clover is more like it,” the man sitting directly opposite said.

If there had been a question before, there was none now. “Are we gentlemen or fools?”

“When I’m drinking, I’m a fool.” That said, Finch raised two fingers, signaling a footman.

Hugo couldn’t agree with him more.

“Who won the wager on Miss Cynthia Bridges this Season?”

Good. Let the conversation fall in another direction.

“No one that I’m aware of,” a man to his right chimed.

“It wasn’t for lack of trying, I’ll tell you that,” Finch said, tossing his ante on the table.

“Not to worry, Finch, there are always horses to bet on.” The table broke out with laughter again as more drinks showed up.

“Not if Kingsley stays in London for the fall, and I have it on good authority that he might. Then, our little Miss Clover will be here, and I’m considering staying beyond the Season. The chit’s aged nicely.”

“Like a thoroughbred.”

Hugo wanted to roll his eyes. “I believe it’s Lady Clover, and it’s your bet, Finch.”

“That’s it, Darrington. A bet.”

“The game,” Hugo emphasized.

“I’m placing my bet for Lady Clover.”

“On yourself?” the man across the table asked.

“All men for themselves this winter, I say,” Finch said with too much innuendo.

“It’s childish entertainment, don’t you think?” the man next to Darrington asked. There was at least one other levelheaded soul at the table.

Perhaps it would die out, and perhaps it would not. Hugo fell silent again, but he took inventory of the table for later contemplation. Five men, including himself. He didn’t expect any wager the man put on his own prowess would likely be big enough to leave the table. The last thing he needed was for this nonsense to spread to White’s where Kingsley might come upon it.

“Are we playing cards or discussing schoolroom antics?” Hugo made a show of

examining his cards. The other men did the same. It looked promising for two more hands until the alcohol began talking. He had no desire to stay. “Excuse me, gentlemen.” Hugo tossed his last hand of cards to the dealer and stood. He checked the whist room on the slight chance Rochester might be there. But Rochester was more likely to show up at a billiard table than a card table. Darrington could use a game of billiards about now.

Rochester wasn't there. Hugo leaned against the dark paneled wall, sipping a cognac and watching a game. His mind wandered to Clover, and his heart gave a squeeze. It pained him to hear such ridiculous men dishonor her. She didn't deserve to be the talk of Brook's, not in that way. He tapped his brain for a strategy to permanently dissuade the unremarkable Mr. Finch and his cohort Mr. Haskel, who was thankfully absent tonight, from spewing his mouth any further. Save for a beating, he had nothing. He would say no more tonight because if this man knew he and Clover had been hiding behind a hedge, this little drunk scheme of theirs would never end.

### CHAPTER 9

Hugo liked a quiet house. Rules made him comfortable. Clear consequences had become his friend. He'd spent his reckless years at university with Winn Markham and Dalton Rochester and made the mistake of allowing drunken, childish shenanigans to drive him to wager three thousand two hundred pounds on the spin of a wheel and the roll of the dice. The dice had been loaded, and the wheel was fixed. But it didn't matter because after he and Rochester lost more money than he cared to remember, Winn stepped in and won it back. Or stole it back. Winn's obsession with card tricks made him impossible to play cards with since he could deal from the bottom and count cards like a professional thief. One careless, unforgiving night got them all exiled. Winn's father would have preferred they leave for the continent for the sake of Winn's younger sister's reputation. But they had gone as far as Bath and decided to settle their unscrupulous manners there.

Two years ago, they had all returned, and since then, Winn had married Adeline Priestley, Rochester married Evelyn Markham—Winn's younger sister and another of Clover's friends—and Hugo had busied himself in building his name.

His father was no businessman. Philip Darrington spent his time tinkering and building things. He was good at it, too. He loved music boxes most of all, and Hugo's mother had an entire collection of them. Unfortunately, his father didn't make money from his projects. He loved the process like a true artist. That's where his motivation stopped. He sold some, but not enough to keep his sisters in the Season or in school. The inheritance and his grandfather's assets would eventually dry up, and Hugo felt it his responsibility as the eldest son to provide a future for his family.

This was why he did not pursue permanent attachments. He simply didn't have time for them. Rebuilding his name and preparing for a serious future had taken every shilling, every moment, and every modicum of energy from him for the last couple of years. The townhouse where he lived while in the city was rented because he knew if business took a bad turn, he could let it go. He didn't want to, but it was an out. The risks he took were for his family. And he had little to lose. Had he not been eager to invest, his family would be no worse off than they were then. But the impressive contacts he'd made and the sums of money he moved around could make him a very wealthy man and, in turn, secure his parents' legacy. He owed them. Although they should have, they never blamed him for what happened.

One of the best contacts he'd made was the Duke of Kingsley, Lady Clover's brother. He'd met the duke at Kingsley Manor two years ago, where he and his friends had attended a Christmas party that Lady Clover had hosted. Kingsley kept to himself for the most part, but Hugo was beginning to feel like a friend.

"Gerard?" Hugo bellowed from the foyer, his voice echoing to the rafters. Just one of the conveniences of living alone. He could yell rather than pull a cord.

His valet came from the back of the house, wiping his hands on a towel tied like an apron around his waist. Gerard had been with him for two years. The fifty-year-old man had brought a love of chemistry and a talent for mixing scents and matching the consumer with them. He had told Hugo that everyone had a chemical reaction to oils and aromatic spices specific to the person who wore them. His favorite mixture was a boot polish such as Hugo had never seen. And to Hugo's delight, Gerard added the right measure of bay rum and cinnamon to Hugo's boots, complementing the cologne that Gerard himself had concocted for Hugo alone.

"I didn't mean to call you away from your aromatics."

"I'm working on a new wood polish infused with lemon and musk. Very masculine."

Gerard pulled off his temporary apron. “What do you need?” Mr. Gale transformed his demeanor and hand combed his thinning, brown hair back from his face. Mad scientist came to Hugo’s mind.

Hugo looked at his stockinged feet. “Boots for one.” His tone was good-natured. His mood was high because he had an appointment with Kingsley, Mr. Silas Torrent, and Viscount Bastion.

“Ah,” Gerard mumbled as he pivoted on his heel, returning with boots in hand. “I treated them. Can’t plan for winter too soon. The rains will start up again before you know it.”

“Perfect.”

“Let me get you a new shirt.”

“Just the boots. I’ll manage. You finish with your work.”

Gerard bowed and left Hugo to wrangle on his boots. This was just one instance that made Hugo comfortable. His house had order but not the weight of a busy family. It was a well-oiled machine.

Nothing like the Duke of Kingsley’s home. Well-run it may be, but it was uncomfortably stiff.

When Hugo arrived at the duke’s, he could feel the weight of responsibility as he was shown to a parlor. He cast surreptitious glances, wondering if Clover might materialize from around a corner or behind a plant.

“There you are,” Kingsley said.



Hugo turned about and gave a proper bow. “Your Grace.” He had the permission for the informal use of Kingsley but always greeted him with the respect due his title. “What time do Torrent and Bastion arrive?”

“We have an hour. I’ll fill you in on what I’ve discovered, and then you can tell me how the party at Mrs. LaDow’s turned out.”

Hugo frowned, hoping Clover had not been foolish enough to speak of him to her brother.

“Not spying, good man.” The duke offered him a drink like he had read Hugo’s mind. Hugo accepted, then took a seat in the starched room of beige and white. “Lady Clover mentioned she saw you there.”

“I hadn’t known she would be attending.”

“Well, I didn’t tell her you would be there.”

This made Hugo very curious. Why and how did the duke know he would be there? And then it dawned on him what Clover had said about Kingsley and Mrs. LaDow. They definitely had a special friendship.

“Don’t look stunned. I really wasn’t prying. Mrs. LaDow’s husband was an acquaintance of mine, and after his death, I helped her with some of his old accounts. She’s harmless, really. Quite nice, actually. I thought Lady Clover could use a change of scenery, what with her closest friends having tied the knot recently and the Season coming to a close. I asked Mrs. LaDow who was on the guest list, and she told me you might be there.”

Good enough. Hugo nodded and set his drink aside. “May I say I was a little surprised to find your sister there? Don’t misunderstand. It’s only that Mrs. LaDow is

a widow.”

“And Lady Clover is not a silly young girl anymore. I thought she could use some polish from someone I trust.”

Hugo cleared his throat. “You mean Mrs. LaDow?”

“Yes. Who did you think I meant? You?” Kingsley raised a glass toward Hugo.

“No. Certainly not.”

“I admit I felt safer knowing you were there. And Lady Clover is so levelheaded as to be timid, so I didn’t worry she’d purposely get herself into a bind. She is appropriately cautious. Thank goodness.”

Lord, she was not timid, although Hugo had the distinct feeling that he may be the only one on the planet to know that much about her.

“Admittedly, I thought Torrent might have shown up despite not being on the list. I take it he wasn’t there?”

Hugo almost lost track. He shook his head absently. “No,” he said, hurriedly readjusting his position in his chair. “Wait, yes. He was there, but we had little time to talk. A short game of billiards and not much else, I’m afraid.” He scratched his brow and thought through how much to tell the duke. “You should know I rescued your sister from a dreary night of whist. We found a chessboard instead.”

Kingsley raised a brow but otherwise didn’t look surprised or concerned. “She failed to share that bit.”

Hugo rotated his glass on the table, the tatted doily underneath spinning like a skirt

with it. The brandy sloshed, and an amber drop stained the stark white tatting. “To be candid, I wasn’t sure you would approve. We were the only ones playing, although the room was open to anyone.” When Kingsley didn’t say anything, Hugo glanced from under his brow. The duke was contemplating a speck of dust on his knee. Hugo cleared his throat.

“Lady Clover is good at chess. Lousy at billiards.” Kingsley gave a halfhearted chuckle. “I think I’m not a good replacement for a parent.”

“You’re not supposed to be. I doubt anyone expects it, much less your sister.”

“No, I suppose not.” Kingsley sighed heavily. “Not your problem, though. We need to talk about Torrent and Bastion before they arrive.”

“My sources say they have maxed their funds, so buying more shares in the project should be easy enough to manage. Cubitt is the architect, so there will be many investors. If we’re to make the most of it, we need to move.”

“I agree. The shops alone would be enough to corner.”

“Exactly. Let the small fish whet their appetite on the landscape.” Hugo sat forward in his chair, resting his elbows on his knees and steepling his fingers. He and Kingsley were of a like mind. He couldn’t ask for a better business ally.

“Your Grace,” the butler said, standing at attention just inside the doorway. “Lady Clover would like a word when you have a moment.”

Kingsley stood. Hugo stood. And Lady Clover, very ladylike, stepped into view. Her hair was tamed and tucked, her dress conventionally cream-colored. It would have been forgettable except for the turquoise cloak and her blue eyes. “If you’ll excuse me, gentlemen,” she said to the room, barely settling on Hugo before returning her

attention to the duke. “I thought to visit Mrs. Rochester since she’s in the city and so close to us. It’s barely two blocks from here, and I imagine I can handle it alone.”

Kingsley considered her for a moment. “Take Rogers for a driver and Miss Esther for a companion.”

“Of course, you’re right. Thank you.” She turned an ordinary smile, typical of proper ladies, on Hugo. “Excuse me, Mr. Darrington. I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

Hugo was on the cusp of saying something equally polite when she tilted her head and took a breath. “It’s good to see you again, Mr. Darrington. We seem to keep running into one another.” Then to the duke, “Thank you, Kingsley.” She licked her lips. There was an uncertainty about her. She wrung her hands, and Hugo noticed for the first time they were sheathed in the gloves he’d sent her. Something about it made his heart swell.

She licked her lips. “Stratford. I miss your name.” She smiled uneasily, then left.

The duke looked after her for a prolonged moment, and Hugo remembered her speaking of her brother and his name and how much she missed that time. He could have sworn Kingsley flinched.

The duke started for the door. “We have twenty minutes, Darrington. Would you like a game of billiards?” he asked, ending the uncomfortable formality.

### CHAPTER 10

Clover had questions. Evelyn had answers.

She did her best to put Hugo Darrington out of her mind. The shock of finding him standing with her brother in the parlor challenged her composure, and by the time she turned to leave, she was out of breath. Hopefully, it hadn't shown. Excitement was the word. Or fear. Swallowing the familiarity she had enjoyed with Mr. Darrington was not an easy task, but she didn't care to put Stratford on alert. There was certainly nothing between her and Mr. Darrington except an inappropriate conversation before a fountain, a search for a private garden, and a quick lesson on throwing a punch.

No, nothing but that.

Not to mention the gloves. If they were, in fact, from Mr. Darrington.

"I'm so relieved you were home to guests," Clover told Evelyn twenty minutes after the uncomfortable conversation with her brother.

"I'm always home to you," Evelyn said as she showed Clover to the drawing room with beautiful wainscotting. The room had a cozy, warm aesthetic. The foyer, however, was the real appeal, with a high ceiling painted with a blue medallion and the Tree of Life at its center. One could get lost looking at it.

"Rochester has done so much to the place since last I was here. Or was it you?"

Evelyn looked about the room. "This room was one of the few rooms finished and

furnished when we married. But in the last several weeks, I've been putting my own touches to it. New curtains a brighter shade of burgundy. Another chair by the window for reading during the day or simply watching passersby. Then there are the bouquets of flowers I keep fresh in the foyer and elsewhere. Regardless, Rochester is the one who is good with details. He's the real mind behind the décor. Although, I admit to taking over the green parlor. You know, the one Rochester insists is puce? I asked him if I might enlist a professional to help. I won't say there was a small argument. But"—she raised a finger—"there was a small argument." Evelyn smiled sheepishly, raising her brows for good measure. "Whether the room remains green is still undecided. I have a side wager with his cousin, Lovie Remington, to see who wins."

"Which side does Mrs. Remington favor?"

"Me, of course. We women must stick together."

Clover frowned over the word wager, wishing the tea Evelyn had ordered was available to hide her worry behind.

Evelyn stretched out a hand and gently squeezed Clover's arm. "What is it?"

"Nothing really." This was not the time to kiss and tell about the maze, or the garden, or the ball. Lord, the moments with Mr. Darrington were adding up. She gathered her thoughts. "I came to you because you are the only one I can trust with my questions."

"Excuse me, my lady," the housekeeper said. "But the goose is honking."

Clover looked from the formal housekeeper to Evelyn. Confusion riddled the housekeeper's forehead with wrinkles.

"Let her out, Mrs. Nithercott. Otherwise, the neighbors will complain again. She

won't fly off if you leave feed for her. I'll take care of our tea."

"Right away." The housekeeper backed out of the room. When she was clear of the door, Clover heard the short tap of hurrying feet.

Clover looked to Evelyn. "A goose?"

"Oh, yes. Rochester gifted me a goose, but we can't keep her here much longer. She'll eventually live at Heavenly House with Rochester's brother."

Clover nodded as if that all made perfect sense. She sighed, throwing herself into a rather uncomfortable smile.

"Now, what manner of questions?" Evelyn picked up the conversation where they'd left it before the goose incident.

"Personal ones. Secret things." Clover leaned in and whispered the last part.

Evelyn moved back. "I see. Perhaps we should go somewhere more private."

Clover looked over her shoulder, then nodded. They took the stairs, and Clover followed Evelyn into her boudoir. She had never seen this room.

"It's gorgeous," Clover gushed in awe. A coverlet of rich royal blue crushed velvet made up the large four-poster bed. A lovely settee that matched the gold curtains was angled in front of a small hearth. "You have beautiful taste."

"Oh, this isn't my work." Evelyn invited her to sit at the settee. "I'll get our refreshments, and we can have a nice talk here."

"No. No. Just sit with me." Clover patted the cushion beside her. If she thought too

long, she was liable to lose her nerve. “Did your decorator do this room?”

“Rochester did this room.” Evelyn spread her palms out, indicating the entire suite.

“He is very good at it. I suppose you approved, then?”

“I could do little else since it was finished long before I got here. Honestly, I loved it the first time I saw it.”

Clover’s eyes widened, and her jaw went slack. It was possible Evelyn had just answered one of her questions. She pulled off her lace gloves while breathing in another look at the magnificent surroundings. “Is your room on the other side of one of these doors, or did Rochester give you this one?” She thought she knew the answer but wanted Evelyn to confirm.

“There’s a nice wardrobe behind that one.” Evelyn pointed to the left side of the room. “And a new wardrobe being built behind this one.” She pointed to the right side of the room. “And later, I want a bathing room.”

“Rochester stays in this room with you?”

Evelyn nodded. A huge smile dimpled her cheeks. “You might say I stay in here with him since he was here first. Besides, we have far too many house guests coming and going for me to take up another room.”

“I see. So, if you lived in a larger estate, like Rochester’s country manor, you’d have your own rooms?”

“There would be rooms aplenty, but I wouldn’t sleep anywhere but with my husband.”



“I didn’t know if there were wives who did that. My parents had separate accommodations. And Kingsley...” Clover stopped abruptly. “I know Stratford has a mistress, but she lives elsewhere.”

“He’s told you that?”

“No. He’s silent as the grave. But you don’t live in the same house with someone and not know some of their secrets, even ones kept so close to the hip.” Clover grimaced. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Are these the things you wished to speak in private about?”

Clover nodded.

“Have you set your sights on someone then?” Evelyn’s brow raised. Hope shone in her eyes.

“No.” Clover turned away, her gaze drawn to the large bed.

“Then what has you asking about bedrooms?” The question was not condemning. If anything, Evelyn sounded concerned. “What’s your secret, Clover? You can trust me, you know. I have done my share of scandalous deeds.”

“Nothing like that.” She bit her lip. “What I mean is, not to say you have done anything scandalous, just after the conversation with you and Addy, it got me wondering about such things.” She turned her eyes toward the ceiling and plowed ahead. “This morning, as I was lying awake in bed, I wondered if I would have to share it with someone. Eventually, I mean. Not now.”

“Did that someone have warm brown hair and green flashing eyes?”

Clover snuck a peek at Evelyn. “They’re more like turquoise in the right light.”

Evelyn sat perfectly still, as if she feared the slightest move would send Clover running from the room.

“And it’s not what you’re thinking.”

“What am I thinking?”

“That I fancy Hugo Darrington.”

Evelyn tilted her head. “You have always fancied Darrington. Are you going to deny it now? To me?”

Clover closed her eyes and blew out a slow breath. “It’s rather complicated.”

“It usually is, believe me.”

“I wouldn’t normally have thought so, but I had an unusual conversation with him not long ago. A rather fun one, actually.” She chuckled uncomfortably. “Not at all what I’m used to.”

“You mean not what you’re used to with a man. Because Clover Dunhurst, I know you, and you are not the timid little thing people assume you are.”

“He called me a mouse.”

Evelyn burst into laughter. “How sweet.”

“You think so?” Clover was too shocked to filter what she said at this point.

“Rochester calls me goose.”

“Oh, now it makes sense. The goose. He bought you a goose.” Clover giggled, bringing a hand to her mouth, her gloves still clasped in them. The moment she took a breath, with the lace gloves right under her nose, bay rum flooded her senses, and heat flooded her cheeks.

“Rochester is thoughtful, but one would think he’d have given me jewelry.”

“No.” Clover shook her head, sobering a little. “The goose is perfect.”

“I think so, too. And how would you accept a mouse?” Evelyn slipped off her shoes. She turned in her seat, folding her legs beneath her as she lay an arm across the backrest of the settee, wholly engrossed in the conversation.

“Not at all. I’m not fond of rodents.”

“And Darrington? Is he fond of you?”

“Perhaps, in a funny friend sort of way.” She took a deep breath to clear her head. “Two weeks ago, we attended the same house party. Mrs. LaDow and Kingsley are friends, and he thought it might be a nice diversion for me. I’m afraid it was more than that.”

“Mrs. LaDow’s parties are generally for a faster crowd.”

“Exactly. She did her best to keep an eye on me, and when the other guests were playing their little games, Mrs. LaDow gave me a map of the hedge maze.”

“I’ve heard it’s beautiful and lost-worthy for couples.”

“I used the map to find a secret place, closed off from everyone. I used it as a reprieve.”

“Did you not have fun?”

“Too much fun. And that’s the problem.”

“Darrington was there, wasn’t he?”

Clover nodded. “I believe he felt it his duty to watch over me since he and my brother are partners in one venture or another. We ended up in the secret garden together for reasons I’d rather not explain right now. Nothing untoward, I promise.”

“That’s too bad. I should think something untoward with Darrington is exactly what you’re looking for. Perhaps even what you need.” Evelyn gave her a little pinch on the shoulder.

“Evelyn. Of course, it isn’t. We had a nice time.”

“And that’s why you’re dreaming of him in your bed, I suppose?”

Clover rolled her eyes shut. “It was the conversation with you that put him there.”

Evelyn bit her lip, a smile blooming around it. “I’ll allow that, but in return, you must tell me what happened.” It was a request, not a command. Evelyn truly seemed interested and excited.

“Darrington caught up with me in the maze, and we had a funny discussion about the fountain and the statues. Very innocent. But then a couple of men, strangers to me, showed up and ruined it all.”

“And they saw you alone?”

“No, thank goodness. We hid behind the shrubs until they were gone. But they were beastly drunk and said dark things about me. Of making a conquest of me.” She looked at her hands. “Making fun of my virtue,” she finished quietly.

“And Darrington didn’t leap out and pummel them?” Evelyn had the perfect amount of disgust and anger on her behalf.

Clover gave a nervous chirp. “You have sort of brought me to the question I’ve come to ask.”

“How?”

“The men were horrible. True. And Darrington wanted to kill them. True. But I wouldn’t allow it because there would have been a terrible scandal. It wasn’t worth it. However, we ended up escaping to the secret garden, which was a scandal in itself. And you must promise not to tell Rochester because if Kingsley found out, we’d be in the soup.”

Evelyn nodded heartily. Then she impatiently waved her on. “And?”

“And we discussed many things. We formed an alliance of sorts, a trust. Then I saw him recently at another ball.” Clover leaned in to whisper as if a maid might chance by. “He showed me how to throw a punch.”

Evelyn sat straight and raised her brows.

“And I begged him to take me to the boxing club.”

“Oh, Lord.”

“You’ve been there. It can’t be all that bad, and I want to see a match, but Hugo refused me.”

“Hugo, is it?”

“Evelyn, listen. Let’s not get caught up on semantics. You went undercover, yes?”

“Yes. But out of necessity, you understand.”

“The why doesn’t matter. What matters is you did it, and it’s possible.”

“And if he got caught, then what?”

She shrugged, sighing because Clover knew her friend was making perfect sense. “I know you’re right.”

“His Grace would throw him out as a business partner and never look back. Is it worth that?”

“No, it’s not.”

“May I speak candidly?”

Clover reached over and took Evelyn’s hand. “Always.”

“For one, if the daft man hasn’t kissed you yet, he’s a fool. And two, I think you’re confusing excitement for seeing Mr. Darrington with wanting to see him box. It’s far easier to make the passion more respectable by burying it beneath an activity which has nothing to do with feelings. Because, my dear, you have feelings for him. And that is not a secret.”

Clover sat back, defeated. "I know. I have wicked feelings for him." She let her head loll back against the cushion. "And I don't want them. His life is all planned, and I'm almost certain it doesn't include a courtship. And if I'm being perfectly honest, I'm not looking for one. I have never been allowed to plan anything at all, and I don't want a husband to lord over me, making plans for me. I want to do something important. My entire existence has been groomed for marrying well and securing a future not only for myself but one that keeps our family name untarnished."

Evelyn scratched her head. "That is a pickle."

"I want to see a pugilist fight. Please ask Rochester if he might take me with you."

"There is not a circumstance that exists in which Dalton would consider it. He just about lost his friendship with Winn over me. Brothers and sisters are complex."

Winn Markham, Addy's husband, was Evelyn's brother, and Clover knew Evelyn and Rochester's courtship had not been an easy one. She was right. Darrington would lose his business contacts if, for some reason, Kingsley came to know of her innocent involvement with Darrington.

"Promise me this, Evelyn. If, for some reason, Darrington is given permission to show me the club, you and Rochester will join us. Think of the fun we would have."

"Agreed. But I wouldn't wager on it happening."

Clover looked at her hands. She fumbled with the gloves. "Not a wager, please." Suddenly, she wanted to cry. "Evelyn?"

"Oh, my sweet friend, what is it?" So much was wrapped up in that one sentence. So much love and care and all the things Clover needed just now.

“The awful men in the maze wagered on me.” She peeked at her friend. “Everything from a kiss to a plucking, as one put it.”

Evelyn looked dumbfounded. “Did Mr. Darrington hear that part?”

Clover nodded. “He heard all of it.”

“Good Lord, you should have let him bury a fist in their bone boxes.”

Clover’s usual, silly, annoying giggle turned into full laughter. She leaned into Evelyn and hugged her. “You’re the best of friends. I’m not sure what I’d do without you and Adeline.”

Evelyn sat back and held Clover by the shoulders, locking eye contact. “We are all together in this race. This world cannot contain the sheer solid foundation of such a friendship. I promise you that. But if you hear another man say foul things again, you take everything Darrington taught you and lay them low.”

Clover threw on a wide smile, just imagining punching their beady little eyes until they were swollen shut. “Perhaps Darrington would give me another lesson. What say you?” She asked sheepishly, without any real intent.

“I would safely guess he would do anything for you. Why don’t you send Darrington a note.” Evelyn had written a series of notes to Rochester before they courted.

Clover gave her a dubious look. “How did that work for you?”

Evelyn scanned the room. “I’m here,” she said with a challenging upswing to her voice.

“I don’t want to marry him. We’re simply friends. I want him to take me to Strong’s.”



“Try the note.”

For several days, Clover kept vigil on Darrington’s appointments with her brother. The visits increased as their partnership was honed on two specific investors.

She purposely made herself seen whenever he dropped in. Once, she even slipped in to watch Darrington and Stratford play a game of billiards. But in every instance, Mr. Darrington took no real notice of her. He politely greeted her when need be, but he never looked her way or engaged her in conversation the few times she’d been close enough for one. He seemed cold. Distant. And she knew it was unfair to judge him so because her demeanor was similar.

She finally agreed to Evelyn’s tactic and wrote a note, which she surreptitiously passed from Esther to Mr. Lorry, a trusted footman, for delivery when Mr. Darrington called again.

### CHAPTER 11

Hugo couldn't very well tell Kingsley the reason he wished to meet elsewhere was because, after avoiding all contact with Lady Clover, she had done the unthinkable and sent him a personal note. He waited for the other shoe to fall. The two obvious disasters would be for the duke to find out or for the servants to turn in their mistress. Thankfully, that had yet to happen.

Between the note and the gift he'd sent, the unpredictability factor was high. In his defense, he hadn't signed his name. As for the note, Clover's signature condemned them both.

He pulled her note from his pocket and read it again.

Mr. Darrington,

I realize the implication of a note and do apologize for any embarrassment I may have caused you, but I am still in want of a special clandestine trip. I have spoken with my friend, and she agreed to accompany me if you might find a way to make it possible.

Regards,

Lady Clover Dunhurst

He imagined her friend to be Evelyn Rochester. If anyone could cause a scandal, it was Rochester's wife. It was she who started the whole rule-breaking business. He

would burn the note when he returned home.

For now, he paid a visit to Rochester himself.

“Billiards?” Dalton Rochester asked, opening the front door with a hardy smile, forgoing a butler. It made perfect sense to Hugo since he, Rochester, and Winn Markham had lived under the same roof for three years. They had been run out of London by Markham’s father, and since Rochester’s father was all but absent and Hugo’s was not to be bothered, they had, like brothers, taken the exile upon themselves. If not for Darrington’s and Rochester’s involvement in the gambling scandal, Markham would have never been thrown out of his home.

“Look at you, all respectable.” Hugo shook Rochester’s hand. As always, Rochester’s dark hair was as unruly as his clothes were fastidious. Somehow, it worked for him. “Don’t you think you’ve been away long enough? How long does this marriage thing last, anyway?” he asked good-naturedly as he followed Rochester to his billiard room.

“Forever, last I heard,” Rochester threw the comment over his shoulder. He slid open the pocket doors to the billiard room, and the fresh smell of lemon polish and rich mahogany paneling filled Hugo’s nostrils. It felt like home.

“Have I told you lately how jealous I am of this room?”

Rochester poured two tumblers of Irish whiskey. “No. But I’m flattered.” Rochester replaced the decanter and handed the drink to Hugo. “To fate.” Rochester lifted his glass.

Hugo eyed his friend over the rim while he accepted the toast. “I make my own fate if you don’t mind.”

Rochester chuckled. "I'm not condemning you, man. It was a congratulatory toast. This business with Belgrave Square is your deal. I never understood how you could weigh the risks and odds and always be right."

Hugo shrugged and picked out a cue stick. "I'm not always right. Most of it is instinct. Kingsley and I have been talking, and we hoped you'd be ready to join the next meeting."

"Then you are staying the winter in London?"

"Damn right. This deal is almost closed. Do you suppose your pretty wife can manage without you for an afternoon?" He ribbed Rochester because before he'd married Evelyn Markham, he had been at every meeting.

"It's been a matter of months. Don't I deserve a little time with my bride?" Rochester sighted down the cue stick like the barrel of a gun.

"I heard you took her to Strong's." Hugo leaned into a shot, flashing Rochester a quick glance.

Rochester stood back from the table, his green eyes flashing with a moment of confusion. "Who told you that?"

"Someone you would know, so I'll refrain from telling."

"Evelyn?"

Hugo laughed. "No. When have I ever had a private conversation with your wife? Not even before you were married. She's been yours forever."

Rochester stood proud, a grin of satisfaction on his face. "Damn right."

Hugo admired the carved leaves that framed the table just under the lip. “What was this room before you transformed it? It had to be another drawing room. It’s too large for anything else.”

“It was a formal dining room big enough for a king’s party. Ridiculous, really. I can’t imagine entertaining such a crowd.”

“What about Mrs. Rochester? Does she approve?”

“Are you trying to get under my skin, Darrington?”

“No. I’m honestly curious.”

“Evelyn wouldn’t dream of destroying my passion for this game.” Rochester blew out a breath. “Now, tell me how you know about the club.”

“What are you worried about? I’m no scandal maker selling on-dits to the rags. I’m simply curious to know how you did it.”

Rochester scratched his eyebrow. “Disguised. And the circumstances were complicated. Lord, it was you I went to see fight that night.”

Darrington nodded. “Did I win?”

“Please.” Rochester traded his cue stick for another drink. With his back to Darrington, Rochester continued, “Darrington? When’s the last time you were in Brook’s?”

“A week ago, why?” A foreboding clouded the well-lit room. Darrington felt like he needed an anchor before the storm hit.

“Because there’s an unusual wager in the books, and I was concerned it might reach White’s, too.”

Darrington impatiently waited for Rochester to turn around. “What kind of wager?”

“Evelyn’s friend, Lady Clover.”

“Bloody hell.”

“Did you know?”

He shook his head and wanted to break the cue stick over the table. He wanted to pummel the men who’d dare speak ill of Clover. He wanted to drag the imbeciles to the court of Darrington and kill them. “I thought it was only the foolish words of a drunken man. Believe me, that alone made me want to do bodily harm.”

“Because it’s her?”

“Because she’s Kingsley’s sister,” he nearly shouted. “A scandal now might be the pebble that breaks the dam. We can’t afford it.” Without thought, he laid the cue stick on the burgundy baize.

Rochester almost dropped his drink and swept the stick from the table. Everything about the room was pristine, and the table was a work of art. Level. The baize always ironed.

“I apologize. I’ll put that away properly.” Hugo took the stick from Rochester. “I think it prudent we cut this short.”

“Hugo. Don’t do anything rash. Your temper is formidable. Remember who you are.”

“I know bloody well who I am. And so do they.” He spoke of the men who’d made the wager. If he caught it fast enough, maybe he could stop it. He threw his coat over his arm and barreled out the door. “Brook’s,” he instructed his driver.

Between the note she’d sent and the wagers in the books, Darrington was putting out more fires than he could manage. He was losing. And he never lost. If it all went to hell, there was still Vauxhall. The park had just changed hands, and Hugo could feel the mistakes the owners were making. If things didn’t change there, the place would be lost to debt in a matter of years. They needed an advisor. Like Rochester, he could make that shot with his eyes closed.

The only other strategy he could come up with would take more luck than a four-leaf clover could provide. But he had to try.

Clover sat in her drawing room the following week, waiting for Evelyn to call. She’d sent notice two hours ago, and Clover could hardly stand the wait. Had Evelyn procured the invitation to the boxing club? Would Darrington be there?

“Mrs. Dalton Rochester,” the butler announced with a dull monotone.

Clover rose and smoothed her skirts. “Evelyn, I was getting worried.”

Evelyn hurried to kiss her cheek, then unceremoniously, without invitation, plopped down on the settee.

“You have news?” Clover asked, seating herself in a chair opposite the settee. A silver tray with tea and biscuits sat between them.

“Oh good,” Evelyn said, wiping a loose curl from her brow and pouring the tea. “Do you mind?” she asked as if she’d forgotten herself, her hand arrested on the teapot’s handle.

“Please.”

“You want some?”

“Certainly,” Clover watched, confused. The hairs on her neck stood up. She leaned her head to the side, putting herself in Evelyn’s view as her friend prepared two cups. Nothing Evelyn did ever surprised Clover, but the frenzy of her movements now gave her pause. That and Evelyn didn’t bother putting anything in the tea. Something was wrong. Her stomach turned over when Evelyn handed her the cup. “Is there news? Did Darrington make contact with Rochester? I sent him the note a week ago. I would have thought he’d have acted on it by now.”

“Oh, there’s news, all right. But not what you’re thinking.”

“This isn’t about the club?”

Evelyn gave a hard chuckle. “Depends on which club you refer to.” She held up a hand when Clover opened her mouth to speak. “I won’t waste your time because time is of the essence.” She took a drink like a man slamming a bourbon. “Darrington answered, but not your note. He answered the betting books at Brook’s.”

“You’re not making any sense.”

“The wagers.”

“What wagers?” Clover asked, alarmed.

“The ones I assume those dreadful men from the party made. Rochester says the bets are stacking up, and they’re all betting on your downfall.”

Clover froze. Tears burned her nostrils, and her eyes welled. “This is a calamity.”



“And it gets worse.”

Clover returned her attention to Evelyn and set her tea down. “What could be worse unless Kingsley knew.”

“I couldn’t say who knows at this juncture, but I will tell you the most condemning name in the godforsaken book is Hugo Darrington’s.”

The tears which had threatened were sucked back into her soul while something else began to build. “Why would he do that? Because I wrote him a note? Because he wanted to be rid of me for good? He could have told me so himself without humiliating me publicly.”

“What are we going to do?” Evelyn asked, laying her hands in her lap and looking as if she’d take on the world for her friend.

“I trusted him, fool that I am. The wily bastard.”

Evelyn didn’t even flinch at the curse, but she did look behind her, presumably for prying ears.

“I don’t care who hears at this point. That man will rue the day he showed me how to throw a punch.”

Evelyn made a fist and punched the air. “Good for you.”

Clover sighed heavily, a plan breaking through the mist of her misguided trust. Truth be told, she was as angry with herself as she was with Darrington. It had to be that note which pushed him over the edge. She should have never sent it. What worked for Evelyn rarely worked for her. “Evelyn?”

“Anything, just ask.” Evelyn scooted forward with a look of blazing loyalty.

“I need to leave the house without Kingsley sending an army. I must at least get an answer from the jackass’s mouth himself before my brother finds out. Kingsley never questions my visits with you.”

“Yes, yes. I’d be happy to accompany you anywhere.”

“I don’t need that. Just stay put and let me use you as an excuse.”

Evelyn nodded. “Are you sure you don’t want my company?”

“I need to do this alone.”

Evelyn crooked a smile. “That’s the Clover I know.”

### CHAPTER 12

What a difference a few days makes when scandal-broth is brewing.

Clover sat in her closed carriage. Esther, acting as her companion, sat silently beside her, and the good woman had the decency not to say a word when Mr. Lorry pulled up in front of Mr. Darrington's townhouse. She had instructed Mr. Lorry to park across the street behind several other vehicles in hopes Mr. Darrington would not see them. The sun was on the edge of setting, and chances were good they would soon be in shadow.

There was no way of telling whether Darrington would recognize Clover's carriage, but she couldn't take any chances.

"Esther, you understand your part? Please say you do."

Esther, who had a decade of wisdom over Clover's, mutely nodded.

"I simply need to confront him, and I cannot think of a better way at this point."

Esther looked as if she wanted to say something. Her mouth was grim, and her brown eyes pleaded with her.

"Say something if you must," Clover said as she leaned toward the window, determined not to miss the man who would soon be in the line of her fire.

"Milady, if he's attendin' a party tonight and you have no invitation, then you're sure

to start somethin' when what you really need is privacy. Perhaps it will all blow over."

"I wish you were correct. I truly do. But Mr. Darrington has made his bed. Besides, I'm the sister of a duke. For once in my life, I have no qualms about using such tactics to weasel my way into whatever circumstance our dearly, soon-to-be departed Mr. Darrington finds himself this evening."

"And if you don't mind me sayin', what if that place is Brook's, or Strong's, or somewhere worse? Perhaps a..." She stopped suddenly, but Clover knew she was about to say brothel .

"I'm too angry to care at this point." Clover sat forward, one gloved hand gripping the gutter that cradled the window. The glass fogged when she huffed. "There he is. Thank the good Lord, I recognize his team." She knocked on the glass, and the coachman appeared. "Mr. Lorry, I believe that's the vehicle we need to follow."

"Yes, Lady Clover. Are you certain the duke is in agreement?" Mr. Lorrey's blond eyebrows met in a vee at the bridge of his nose. Other than that, his demeanor did not reflect the seriousness of his question.

"Yes. He gave me leave to visit with friends." She cleared her throat. "I can't remember where or which event she's attending, and this carriage we follow has that information." What an obvious load of manure. But her servants would never question her reasoning. Except maybe Esther, who had already given her two shillings of opinion.

Esther's thin shoulders were stiff as wood as she turned face forward, refusing to look at the coachman.

They were underway two minutes later.

“That bit of tripe will not go well if Mr. Lorry mentions this to the duke.”

“I can handle my brother.” Oh, how she hoped that statement was true. If all went as planned, then Stratford would never find out. Except, of course, for one tiny detail. Clover did not have a plan. Just an idea.

Darrington’s carriage had gained momentum through a thick throng of merchants who stopped every other vehicle on the road to sell fruit, fish, ribbon, and all manner of things. The street turned into a bottleneck of carriages, horses, and foot traffic until they’d come to a complete stop. Clover opened the window and motioned for a young girl to approach the carriage.

“For you, my dear,” Clover said as she handed a shilling to the girl in exchange for a small bouquet of violets wrapped in paper. “And another, if you’ll tell me whether that carriage right there”—she pointed to Darrington’s—“makes a turn on the street just ahead.

“We could be half an hour waitin’,” Esther said, clearly worried.

“Or it could clear in minutes. It’s unpredictable.”

Esther eyed her.

“And yes, I’m unpredictable. I understand.”

Darrington’s carriage began to move, but they were still momentarily stuck. Clover wanted to sit on her hands to keep from throwing open the window and shoving her head out. Thankfully, the girl saved her the embarrassment.

“It ain’t turned on St. James, milady. Jus’ gone straight through.”

“Perfect. That’s exactly what I needed to know.” She handed the girl another shilling.

“For you, Esther.” Clover twisted in her seat and handed the violets to her maid.

“For my silence?”

“What else?” Clover smiled a little. “It won’t come to that. And if it does, you put your position before me.”

“Never.”

“Always,” Clover insisted. At that, the carriage jolted into motion, and she grabbed Esther’s hand to steady them both. “Finally, we’re on our way. Do you see him?”

“No, but Mr. Lorry seems to have it in hand.”

“Well, it isn’t Brook’s, we know that much. And we’re moving away from the theater.”

Clover wasn’t sure what she expected. In truth, she thought Darrington might attend the theater or a ball or a late in the year party, even perhaps a club. What she didn’t expect was a ride to the outskirts, over a bridge, and to see his carriage pulling away from the curb right in front of Vauxhall.

“Lady Clover, is there any way I might change your mind?” Mr. Lorry asked as he helped the ladies descend the steps. His short stature did not deter the height of his responsibility.

“No. And I have Miss Esther here. You take care and watch for me to return. The gardens are full after five, so there will be plenty of eyes. There’s nothing untoward about two ladies enjoying the sites.”

Esther blew out a loud breath. “Nothing at all if the lady in question was any exceptin’ the duke’s sister.”

Clover paid for them both, then frantically scanned the crowd, settling a moment on every man within Darrington’s height. Which weren’t many. “There he is. He’s going into the pavilion. It’s too cold for the orchestra, so I imagine they’re playing indoors tonight. We may have to wait for him to emerge again.” She pulled back, avoiding eye contact with anyone.

“I think I see him,” Esther said, nodding toward the walkway surrounding the rotunda.

“Oh, good eye, Miss Esther. Why don’t you enjoy the music and stay indoors. I’m going to follow him.”

Esther didn’t argue, and Clover didn’t want her within hearing distance of her and Darrington because she wasn’t certain how it would go. One thing was sure. She needed to surprise him with her questions. She needed to see his face when she confronted him with what he’d done because deep in her heart, she hoped Evelyn was wrong.

She ducked behind a bush. If he saw her coming, all would be lost, and she’d never have the truth. He’d spend the moments planning his words, his expression, his strategy for undermining her existence. Either way, this hairbrained idea had little promise of ending well. At least it would be private if he continued down the same path in the direction of the gardens.

She almost missed him in the Pleasure Gardens. Even the lamplight was blue and concealing. But for the clip of his bootheels, she would surely lose him. She recognized the devil may care stride even in the shadow of the trees. The hint of a gold tassel lashed about with every swaggering step. His gait was unmistakable. At

least to her.

Stratford would lock her away in a convent if he had known where she was headed. It was bad enough that she had involved Esther. And poor Mr. Lorry. Stratford wouldn't fault them. He'd most assuredly hold her accountable for the whole fiasco. But she had to know, so she followed Darrington, the clod who'd entered her name in the betting books at Brook's, perhaps even Boodle's. His notorious wager at a swarthy gaming hell years ago is what stuck in her mind now.

Could she forgive him if he had a gambling problem?

In this case? Oh, Lord, probably.

She scurried like a thief, avoiding notice. She turned quickly so as not to be seen when Darrington slowed his steps. Then she continued on. It was unthinkable that he would pretend to champion her at Mrs. LaDow's house party, then turn around and make a shameless guinea on her reputation. Although, according to Evelyn the wagers had become ridiculously outrageous. She'd heard Lord Penworthy had wagered a full quarter's allowance on the game, now called Pluck a Lucky Clover .

Men were animals. Barbarians by every definition. Even the dolt walking twenty paces ahead of her. She choked up on the drawstring of her reticule, held her bonnet to her head, and gave a little tripping skip to shorten the distance between her and her prey. She ducked her head, watching her short boots kick up a small storm of dust sure to cling to the French lace hem. With every labored breath, she felt her breasts straining against the hand she held to her chest, the white lace gloves stark against the turquoise pelisse.

“What the devil are you doing?”

With her head down, Mr. Darrington's boots were suddenly within sight. Irritatingly



lost to the images of books lined with wagers and bets from seedy men, she'd missed his unexpected turnabout.

"Are you following me?" Mr. Darrington asked, one hand on his lean hip.

"Not exactly." She did her best to keep the condescension from the lie for the sake of truthful answers. More to the point, so she might see his face when he gave those answers. She hadn't considered he might not say a word or admit to anything.

Sheer throttling determination bore across his brow. "Then what exactly are you doing? Because all this"—he circled the air between them with his index finger—"looks suspiciously like stalking." He shot her a pointed stare, his mouth unbending, pressed into a straight, frustrated line.

"You flatter yourself." Once her gaze was leveled with his, she forced herself to keep it there and from looking below his broad shoulders. He had the physique of a well-trained boxer, evident even under layers of fine clothes. Not to mention, he smelled delicious, as always.

For a heartbreaking moment, she almost forgot why she'd followed him in the first place. "I have good reason for being here, Mr. Darrington. Forgive me if I've interrupted a little tête à tête. This shouldn't take too much of your time." It was impossible to keep the sarcasm from her voice.

With the sound of an exasperated seething bull, he huffed, looking swiftly this way and that. He abruptly grabbed her.

"Take your hands off me." She tried to pry his fingers from her upper arm, protesting while he ignored her every word.

He turned on his heel, simultaneously pulling her in front of him. Every time she

looked over her shoulder, he pressed a hand to her back, his body inches away, and nudged her along.

“This is?—”

“Shush, if you please.”

“How dare you?—”

“And keep walking.”

“My limbs are shorter than yours.”

“Believe me when I say I’ve noticed. And if I weren’t afraid of making a spectacle, I would tuck you under my arm like a sack of flour and hurry you along.”

“That—”

“Clover,” he demanded in a forced whisper.

“And now he calls me Clover. Isn’t that lovely?” she mocked under her breath, having little doubt that he heard her. With her body thrown forward and her feet desperately trying to right herself, she tripped on her skirt.

With the sleek move of a panther, he hauled her back, his arm under her breast, her bottom making improper contact with his hard thighs. He wedged his knee between her stumbling stride, holding her upright with an arm like a band of steel. They veered off the path as her feet left the ground, and he held her against him moments before depositing her unceremoniously beneath the shadow of a massive elm tree. The cool of the night disappeared with the onset of her temper.

It took her no time to pivot and face him. She hissed as her pelisse snagged on the rough, cracking tree bark. The thick, scarred piece bit into her back.

“Are you quite finished, sir?” She gave her arms a hard brush with her palms as if she could rid herself of his touch and the experience, ignoring what her heart was doing against her better judgment.

“I’m hardly finished.”

“Good, because neither am I.”

“Admit you followed me.” His voice was as demanding as his demeanor, grinding out the statement between his straight white teeth. “No doubt you lured me into that hedge maze as well.”

“Oh, ho.” The words bucked out of her in a deprecating laugh. One good thing had come from knowing him. Her nervous giggle had all but disappeared. She rested her fists high on her waist, her elbows at a sharp point. She needed to look taller than her five feet, three inches like a puffed-up bear with the tongue of an adder. The time had come. “Now I understand you.”

“Feel free to fill me in at any time, darling, because I am at a fool’s loss for words. But I assure you I am not at a loss for ideas on what to do with you.”

She felt her face bake under his scrutiny.

“Lovely, now you’re blushing. Is that embarrassment or anger, I wonder? Be careful with your answer. Whatever you say next is bound to give you away.”

She could not allow him to turn this tide. “Let us get our facts straight.” She poked his shoulder with her index finger for emphasis and was not amused when she saw a

faint smug satisfaction about his mouth.

He looked at his shoulder as if she were a bug, a thing to flick away. Without moving his head, he gazed through his dangerously thick lashes, then removed her hand with a controlled grip. “Stop pointing at me.”

“As soon as you”—she poked him in the chest—“tell me why you did it.”

One swift move and he snatched her finger from his chest, and this time he did not let go. “Point that finger at me again, and I will tie your hands behind your back and leave you right here.”

Why was he angry with her when she had every right to be so with him? Recognizing a bluff when she heard one, she rolled her eyes closed, sucking in a deep breath. “You may let my hand go. I will behave.”

He immediately dropped it. His fingers spread wide as if to clear her touch from him.

“Thank you,” she said with a sharp edge.

“You’re welcome.” His response sounded automatic, a precept baked into the heads of every child. At times, the sentiment meant nothing. Right now, she couldn’t tell.

“Lucky. Clover,” she emphasized each word that had been given her by Evelyn, who recited them verbatim from her husband, Rochester.

Mr. Darrington had the decency to blanch.

“I can see you understand, so while we’re on the same page and before you deny what I know is true, please tell me why.”

“How did you come to know?”

She sighed almost with relief that at least the truth would not be part of the argument she saw coming. “You wagered on me as if I were a prize, a strumpet, a game to be played. And for what? Entertainment? Or do you play me for false? Or worse, an idiot?”

“No. No. You have it all wrong.” His indignation was replaced with desperation.

“Are you no better a man than those oafs? All the things they said about me while you hid right there, with me, in that maze. Is it a joke to you? Am I a joke? Perhaps you failed to understand how not only humiliating it was but also how dirty it made me feel, how my skin crawled at their crude little game. The only possible answer that would not wound me now would be that you did not understand at all. I am left to conclude that you, Mr. Darrington, read far more into our little inconsequential kiss than anything.” She said it, her heart pounding with a feverish release.

His shoulders dropped with a heavy sigh, and he scrubbed a hand across his mouth as he absently searched the canopy of trees.

Clover had the reaction she came for. He did know, but there was something else there. The way he looked somewhat pained and not exactly guilty bothered her. “I am not suggesting you did anything terribly wrong at the house party.” Of course, she was, but his countenance screamed for a greater truth yet unknown to her.

“Well, thank God for that,” he said, only marginally exasperated now and not a little sarcastic.

“I take responsibility for my flirtation that weekend. I can see how you might have misinterpreted my forwardness. But you do understand why I did it, don’t you?”

His gaze hurtled back to hers, and he held her there for a quizzical moment, his handsome face transformed by a slight grin which grew bigger until his cheek dimpled. The look was lethal, dangerously captivating, and full of the devil himself. And the tiny scar just below his bottom lip did not help. “The problem with you, Clover, is I do understand why you did it. I’m afraid you might be surprised at the reason, however.”

She drew her brows together. Her heart raced with confusion.

“You didn’t flirt with me in the garden because you were curious. You did it on purpose. For a purpose, if I might be so blunt.”

“Yes.” She folded her arms, feeling cornered. “Because I was embarrassed after our conversation about the statues.” As if that explained it all.

He licked his lips, his eyes challenging her not to look away. “And what about at chess? Why did you flirt with me then?”

“To win.” Her answer was innocently true. His gaze dropped to her mouth, and she swallowed hard. She lost the staring contest and looked away as if eliminating the sight of him would release the magnetic hold she had allowed his presence to dictate. She shook her head. “We’re falling off the subject here. The real reason I followed you was to confront this problem you seem to have with gambling.”

“Problem? With gambling?” He rubbed his temples. “My problem is not with gambling, I assure you.”

“It’s the only explanation for what you did. If I believed otherwise, I’d have to hate you.” She chanced a glance. “I don’t want to hate you.” The last part came out weary and worn because it was terribly true.

“And that, my dear, is precisely why I did it.”

She blinked in disbelief.

“Kingsley is altogether absent from the clubs. It appears he gives you a broad wake. Is it any wonder that this thing has grown thorns?”

“You dare to bring my brother into your doings? I wonder what he would think of that?”

“I welcome his intervention. I beg for it. Don’t you see? We are friends, you and I, and I thought it best to put a rest to the wild antics. The bets were made for your virtue. The columns under...” His jaw ticked. “Lucky Clover. The talk I cannot begin to mention that precludes such a thing. It had to stop before Kingsley found out. Or you. But I can see that ship has sailed.”

She put her hands on her hips, squeezing them into fists to keep herself from poking him again. “You purposed to put a stop to it by contributing? Are you insane or just an idiot?”

“A little of both, perhaps. Would you allow me that?” Suddenly, his gaze snapped to hers as if understanding had just bludgeoned him. He gripped her arms with a little shake.

The shock of it brought her to attention. She was immobilized by his look of disbelief and paralyzed by the shock of his touch.

“Wait a moment. You think I wagered on you? On your innocence?”

She nodded, feeling dumbfounded.

“No. Oh, Clover.” As soon as he said it, they were both drawn to the sound of approaching revelry.

She and Mr. Darrington were far enough from the footpath to dissuade a full-on conversational assault but not too far to be recognized should it be someone they knew.

“Damn it all, give me your hat.”

Too shocked to argue, she tugged at the cream-colored ribbon under her chin. Before she could fully untie the thing, Mr. Darrington slipped a finger through the loosened knot and unceremoniously whipped the hat from her head. Errant strands of hair tangled in the netting and pins, pulling pieces of hair with it, no doubt, in a crazy convoluted mess. Little sharp tugs to her scalp ended when one thick strand of hair fell over one eye.

Mr. Darrington shoved the hat between them, then leaned in, bracing his hands on either side of her head and hiding her behind his biceps and broad shoulders. She couldn't see a thing. If the same were true for the interlopers, then perhaps the position would keep her from being effectively identified.

With her hat pressed between them, she didn't know what to do with her hands, so she rested her palms on his chest. Blunder number one.



### CHAPTER 13

Hugo couldn't believe the predicament he'd fallen into. Headfirst, to the bottom of the pit he had contributed to, and all for the sake of the woman trapped between him and a tree.

"And what do we have here?" Nigel Sanderson, a regular at Brook's, stumbled along. His words held the slight slur of too much drink. He and two of his friends moved two feet from the path toward Hugo and Clover. He stayed Clover with a stern look and prayed to God she'd keep quiet and still.

"Step away and move on, Sanderson," Hugo said with enough quiet, reserved confidence to charge the air. He didn't dare look at Clover, keeping his eye on the men over his shoulder crossing the parkland. Sanderson's short stride kept the other two in check.

Sanderson did stop but did not retreat. "Now I am intrigued. Do I see a hint of frippery teasing your bootheels, good man? Or are you setting the bets on another filly this evening?"

"Don't be crude. Just walk away," Hugo said. And then, with a growl, "I wouldn't come any closer unless your lady love likes her men with swollen eyes and a tongue bit through."

"If she's doing the biting, I say have at it." The other two gentlemen laughed, keeping their distance. Hugo's reputation was not one to push.

“Good show. Then I’ll only break your nose, and to hell with the rest of the rules.” He generally kept to the guidelines given by Strong’s boxing club, but he wasn’t opposed to breaking them now. Keeping his hand braced against the tree, he threw a menacing look over his shoulder, ready for a hardy stare down.

“Sanderson,” one of the other gentlemen said. “Let’s not waste the evening.”

Sanderson raised both hands in surrender. “Give your lady friend my sincere apologies. Enjoy your evening.”

The fact he did not include the adage or addendum of luck with his comment told Hugo the men did not see who was wedged between him and the tree. He kept his eye on the path and allowed time for his heartbeat to slow before he sighed and looked down at the woman in front of him. Her chest rose and fell. The warmth of her hands seeped through his clothing and burrowed under his skin, a tickling sensation that sent a jolt of pure lust straight to his loins.

Perhaps it was the charge he always felt after a confrontation that usually ended in fisticuffs.

Those beautiful blue eyes were round and pleading. For what, he wasn’t sure since his own pulse teased him into forgetting where he was. The corner of his mouth ticked up at the sight of her hair disheveled, reminding him of picking twigs from strands of sunshine while they sat in their secret garden.

Their garden?

He mentally rolled his eyes at such flowery sentiment. But then again, he was here, rescuing her once more. Or was he?

“They’re gone,” he said but didn’t relinquish his stance. “We shouldn’t stay here.”

She swallowed and took a breath. “You are not getting out of an explanation that easily. And I’m not leaving this spot until you finish your asinine rationale.”

She didn’t poke him with a finger, but he felt it all the same, and then he lost all reason and rationale when he looked at her mouth. Prim and properly pink, drawn into a line. He wanted to kiss her until she softened against him. Desire shot through him as strong as the adrenaline from a good prize fight. And she was a prize. He couldn’t deny it.

The question of the year was whether he would be cad enough to claim it. Yesterday, he might have said no. Today, she was leaning against a tree and looking at his arm beside her cheek. She swallowed, then turned her fluid blue gaze on him.

“Perhaps this isn’t the place for a discussion.” Her out-of-breath statement sobered him a little.

“Might you have thought of that before you followed me here? It is called the Pleasure Gardens for a reason.”

“You can blame yourself for that because I wouldn’t be here but for you. Why, I wonder, are you here?”

“I’m here for business. It’s certainly not what you’re thinking.” He held to his spot, caging her in and hoping to distract her from further questions and his part in the whole debacle. Even to his own ears, it was beginning to sound more than a little foolish, good intentions or no.

“You’re such a bright man. So, you tell me what I’m thinking.”

As foolish as ever, Hugo didn’t hesitate. “Currently? You’re thinking about the other garden and the kiss.”

Her jaw dropped, and if there was room enough between them, he was sure her hands would be on her hips. “You are mad. A lunatic ready for Bedlam if I ever saw. But I’ll give you credit for the deflecting tactic even if it won’t work.” Her look was an ill-performed attempt at daggers and indignation.

“Lovely. We’ll play your game instead.” He let his hands fall free of the tree, releasing her from the emotional cage. “I made the wager against the outcome. Not a wager to win you, but a wager against their folly.”

“And you thought that a good idea?”

“In retrospect, I can see your point and how it would fuel the challenge to pluck the Lucky Clover. But you must see my side.”

She stood in front of him, close enough to touch. So close he felt the passionate heat radiating from her body. Her hair looked as if he had tumbled her right there.

“You bet against them winning,” she accused. “Which will make them want to try harder.” She poked his chest with her finger, right over his heart. “How much?”

“Pardon?” He removed her finger once again, taking no offense at it. She clearly did it unconsciously so as to make it a living part of her personality.

“The wager. How much did you bet?”

He kept hold of her hand after removing it from his chest. “Enough to give them pause. The books are full of bets for you, I hate to say. But there were none against them winning you. The amount is absurd enough to create doubt because no one in their right mind would wager so much if they thought they would lose. It effectively separated the competition, and now bets are being thrown on the other side. All you must do is keep your virtue, and the books will be closed. For good. Do you

understand?”

Her brow furrowed. At least she looked as if she was trying to understand.

“A separate wager. A separate entry in the books. It’s the best I could do to stop the wave against your virtue. I bet on it. You see?”

She pulled her bottom lip through her teeth and studied him for an uncomfortable moment. “Kingsley’s bound to find out. And then what?”

“I imagine he already has.”

“Not likely, else he would have never allowed me out of the house without a hired guard and fitting me for a chastity belt. He thinks I’m visiting Evelyn with my companion. My brother is not prone to spending his time in the clubs, so how would he know? He entertains very few guests.”

Hugo wanted to argue that point with her but thought better of it. Everyone deserved some modicum of privacy, including the Duke of Kingsley.

He absently rubbed her hand, and his mind immediately tripped over the punch he taught her days ago. He looked at her fingers, then pulled off his gloves and seized her hand. He rolled her fingers into a fist. “You want to keep your thumb overlapping here—” he pressed her thumb across her forefinger—“and never here.” He opened her hand and rolled her thumb on the inside against her palm. “With the thumb tucked this way, you risk breaking it.”

She looked at his hand over hers and then back to his face in disbelief.

Why did he ever think her mousy?

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“Boxing,” he said as if it explained everything.

“Is that what we’re doing now?”

“No. I’m killing two birds with one stone. Moving the conversation from anger and confusion to solution and consequence.”

She shook her head, her brow creased, and her lips parted. “Who is it I’m hitting? You? Again?”

The solution to her confusion was about to be a consequence. He ran his thumb across her wrinkled brow. The tips of his fingers slid into the wisps of hair at her temple, and he was lost. He dragged his fingers gently through her hair and reveled in the luxurious feel of silk between his fingers. His gaze fell to her lips, and he saw gooseflesh break out on the nape of her neck. He would have fought anyone who tried to pull him away in that moment. The only thing that could stop him now was her. Just the sight of her mouth drugged him.

He pressed her hand to his chest, and with his other hand locked in her tumbled hair, he tilted her head back and touched his lips to hers like a question.

“I want you, Clover Dunhurst.”

She slid her mouth over his, her bonnet fell to the ground, and he gave in to the temptation to know the taste of her, to feel the erotic inability to stop his heart from hammering away. Forget what the rest of his body was doing. He was so absorbed in that one kiss that he paid no mind to anything else. Not until the tiniest moan escaped between them, a sound without identity because his mind was too lost to wonder who made it.

She pulled her hand free, and he kissed her harder for fear the next thing he would feel was a slap. But he was not ready for the feel of her palms flat against his chest, sliding up his shirt front. A smart tug on his cravat brought them closer, and when Lady Clover Dunhurst, the very woman whose virtue needed protecting, cradled his jaw with her hands, he hauled her against him. Wrapping his arm around her small waist, her body, her breasts, her limbs all in contact with him. Each breath absorbed the scent of her into his soul, and she smelled different from the day in the garden. She smelled like a mixture of lavender, trees, earth, and him. It was chemistry made by fate.

Oh, she was a temptation.

He pulled free of her mouth and ran sucking kisses down her neck for the pure joy of hearing passion's whimper from her lips to his ear. Some primal part of him wanted to mark her. To claim her as his. He felt a sharp nip at his ear.

"You little minx." He cradled her head against his chest, his nose in her hair. His breath shuddered until it slowed enough to speak, and his conscience begged for mercy. "I'm so sorry," he murmured. "I'm so terribly sorry, Clover." For what? The kiss? The wager? Lord, his heart ached too much to decipher what he'd just done.

The sister of his business partner was not a safe place to chance breaking the rules.

She snuggled a hug into him, her arms about his waist, her cheek rubbing his chest. "I've never kissed a man before you. I like kissing you, Hugo Darrington. And that is as confusing as anything I've ever contemplated."

He pulled back to see her face. "Don't look to me for answers. I don't have any. I'm perhaps as surprised as you are."

"Oh, you have answers. I can tell." Her finger caressed his lips. "I just don't think

you like them.” He took her finger and kissed it, then let her go.

“And you shouldn’t either. This was a mistake, and I take full responsibility for it. You are a pretty thing.”

“And that’s why you kissed me because you think I’m pretty?”

“No. But it doesn’t help my case that you are.”

“So, what now?”

“Now, you go straight home and never tell a soul. I’ll follow far behind until you safely reach your carriage.”

“You cannot follow me. If anyone sees you and me in the same vicinity, they’ll put it together. Especially your friends.”

“My friends? You mean Sanderson? No, love, they are not my friends. And I’m afraid you’re right, but I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

“Lovely, I guess I don’t get a choice.”

“Not this time.” He smiled wickedly.

“Did I have one before?” She countered with a wicked bend to her brow.

“Always.” Then he held her cheeks between his warm hands and looked at her intently. “Always. Do you understand?” The gesture wasn’t one of tenderness, exactly, but more like a word of encouragement because the days to come were bound to be difficult.



“I understand. But how shall I avoid these men if I don’t know who they are? I didn’t see this Sanderson fellow.”

“Just avoid all men, and you’ll be fine.”

She pulled her mouth to the side and stared at him.

“Me included.” He smiled. “Especially me, apparently. Although, I don’t think that will be a problem since you can’t identify a mountain from two feet out.”

“A mountain? Is that like the forest for the trees?”

He chuckled with his hands on her shoulders and turned her about. “No, it’s like a woman who is too stubborn to admit she needs spectacles.”

### CHAPTER 14

One thing was certain: Clover now understood what being kissed to distraction meant. After leaving the Pleasure Gardens last night, she'd been so distracted she had almost forgotten Esther. Now, back in the safety of her rooms, eating toast and jam and feeling queasy, she had more time than needed to consider her role in the whole debacle.

The mere thought of that kiss and her cheeks were aflame, her knees quaked. It all sounded insanely familiar, like something from a poem. She had never given much credence to the thought of buckling knees. Who knew that was a real thing?

And the man called Sanderson. She had not been in a position to see his face and wondered if she would recognize his voice. Thankfully, the Season was over. No more miscalculations from across crowded ballrooms and no more calculating men. Perhaps the whole thing would blow over by Christmas. The scandal sheets weren't so amusing after the gentry left the stuffy city for more open spaces. Most of them would hibernate in the country until next year. Not Stratford, however. Not this year. Her brother would stay in London for his business contacts, and so would Darrington.

And so would she.

Unless she could convince her brother that rustivating in the country was just the thing she needed.

"Oh, good," Esther said as she popped into the room with her arms full of linens. "I thought you'd never wake."

“I’m sorry about yesterday. Let me help you with that.” Clover didn’t adhere much to the differences in their positions. Esther was often the only ally she had in the house.

“I do beg you one thing, milady. Do not ever tell me what happened in those gardens because the duke has already asked about Mrs. Rochester and how your visit went.”

“He’s being cordial.” Clover stood on the opposite side of the bed, helping Esther strip the sheets.

“He’s a duke. And I’m your maid. There is nothing cordial about it.”

“What did you say?”

“Very little. I’m not expected to visit with your friends, so being noncommittal was fairly easy. But you, that is another matter. I’d avoid him until he has somethin’ else to fill his head.”

“He needs a wife.”

“I have a feeling he won’t even consider it until you’re wed.”

Clover looked up sharply. “Did he say so?”

“Not to me. But I’m not blind or deaf.” Esther jerked the sheet between them, bending a brow when Clover looked at her.

“I’m not blind.”

“I could remind you of a few stories if you’d like.” Esther spread her hands over the coverlet.

Dressed for home in a simple petal pink muslin with one petticoat, Clover ventured past the duke's study with hurried steps. As silent as her silk slippers would take her.

"Lady Clover," the duke called. When they were younger, when their parents were alive, they had always used their first names. Every time he called her Lady Clover it sounded stilted and sad. They had not always been such a conventional family, and she missed it. Some days it hurt more than others. Today was one of them.

She halted midstride and pivoted. "Stratford? Do you know how much I miss just being Clover?"

"Shut the door, and you can be anyone you choose."

She pressed the double doors closed and took the moment to compose herself. "I'm glad you called me. I've been meaning to speak with you about returning to Kingsley Manor."

"I have to stay as long as the weather permits."

"But I don't. Why not send me with Miss Esther and a half dozen outriders? Surely, you can trust I'd get home in one piece."

"I'll consider it." He stood and motioned to a chair in front of the walnut desk.

"I don't like the formality. What is it?"

He took an exaggerated moment to fix his waistcoat and sit. This worried her. "Nothing formal about it. I'm just curious how your visit with Mrs. Rochester went?"

Clover clutched her hands to keep them from rattling about like someone hiding something. "Pleasant, as usual."

“She’s a good friend. I’m glad you have her. I believe she and Rochester will live in Mayfair most of the year. So, you’ll have someone close by even after the city empties. I rarely see you keeping company with anyone else. Do you miss your married friends?”

“Adeline and Evelyn, you mean?”

He nodded, his hands steepled against his mouth.

“Of course I do. But they aren’t that far away, and next year, I’m certain Addy will have more to do with the Season. I am not in need of friendship, Stratford, if that’s what your concern is.”

“No, I think you do well on your own. I see you play chess by yourself on occasion.” That was not an agreeable statement but more an accusation.

“I used to watch Papa play. I simply miss him, and the game reminds me that life used to be different.”

“You mean good.”

“You miss them, too. I know you do. Neither one of us was meant to go about this world alone. You should be enjoying your friends. And I am doing just fine with mine.”

Her brother was an imposing figure of a man, much like their father had been, with piercing dark eyes and a sculpted jaw. He towered over most men. But it was his warm-brown hair that softened his facade. Not everyone had the good fortune to see that side of Stratford, but Clover did.

He sat forward, resting his arms on the desk with his hands clasped. A boyish lock of

hair curled against his forehead. "I am not your worry. But you are mine."

"How can you say that?"

"Because I am responsible for you."

"Am I so tedious a sister?"

"Clover, I'm not certain why you're defensive. I only speak of facts. I don't pretend to know the first thing about parenting."

"Because you're not my bloody parent. You're my brother. My ally, I hope."

He smiled faintly. "You know, you've been so reserved lately that I'd forgotten you had such a spirit."

She swiped a speck of dust from the desktop and then hid her hands because she was wearing the lace gloves that Darrington no doubt sent her. She must ask him about them the next time they were alone. Lord, there better not be a next time. She had been far too reckless and daring lately. Perhaps Kingsley was right to remind her that she was Lady Clover. She had been far too cavalier.

"Why don't you continue your visit with Mrs. Rochester today. Take a walk while the weather is still nice. You look a little piqued."

She would have argued that, especially showing up at Evelyn's without a proper invitation, but just now, she wished to be away from her brother's scrutinizing stare.

An hour later, she took the steps to Evelyn's front door. She had sent a note ahead and received a swift reply.

“Oh, Clover, I’m glad you came. He knows,” Evelyn met her at the door, hauling her inside.

“Who knows?” Clover stumbled over the threshold, her bonnet bumped askew with the abrupt greeting.

“Kingsley. He knows you weren’t here yesterday.”

“What do you mean?” She whipped off her hat and rued the day they were invented. She was forever having them ripped from her head.

“He asked Rochester how we got along.”

“Rochester?”

“Yes. Rochester went to see him yesterday. Oh, Clover, what are we to do?”

“I never meant to put you in such a predicament. Oh, Lord. Could you be wrong? I just came from his study, and he suggested I have another visit with you today. He’s darn odd this morning, so I took the offer immediately.”

Evelyn nodded. “He didn’t ask where you were yesterday?”

“No. He simply asked how you were.” She sighed heavily. “And I told him it was a nice visit.”

“In other words, you admitted to the lie without him even asking, and he’ll be wondering why. As for Rochester, he’s madder than a hornet at me.”

“It’s not your fault.” Her breathing quickened. “I’m sorry, Evelyn. I shouldn’t have involved you in the first place. I’ve managed to make a bungle of everything, and

now you're in a tight spot with Rochester."

"I can handle Rochester. Now, tell me everything the duke said."

One night's sleep did not cool Hugo's ardor like he had hoped. Why, Lord, did it have to be her? He wasn't looking for an attachment. He didn't know if he'd ever be looking for an attachment. And Lady Clover Dunhurst was the kind of attraction that came with lifelong obligations. Something he did not need or want.

Want?

Oh, he wanted her. Or at least his body did. No better way to flush it than to sink his teeth into his current business propositions. It wouldn't be easy since his business involved the Duke of Kingsley. But then again, nothing worth doing is ever easy.

His heart tripped a beat as he pulled up to Kingsley's townhouse. It was more than twice the size of Hugo's rented place, and he knew Kingsley was looking to move into the new Belgrave Square universe when it was built. Hugo wanted that for himself, and there was no better way than to stay in good graces with the duke. He did his damndest not to raise his eyes and look at the windows overhead, fearing he might see Clover peeking through a curtain. He had to get her out of his blood if he were to keep his place at the table, as it were.

He handed off his coat, hat, and gloves to the butler and followed him to the billiard room, a more than comfortable setting.

"Ah, Darrington. Care for a game? The light is good," Kingsley said, motioning with his head toward the open window and the streaming sunlight. He was already sighting a cue stick when Hugo walked through the door.

"I'm always up for a game." Hugo rubbed his hands together more to force himself



into a jovial, easygoing mood. He took a relaxed stride to the stick rack and tried not to think too hard about this impromptu meeting.

“Someone announced their engagement at White’s today,” Kingsley said without much interest. The billiard balls were set to, and Kingsley’s eye was fixed on the game ahead.

Hugo was not a member at White’s, so he had no reference for the conversation. “An overeager beau, I take it?” Hugo lined up a shot.

“I should hope so. To announce such a thing in such a public setting. I hope he’s asked the girl before he made such a blunder.”

Hugo missed his shot.

“You’re a member at Brook’s, yes?”

Hugo nodded without comment.

“Have you ever seen such a thing as a marriage announcement at a men’s club?”

“Most men who frequent the clubs do so to escape their marital affairs.”

“Or start a few,” Kingsley smirked.

Hugo did not see the humor in the conversation. His cravat felt tight. The conversation choked even the light from the room as a cloud passed by. “I don’t make it a point to keep tabs on the nonsense of conjecture. Unless, of course, they might involve a business dealing.” He hoped to turn the subject toward their future venture with Mr. Torrent and Lord Bastion.

“Imagine that. Interesting way to go about it, though, don’t you think? Everyone and their brother are bound to throw bets for or against it.”

Hugo froze half bent over the table, the cue stick resting through one curled finger. He straightened and faced the duke.

“Bets, Mr. Darrington.”

Hugo stood tall, jutting out his chin. “You’ll have to be more precise.”

“The betting books. I have it on good authority that you’re quite familiar with them.”

“Are you referring to my younger days? Because I don’t frequent gambling hells anymore.”

“It seems the same announcement has been made at Brook’s as well.” Kingsley seemed to ignore Hugo’s interjection.

Hugo slid the cue stick back into its placeholder, balancing the butt end against the round indentation in the bottom of the rack while grinding his teeth. With his back to the table and Kingsley, he took a deep breath. “Do go on.”

“I say, I was quite surprised to find the chap had not asked me first.”

Hugo clenched his fists.

“Especially since I considered us friends. But then,” Kingsley said on a brighter note. “I thought congratulations were in order. Very sly the way you did that. Damn memorable, too. Think about your anniversaries.”

Hugo turned slowly. “Not mine.”

“Oh, I’m afraid so. Or should I say congratulations? Such a way with words you have. No wonder my sister fell for you.” The words condemned if not the tone.

“What did she say?” Hugo asked slowly.

“My guess is she said yes. Or haven’t you asked her yet? Must get to it.” Obviously, the duke misunderstood on purpose.

“You are mistaken. Whoever told you about the books is playing a prank.”

“No, Darrington. I saw them at White’s myself. It didn’t take much to find out about the betting books at Brooks’s as well. What the hell did you think would happen?”

“Not this. You don’t understand.”

“I don’t? Perhaps it’s you who doesn’t understand. We’ll forgo the banns. Best to put such nasty rumors to rest quickly.”

“I did not announce anything in any book.” Hugo’s voice rose a notch.

“You placed a bet on my sister’s virtue.” Now Kingsley’s tone turned menacing, and there was a storm in his eyes.

Hugo felt cornered and angry as all hell. “I did not place a wager on Lady Clover. But I did try to dissuade them. You can blame yourself for that.” To hell with their business arrangement. Hugo would let his townhouse go and move back home before he let anyone force him into a wedding.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Darrington. I just want what’s right.”

“Hurt me? You must be joking. Do you know who you’re talking to?” Hugo had a

few threats of his own.

“You’re good with pistols then? Not just your fists? Because I don’t plan to let you live if you refuse to do the right thing. Are you a gentleman, or are you not?”

“You aren’t seeing this correctly. Your reasoning is unfounded. The wagering began at the deuced house party you allowed her to attend. I believe you’re familiar with Mrs. LaDow?” Hugo’s mind raced between what the duke knew and what he didn’t know. If he had known about the Pleasure Gardens, he would have said so. Wouldn’t he? If Kingsley didn’t know about yesterday, then there had to be a way out of this lunatic’s snare he’d bumbled into.

“If the wagers aren’t enough to convince you that I am deathly serious, then perhaps the meeting with Lady Clover in the Pleasure Gardens will.”

Hugo’s entire body stiffened. Silence roared in a room already drowning in accusation, and he was sunk up to his neck with a parade of fire ants ready to join in the party.

“Well? I put it to you again, Mr. Darrington. Are you a gentleman?”

The internal combustible discussion with his beaten conscience would have to wait. Hugo gave a single nod, a bow to the judgment of a duke too powerful to fight. He began to wonder if Clover had set him up for this. Yesterday, she had hugged him rather possessively, and he realized how little he knew the true conniving Clover Dunhurst. Lucky, indeed.

Kingsley had the audacity to smile like a royal conqueror, not at all the look of a congratulatory brother-in-law.

Hugo vowed to make him pay for this someday. Of all the senseless dalliances he’d

had, why had this one innocent encounter caught him? He wasn't ready to blame himself. Not yet, while he had plenty of other people close by to heft such a weight upon.

The duke reached into his breast pocket, revealing a tiny velvet bag. He pulled open the drawstring and, between pinched fingers, brought out a ring winking with rubies. "Sooner than later, Darrington." He placed the ring, along with the blue velvet pouch, on the billiard table like a wager or a dare. If Rochester were present, he would challenge it with a blindfolded shot. But billiards was not Hugo's forte. He was more suited to fisticuffs. And his knuckles were aching for a piece of Kingsley.

"I don't need your damn ring," Hugo said, shoving his hands in his pockets. "I am perfectly capable of purchasing my own."

Before the duke could answer, Lady Clover appeared wearing a periwinkle pelisse and a bonnet. It was obvious she had just returned from somewhere and had not been at home when he arrived.

"Perfect timing," Kingsley said pleasantly as if the room were not supercharged by a bolt of God-fearing lightning. He greeted his sister with a kiss on her cheek. "I have business to attend. I think you know Mr. Darrington."

"Stratford, I want a word," Clover said desperately, grabbing the duke's sleeve as he turned to leave.

"We'll speak later."

"Promise?"

"Of course." Kingsley patted her hand and then disappeared.

Before she turned back to the room, Hugo snatched up the ring.

“What was that all about? And why did he leave you here?”

“I assumed you knew.”

“I haven’t the faintest idea.”

“Haven’t you?” Hugo worked the muscle in his cheek.

“No,” she exclaimed, pulling off her bonnet and fighting with the pins. “I hate hats.”

Unbidden, the vision of her in the secret garden popped into his head, only to be outdone by the vision of her last night in the Pleasure Gardens. It would seem he was fated to see that hair tumbled after all. The circumstances, however, were unimaginably flawed. “I assume you just came from somewhere.”

“Yes. From Evelyn Rochester’s.” She plopped her bonnet on a side table bracketed by two leather club chairs. “I assume you’re here on business with Kingsley. Why did he leave you alone in here?”

“Because his business with me is complicated.” He put some distance between them. Leaning a shoulder against the window casement, he looked outside, wondering if he’d break his neck if he leaped from the second story. “Who do I have to thank for this?” He threw up a hand toward the ceiling. “Not you, I hope, after all I’ve done to help.” He was livid, but with whom he couldn’t be sure. He hoped to God it wasn’t Clover because he truly didn’t want to be angry with her. Although regardless of the culprit, he was about to vent like rising steam from a primed tea kettle.

“Pardon me?” She strolled around the table.

“Don’t play coy. You forget I know you better than most.”

“What are you spouting about? I have no idea what has you in fits, but I’m certain the whole house will hear if you don’t take it down.”

“Fits! Fits? This is not a fit, my dear. This is what happens when you corner a lion.”

“I don’t know any lions. You’ll have to reference something else.”

“You’re looking at one.” He held himself barely in check, still trying to ascertain whether Clover was innocent or guilty of this debacle. And then he was caught, as per usual, by the way she examined him from his mouth down to his shoes, a little wrinkle in her nose. Was it guilt? Against all his will, his mind wandered into dangerous territory, and if Kingsley got his way, all her territory would belong to him. The thought, shamefully, gave him pause. He straightened from his negligent lean against the window casement.

Her gaze followed the same trail back up to his eyes. “It would be nice if you purposed to make sense because currently you are making none. I thought we had worked out a truce. I’m trying not to blame you for the betting books.”

“Well, isn’t that a relief?” He clutched his heart. “At least we can start this marriage amicably.”

“What! What marriage?”

“Thank you for finally joining the party. You are very convincing.”

“And what am I convincing you of, exactly?” She shook her head as if to clear it.  
“What marriage? Whose?”

He pulled his mouth to the side, digging in his pocket with one hand and taking hold of hers with the other. She tried to pull it back, but he kept a steady grip as he slipped the blasted ruby ring on her finger. “Ours. My beloved. Or didn’t you know?”

He pulled back, forcing a grin that dug into his cheeks with clenching pain. Then it dawned on him the look of horrified surprise sweeping over her face. The twisted indignation about her mouth was genuine.

She looked from him to the ring. “Where did you get this?” After his outburst, he expected more, but she spoke in an almost inaudible whisper. She touched it reverently.

He cursed his conscience back into its stall.

“It’s been an age since I’ve seen it.” She turned eyes brimming with emotion toward him. “Where did you get it?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“Stop speaking in riddles and answer a question. At least this one, for my sake.”

He calmed with a sigh. “Your brother, His Grace, the Duke of Kingsley. Is that answer enough?” He shook his head. “I’m sorry. Clearly, you have been caught as unaware as I.”

She caressed the ring in a wiggling circle around her finger. “This”—she held up her hand on display—“is my mother’s ring.”



### CHAPTER 15

C lover was dumbfounded. In shock. Tripping over details she had feared would come to light. She braced a hand against Kingsley's billiard table, where she usually felt welcome. Currently, everything felt foreign. Even the ring Hugo had forced on her finger despite it being her mother's. "What exactly does he know?" she asked Hugo in reference to what her brother knew. Finding a way out of this mess meant building a foundation of solid information.

"He knows about the betting, the wagers, my daft attempt to quell the storm."

"And yesterday?" she asked, feeling weak in the knees now that she recognized that particular feeling. This time for the pure fear of it.

Hugo licked his lips. "He knows about the Pleasure Gardens. Although, I doubt very seriously that he knows you followed me there without my permission, knowledge, or encouragement."

"And?" She almost couldn't ask. Blood bloomed hot in her cheeks. "The kiss?"

"That I don't know. Thank God, at least he didn't mention it. But then he didn't have to, did he, because the betting books were enough. I tried to explain how it started."

"Oh, no. Not the secret garden."

"I didn't go that far. Just filled him in on the necessary details about the jackasses who started it. They should be here, called on the carpet. Not me."

“Or me. You speak as if this is something I would even consider. And with my mother’s ring.”

“It is the act of a gentleman, Lady Clover.” His tone was as formal as his temper would allow.

But Clover had a temper of her own. “You’re marrying me out of some perverse obligation. Is that it?”

“Stop pointing that damned finger at me. And yes. I am marrying you out of a gentleman’s obligation. What’s perverse is the way Kingsley wished me congratulations because of the announcement at White’s. Which, of course, was figurative because I made no such announcement.”

“You’re not making sense again.”

“And you’re pointing again. He considered the wager a declaration of my undying love.”

The word love felt like a jab to her stomach. She rubbed her midsection like she was about to be sick. “Gentlemen have such a bizarre sense of ethics. They take up with mistresses without blinking an eye. They massage their egos with dalliances and yet manage to stay bachelors. But one tiny, misplaced wager and a contract is signed in blood.”

“You, my dear, are the sister of a duke. There is a difference.”

“I don’t see it that way. I’m still a woman. And you needn’t worry about my reputation. I don’t require a proposal, not that I’ve received one. And you know why? Because nothing happened between us. Nothing is going to happen between us.” The last part, she said with conviction, daring him to understand.

“I’m afraid it isn’t up to you or even me, for that matter.”

“Aren’t you the saint, sacrificing yourself to the virgin gods?” She rolled her eyes.  
“That didn’t come out right.”

His eyebrows shot up. “And what do I gain from the gods for such a sacrifice?”

“That is the question, isn’t it?” She threw herself in a chair. “And here I took you for a smart man.”

“That’s me. I was smart enough to follow you into that damn maze, worried for your virtue because it was a party you should have never attended.”

“Darrington,” she said in a steady voice, her gaze boring into him. “I did not ask for your protection, and I am not asking now. As for your duty to me, you aren’t my caregiver, and I am not your ward. I’ll speak with my brother, and he will have to see reason.”

“Do me a kindness and do not discuss this with him. The matter has been settled, and my business relationship can only suffer for the argument it will bring.”

“I see. I am a bargaining tool. It’s such a relief to know my worth. Money. I’m chattel.” She slapped her hands on the arms of the chair, gripping them like a vice.

“It is not about money. It’s about reputation. One I have spent too much time rebuilding to have it torn down by a girl.”

She blinked twice in disbelief. “My mistake then. I thought myself a woman.” She pulled in her chin, looking at her bosom, and adjusted the neckline. When she looked up, he was staring at her like a hungry lion.

Hugo cleared his throat. “My apologies. You are a woman.”

“Who knows her own mind.”

“As do I,” he said.

Folding her arms tight, she glared at him in silence.

“My mind. I know my mind, not yours. Lord, we will forever be quarreling.”

She blew out a concession. “We can be angry with one another and waste time on misunderstanding, but this is Kingsley’s fault. So, what is our next move, Mr. Darrington?”

“A license.”

An hour after Darrington left, Clover was inclined to believe their next step would be a license, a vicar woken from his sleep, a parish church in the middle of the night, and not-so-wedded bliss saddled to a man who would hate her the rest of her life.

In Stratford’s defense, he was pacing in his study, scrubbing his fingers through his hair until he looked like a madman. As for Clover, she was not having the luck that belonged to her name as a given.

She took a seat on the leather sofa, avoiding the heavily carved desk where business deals were made and lost.

“Clover, there is nothing else to be done.” Stratford leaned a hip against his desk, folding his arms. “The damage is irreparable. It’s not just the wagers—which, by the by, are quite enough. It’s also the clandestine meeting in the Pleasure Gardens.”

“Tell me again, how exactly do you know about that?”

“It’s not your concern how I know. The fact you were not visiting Mrs. Rochester was enough to send me on an errand to find you.”

She decided to refrain from this particular line of questioning since it was believable that Stratford himself saw them in the garden, and she couldn’t bear to think he might have witnessed the kiss. She ignored the where and how and concentrated on the why.

“For one conversation, I am to be given a life sentence?”

“One? No.” He uncrossed his arms, piercing her with a direct stare that brooked no argument. “But many? Yes. Not to mention, I have it on good authority that you were flirting with him from across a ballroom just weeks ago.”

“Flirting? I was not flirting. I was trying to decipher who was waving at me. And who told you that?”

“You’ve forgotten your little circle overlaps with mine. And another thing. Why did you not tell me you needed spectacles, that you cannot see two feet in front of you?”

“That’s an exaggeration. But I do admit I have held off on the issue of my sight because young women in spectacles are not at all the rage.”

“Clover,” he said more gently. “Between the wagers and the gardens, it’s enough to compromise you.”

She swallowed hard. “I suppose you are gentleman enough, then, to marry a woman you compromised? Hm?”

“My peccadilloes are not your concern. But you are mine.”

She felt defeated, as if her life had been taken from her hands when, in truth, it had never really belonged to her at all.

He rubbed his temples. “I thought the match would make you happy. Your friends are married to Darrington’s friends. It will make a nice social group, good company for you when the men have business together.”

“I can see my friends when I please. I don’t need a husband for that.”

“Or you can lie about seeing them.”

She drew her mouth to the side. “A point for you.” She sighed and relaxed against the button-tufted sofa, catching the wink of the ruby ring she wore. “Did you not wonder how this would affect Darrington or my marriage to a man who doesn’t wish it? A man who doesn’t love me?”

Stratford looked at her softly. He came to sit with her and took her hand, something he hadn’t done since they lost their parents. “Tell me you aren’t attracted to him, that you are repulsed by him.” She started to speak, but he stopped her. “Look me in the eye and say it, Clover.”

That was one request she could not fulfill. Her shoulders fell, and she sagged against the cushions. Defeated by attraction, but not love. Not deep-rooted feelings where two people cannot be held apart. “Stratford, Darrington and I are like opposing forces, like magnets set to the wrong side.”

“Then flip the narrative and see what happens.”

“You must have heard us arguing. He already resents me for this. I cannot bear it for

a lifetime.”

“Perhaps yours and Darrington’s anger toward me will be the glue that binds your marriage.”

She looked sideways at her brother. There was concern in his eyes but a determined draw to his mouth. “You are my only family, Stratford. I don’t want to be angry with you.”

“Give it time. Sleep on it.”

“Will you change your mind?”

“No.”

She caressed the ring. “This would have been a nice touch if it had come from a man who adored me.” She pulled it off and handed it to her brother.

With no way out and no way around the strictures she lived by—had been raised by—she and Darrington would be married in a matter of days. With a duke’s bidding and influence, they would, in short order, secure a time at St. George’s, Hanover Square.

### CHAPTER 16

Kingsley had allowed enough time between the license and the wedding for Adeline Markham to attend. Clover could be thankful for that. But now, after the vows had been spoken, she sat at a dinner feast in her honor, feeling alone and distant. Her friends were there. Her brother was there. Her husband was there. But emotionally, Clover was anywhere but there.

The gathering was a small one. A personal affair, but with a feeling of forced joviality. Her brother only looked her way twice. She knew he was feeling guilty. What she hadn't considered because of her own melancholia was that Stratford would live in this big townhouse alone. She couldn't even imagine Kingsley Manor without family there.

"Sherry?" Hugo asked her when she put her plate of cake aside. "Or port?"

She shook her head, catching the eye of Adeline across from her. "Addy, do you play billiards?"

"I've tried."

"I do," Evelyn offered. "And I think that's a splendid idea. Just the women. What say you, Mr. Darrington? Do you think you can part with your lovely bride for an hour or so?"

Clover's heart soared for Evelyn, having the kind sense to put the question to Darrington without Clover having to say a word. She turned to look up into his



inarguably handsome face, drawn tight by the strain of the day.

“I think my wife would love that.”

She hadn't heard herself referred to as a wife, but somehow, when he said it, the world disintegrated around her into a place she did not recognize. She had to remind herself to breathe steadily because panic was an ally of anxiety, which had befriended her a week ago.

When they reached the billiard room, Clover turned to Evelyn. “Thank you so much for that.”

“You looked as if you might faint.”

Adeline shut the door. “Evelyn has a way of interjecting at just the right moment.”

“Do you think it rude of the bride to leave her own party?” Clover asked.

“With the Season long over and the ton retired to the country, I don't think this small party will suffer your absence,” Adeline said.

“We're all family.” Evelyn wrapped her in a hug.

“What about Mrs. Hawke? Isn't she Rochester's cousin?”

“Mrs. Hawke is due in a matter of weeks, and her husband was giving her the can-we-leave-now look all through dinner. That just leaves us. I seriously doubt the men are missing us at all.”

Adeline pulled up a cue stick from the floor rack. “Someone show me how to use this thing. I haven't been out in months.”

Evelyn managed, as she always did, to show Adeline how to shoot a little ivory ball across the table, all the while talking nonstop to Clover. Her attention was rarely divided. She had an uncanny knack to do it all. Evelyn was the brave one. She'd taken her life into her own hands.

Why hadn't that worked for Clover? Despite trying, she made a mess of everything.

"How are you feeling, Clover? Besides angry, of course." Evelyn strolled toward her. "Brides are allowed to be nervous on their wedding day. You more than most, my dear." Evelyn took Clover's hand. "One thing is certain, though, your husband has beautiful taste."

The ring on Clover's finger was new. Hugo had picked it out himself, and she had to admit the single square-cut amethyst set in gold was a lovely piece. She had chosen her gown to match the amethyst with a pretty overlay of violet. "Do you remember the masquerade where Adeline first broke the rules?"

"Clover?" Adeline laughed.

"And Evelyn cornered Rochester with a wager?"

"Correct," Evelyn said with laughing ease.

"I was dressed like Sleeping Beauty. Darrington had danced with me then. But he didn't kiss me. The only rule I broke was to dance too many times with him. I feel like I'm still asleep, waiting for my life to begin and afraid it might take a hundred years to wake up. I need a slayer of dragons. Darrington is too angry to slay anything for me."

Adeline rested the cue stick back into its base. "You two were meant to be together no matter the circumstances. Give it some time. Give him some time."

Those had been her brother's words as well. But Clover felt strange in her skin, and although she had enjoyed kissing Darrington in the gardens, she did not look forward to her wedding night. The distance between them had grown exponentially. She wasn't even sure he wished for a night with her.

Merely thinking it conjured up reality. Clover felt like she'd been floating between worlds until Darrington stuck his head in the door.

"Ladies," he said with a bow of his head toward them all. And then to Clover, "I'm ready to leave whenever you are. Take your time to say goodnight. I'll be waiting in the front parlor." He smiled pleasantly, Clover imagined, for the sake of her friends.

After he shut the door, she turned to Evelyn. "I'll never be ready to leave this house."

"If you're worried about tonight..." Evelyn let the sentence trail.

"We'll answer any questions you have," Adeline rushed to Evelyn's side, linking arms.

Clover felt her face burning. How could she ask them questions about a night they both surely looked forward to? She didn't know how she felt, but anticipation was not high on the list.

When she and Hugo were alone in the coach, seated on opposite sides, looking out opposite windows, his hat in hand and hers perched on her head, the pins digging into her scalp, she saw her future. Ever at odds.

His fingers thrummed the brim of his hat.

"Would you help me with this?" She pointed to her hat with fine netting half covering her forehead and several feathers sprouting from the side.

He looked at her as if he'd almost forgotten she was there. He didn't mean it, but the action pinched a place where her heart once beat. He leaned across the seats. She obediently dipped her head for better access. He wrestled with the pins like the sword in the stone for a good thirty seconds.

"Do you need the assistance of the Lady in the Lake?"

"No. I need to channel King Arthur, so I don't pull out your hair in the process. Whoever attaches these to your head should be sacked."

"I attached this one," she said with a smile in her voice. The hat was as good a conductor to charge the silence as anything. Maybe better. When it seemed the pins were out, he pulled the hat, and she fell forward, clutching his knee in the process. "I think there's one more." She felt his whole countenance stiffen from his knee to the awkward plucking of his fingers in her hair. She wanted to apologize and, at the same time, pretend it didn't happen.

"The last one," he said, gripping the needle between his fingers. He straightened in his seat, effectively removing Clover from his person.

"Thank you." She turned the hat over and dumped the pins in the makeshift bowl.

"Remind me, did the vows include obedience on some level? I can't remember. It's all a little foggy."

She gaped at him. "Probably."

"You don't know either?" He chuckled. "We are a team, are we not?"

"I believe that's the general idea. Why do you ask?"

“Because I’d love to see you throw out every hat you own. And if the vows will help me do that, then I’m willing to demand it.”

Her mouth turned up in an unexpected smile. “You needn’t demand. You’ve only to ask.”

He traced her face with a gaze like a caress. He took a deep breath, then crouched and switched seats, taking her hand in his. He flipped her hand over, examining the delicate lace. “These are the gloves I gave you.”

“They are. But you never sent a note. I was left to wonder. Still, I think it was a nice touch over the formal elbow length.”

“I was afraid of finding myself right here if I’d sent a note.”

“They were a very inappropriate but lovely gift. And I never thanked you for them.”

“You don’t owe me anything, Clover.”

She turned her head to see him, to decipher his meaning. What she saw broke her heart. Fine lines cinched his forehead. His mouth was tight. His eyes lacked their usual charming sheen. He looked like she felt. Like the world had just changed without them, and it wasn’t a matter of catching up. It was a matter of finding oneself again.

As Clover sat on the edge of her bed, in separate rooms, under one roof, with no hat on her head, she wondered why Hugo had not kissed her in the coach. For some reason, instinct perhaps, she knew if they embraced, shared a moment, or a kiss, the quake under her feet would settle. Esther had helped her with her gown, with a bath, and then left her alone to wait. Every sound from next door made her jump. Every jump reminded her, via queasy stomach, that she should have forgone dinner.

A reluctant, quiet tap came from the connecting door. She couldn't move, not even to answer it. She stopped breathing.

The heavy sound of a well-made door cracked open on silent hinges. The whole house was too quiet. "Is it safe?" He poked his head in. His voice was almost apologetic with a hint of diverting humor.

She nodded. Not even a mousy squeak.

He stood more fully in the doorway, dressed in a blue velvet robe, handsome as ever, looking partly relieved for some reason. "Are you warm enough in your dressing gown?"

She dumbly looked down at her night rail cinched around her waist. It was made of cream silk and covered her, but it clung, too. She nodded again.

"Come," he said, holding out a hand to her.

Her gaze shot to his, and he was wearing a Cheshire smile, which made her chest ache with familiarity.

"I don't bite. I promise. Unless that's what you'd like." His smile was like a wink but more appropriate.

She tried not to giggle. "Stop. I'm working very hard at squelching my childhood habitual giggle." She stood and started toward him.

"Why would you do that? I like it." He moved aside for her.

"You do?" she asked with disbelief, keeping her eyes on him while she crossed over to the other side of the world. A gentleman's boudoir. It smelled deliciously like him.

Bay rum and a touch of cinnamon.

He caught her elbow and swung her to face him, leaning in so their faces were inches away. "I have a proposition for you."

She looked at his mouth.

"Not that." Then, as if he needed to get it out of the way, he bent his head and kissed her quickly before she had a chance to react.

She licked her lips. "What?"

"Wedding nights are overrated, I'm thinking. So, I thought we might do battle another way."

Hope bloomed in her. Not because it sounded as if a reprieve had arrived. Honestly, in her deepest heart, she had hoped he might sweep her off her feet and carry her to bed like some romantic play. On second thought, the hope was perhaps he would teach her more about boxing. "Are you going to ask me to hit you again?"

He pulled back. "Do you want to hit me again?"

"Well, not exactly." The words tripped out of her.

He laughed outright. "I shall be happy to accommodate you another time. Right now, I thought we'd do something we both like." He turned her about, and she felt warm hands cover her eyes and a hard male body walking far too close to her backside not to notice certain male nuances. He nudged her forward with his chest, holding his hands to her eyes. She clung to his wrists to help keep her balance.

"And? What say you, Mrs. Darrington? Or Lady Clover if you prefer."

His hands fell away, and a beautiful mahogany table set with a black-and-white marble chess board and heavy carved pieces sat waiting for them.

“White or black?”

“Why don’t you choose since I’m certain this is not the wedding night of your dreams,” she said.

“No, it’s better. Who remembers their wedding night jitters so well as a woman who’s trounced her husband in a game of strategy?”

“In that case, I’ll take white, Mr. Darrington.”



### CHAPTER 17

Had Hugo been insane, last eve, when he asked his wife to join him for a game of chess on their wedding night?

The obvious answer was yes because as they played until all hours of the night, and she became more comfortable, her dressing gown sash fell free. Her night rail, which could have been sheer for all it exposed by silk alone, had driven him to the most erotic fantasies. What a dilemma, to be angry as a raging bull while simultaneously wanting to bed his own wife—the very woman who’d created the dilemma in the first place.

He hoped she’d slept better than he did. The morning room had never been decked out with so much thought in mind, the tablecloth, a sunny yellow, and a vase with a single pink hothouse rose. Yellow would have been more appropriate for friendship. But his staff had taken to Clover immediately. Servants shared, gossiped, and kept their own tattler’s tales. It did come as a surprise that they should sneak in a pink rose for joy. No doubt they were edging him toward red.

“Mrs. Darrington,” intoned Mr. Langley, Hugo’s butler.

Hugo helped his wife, of one day, to her seat. As he hovered over the back of her straight rail back chair, he took a moment to breathe her in. “You may wish to inform the staff what your preferred address might be.”

“I asked them what would make them most comfortable, and they suggested honoring you. They must like you.” She looked over her shoulder. A beam of sunshine kissed

her hair like flecks of crystal.

He didn't know what to make of that, but an unfamiliar ache spread throughout his chest just hearing her say it. "Nevertheless," he said as he sat across from her. "It is your choice, and you retain the right to Lady Clover. It does outrank me."

"What do you prefer? Does it offend you if they wish it?"

"No. But I want you to feel as if you have a voice here."

"I appreciate your concern, I truly do, but I don't want you to change your routine or your life for me. This isn't necessary." She indicated the pretty table setting. "Unless it's what you're accustomed to."

"We need to talk because I don't think either of us knows what to expect of this marriage or what's to come of it."

She pulled back while a footman served her, locking eyes with Hugo all the while. When the footman left, she leaned forward, her palms on the table. "What on earth do you mean?" she whispered loud enough for him to hear her indignation.

"For one, our sleeping arrangements," he whispered back the last part with comedic drama. She turned a pretty petal pink like the rose between them. "It's important you always feel comfortable and safe. Especially in light of the circumstances under which we married. Your room should be that safe place. Like the secret garden. Use it to your liking, decorate it, invite your friends to sit with you there, hold a woman's knitting circle." He grimaced at that. She smiled. Dammit, if he wasn't feeling warm under his cravat. Why did the conversation make him feel like a virgin, awkward and uncomfortable? Because he'd never been married. And then it clicked like a blazing candle in the attic of his dark head. Neither had she.

This was new territory for them both.

“Are you trying to say you’ll never call on me in my room?”

He couldn’t help drinking her in. A vision of pink and sunshine, and he wondered if his staff had something to do with her choice of dress as well. But he was seeing her as he did last night, over a chess board, relaxed enough not to care how charming or alluring she was. The same panging ache reached every organ in his body with a thick pulse.

“Let’s not be hasty,” he answered her question. “There’s always chess, and I don’t think I can resist making that invitation.”

“And you are welcome to do so.”

He thought he heard a different permission, but he laid it aside, along with his growing libido. Fortunately, Kingsley was game for entertaining their equal investment partners while Hugo and Clover spent a honeymoon period without the pomp and well-wishers who, during the Season, would be beating down their door. Thank goodness most of the ton had retreated to their country seats. Hugo’s usual plan was to visit his family estate every other Christmas. This was his year to see them, but he feared business would keep him in London in the same way it did the duke. The fact Kingsley was Clover’s brother was not a boon in this case. He somehow wondered if he had spies peeking through windows for the benefit of her welfare. How else had the duke known about the Pleasure Gardens? The real nail in the matrimonial coffin.

Was it worth that kiss? He looked at his wife across the table and wondered if it had been the stealing of it which had been so exciting or if their chemistry was real.

“I have a question for you, my dear wife. And it’s crucial to my ego.”

She laid her fork beside her plate. "My full attention is yours."

"Were you aware yesterday who you were marrying?"

"Of course, a bruising pugilistic hero." She narrowed her eyes, belying it with a smile she couldn't know was more seductive than sweet.

"No. I mean, did you know at the time?" He made circles around his eyes with his thumb and forefinger, winking through one hole in the universal mimic of spectacles.

She gave him a weak smile. "Honestly, Hugo, I don't know who I married. I'm not even sure who I am. It was like a dream, without being dreamy."

"If I didn't understand, my heart would be broken for such a statement."

"A part of me wishes it were."

He gave her a quizzical look. "Which part?"

"I'd rather not say. I'll leave that discussion for the privacy of my boudoir."

Where he had just made himself unwelcome. Idiot of a man that he was.

Clover could not tell who won the first round of wedding chess this morning over breakfast. She assured Hugo that he need not be present at every meal. Her expectations were low. She almost let a giggle slip when his face turned dour after such a statement. In truth, she had not set out this morning to battle him with innuendo, but he looked so good even after a night with little sleep.

"Madam." Gerard Gale, Hugo's valet, approached her in the little rosewood salon at the front of the house. He looked to be in his late forties, perhaps fifty if his thinning

hair was any indication. For all that, he was well-groomed, as anyone would expect a valet to be. Who would have guessed the man was interested in science? “You wished to see me?”

“Yes. Please come.” She waved him in as he searched the room warily.

“It’s just us. Please, sit.” She offered him a chair adjacent to the burgundy leather sofa. The house was clearly decorated for a bachelor. “Mr. Darrington speaks highly of you.”

“I am honored, madam.”

“He explained your passion for chemistry.”

Mr. Gale’s eyes lit, and his spine grew an inch. “As it pertains to perfumery, yes.”

“Would you mind lending me a sample of Mr. Darrington’s cologne?”

“If you don’t mind me saying, I’m certain Mr. Darrington would be happy to give you whatever you need.” He looked at her curiously. “What, exactly, do you wish to do with it?”

Folding one hand over the other, she considered holding back and then changed her mind. “I wish to scent my handkerchiefs, my pincushion, some personal items with something he likes.”

“I’m sure he likes you.”

How could she say she didn’t know if he liked her at all? Or that they did not share a bed last night? Although there was little doubt the female servants in the house knew.

Mr. Gale sat forward, his hands gripping the edge of the armrest, his brow drawn and there was such concentration in the way he lifted his nose in the air. It was apparent he was smelling her.

She felt a bit awkward and more than a little self-conscious.

“I apologize. I cannot help myself. There is nothing unpleasant about you if you don’t mind me saying.”

“Mr. Gale,” she began. “I love... how do I say this?” She bit her lip, then hurried ahead. “I love the way my husband smells.”

“Oh.” Mr. Gale sat back, and Clover mirrored his position. Retreat or move ahead was the silent question. “Mrs. Darrington, I would be honored to make something special for you if you’d allow it.”

“Something my husband would like?”

“Yes. One must take into account all sorts of chemistry to create a scent that delights the palate.”

“The palate?”

“Oh, yes. The right scent is delicious on all accounts.”

Delicious. Did the valet realize what he said? “How long would it take?”

“You must come sit with me in the laboratory. We’ll maximize our olfactory. Perhaps Mr. Darrington would like to attend.”

“No. I don’t wish him to know at all.”

“A surprise.” If Mr. Gale were not beaming before, he was now with a contagious excitement that makes one forget every other propriety.

“He isn’t doing his regular business this week. Are you good with schemes and secrets?”

“The best.” A good valet would have all the best secrets.

“I’ll make plans to visit a friend and come back through the alley from the mews. Where is your workshop?”

“A room on the ground floor near the kitchens.”

“I will meet you there at three o’clock sharp.” She held out her hand, leaning unladylike over the tea table. They shared the same joyfully daring grin, and he shook her hand.

The fact that Hugo didn’t mind her leaving the house on their first day of marriage upset her a little, but it served her purpose well that his mind was elsewhere. The servants snuck her in like a thief and helped her find Mr. Gale’s lab. The room was more significant than she expected, a tribute to Hugo’s good-natured heart. She couldn’t name another man, including Stratford, who would give their valet such rein for a hobby, except it was obvious this was no hobby. The walls were washed clean, and there were dozens of bottles shelved along one wall and twine draped across the ceiling with tiny herbal bouquets. A table in the middle of the room held over a half dozen mortar bowls and three times that of pestles.

“Sit, my lady. We must make good use of our time.”

It was clear she was now in his domain. Mad scientist came to mind.

Mr. Gale circled her several times, sniffing the air. “Yes, yes, yes.” His eyes were that of an owl.

And Clover sat still, content, curious, for an hour. By the time she left, she was as excited as the mad scientist.

“This must sit for at least twenty-four hours, and I’ll have it sent to your room in an atomizer, an oil, a cream for your hands, and soap in a few days.”

“Can you manage?”

“Madam, it gives me great lead to follow my nose. The staff and I are grateful you would trust us with something so?—”

“Delicious?”

Mr. Gale snapped his fingers. “Exactly!”

She emerged from the servants’ corridor into a main hallway and found her way to the foyer, where she almost collided with Hugo.

“There you are. How was Mrs. Rochester?”

Oh, Lord. It dawned on her that she had used Evelyn once again but this time without permission. “Very well. I need to send her a thank you right away.”

“Right now?”

“Did you need something?”

“You.”



That statement sent her nerves in a familiar direction like the night he kissed her. “I was helping Cook with the menu.” She waved a nervous hand in the direction she had come.

“I didn’t ask where you came from.” The statement held some suspicion.

“And I didn’t have to offer it, either, she countered.

“Are we arguing? I can never tell.” He shook his head.

She chuckled. “I apologize. I’m at your service.” She gave a mock curtsy.

“We didn’t finish our discussion this morning. I wanted to know if there was anything special you wished to do this week.”

She followed him to the drawing room, where he poured them both a glass of wine.

Clover took a seat on the settee. “I know what I want, but I think you should drink that whole glass before I ask it.”

He handed her the wine and then sat beside her. “You need me foxed for this?”

“Immorally so, yes.”

“I’m intrigued. Do go on. I’ll even drink to it.” He took a hardy sip. “Although it might have been better if you’d suggested brandy.”

“My idea, or wish, is to see a fight.”

The words were barely out before he answered. “No, Clover. You may ask as sweetly as ever, and it will still be no. But I do appreciate your strategy.” He set his glass on

the tea table.

“Rochester took Evelyn there.”

“I don’t care what Rochester did. Besides, we’re trying to live down a scandal, not start another one. If that’s what you discussed with your friend today, you wasted your time.”

“We’ll start a trend.” Her heart would not let this go.

“No.” He shook his head. “Don’t ask me again.”

“Is there no incentive I can offer?”

He looked at her mouth, and she bit her lip. He cleared his throat. “No. Perhaps.” That lopsided grin gave her hope. “I believe you mean it.”

“Please.”

“I’ll think about it. Will that do for now?”

She folded her legs under her skirt, bringing herself to her knees. Leaning close, she placed her hands on his cheeks and kissed him. Simply. Innocently. Like in the secret garden except with the added innuendo about incentives. As she sat back, she arched a brow. “I dare you to forget about it now.”

### CHAPTER 18

For three days and nights, that damned kiss haunted him. The dare. The coquettish eye contact. All of it drove him mad. But still, she did not invite him, and he would not press a suit for a dare or a game. Wanting her was one thing. Respecting her position was another. Neither of them came into this marriage by choice, and he was damned if he would choose to consummate it without her consent. As a gentleman, he had married, and those scruples didn't stop for a few vows.

He did, however, have a few moves left. With any luck, he would at least check her king.

"Esther said I should be ready for a trip this afternoon. Where are we going?" Clover appeared in the doorway of his study as he signed papers for his secretary.

"If I wanted you to know, I would have conveyed it through Miss Esther." He eyed her under his lashes. "And please do not get so hopeful."

"Then tell me where. I don't know how to dress."

"Shopping." Was the only answer he would offer.

He could see from the corner of his eye her impatient stance. Hands on her delightful hips, and with a glance, he saw her biting back a challenge. "What time?"

He looked around her at the mantel clock. "An hour?"

With that agreement, he hurried to arrange the coach and the cargo, before collecting his wife.

The coach was brand new. A gift from Kingsley for their wedding. Too lavish by half, but Hugo accepted it almost as his due. He knew the dusky pink velvet squabs were for her, but the dark-brown enamel paint was for him with his initials in bronze paint on each door. It still smelled new, like rich fabric and polish. As he helped Clover inside, he caught a pleasant scent that didn't stop after the door swung closed.

“What are you wearing?” he asked her, a curious draw to his brow.

“A dress. A cloak. And I brought the hat, but I'd rather not wear it inside if you don't mind.” She watched him closely, but her words were of little inflection. Normal.

“Not what you're wearing. I can see that. But what is that perfume? A new soap, perchance?”

“Do you like it? Isn't it delicious?”

“That's the word. I can almost taste it. Oranges or citrus.”

She nodded. “The oil of orange rind with jasmine and honeysuckle, mainly.”

“Gerard.” His very talented, wily valet.

“He's truly gifted. I think he needs his own business. How difficult would it be to help him find his way?”

“Gerard and I are already working on something.” He wouldn't tell her their unexpected marriage had pushed the project further out.

“I love that you care so much about your servants.”

“I care about investments, and Gerard is a genius.” She looked away, and he knew she was thinking of herself as an investment. If he and Kingsley had not been knee-deep in business together, perhaps she believed he wouldn’t have married her. But he would have. He was a gentleman, first and foremost. And something deeper. Maybe. He quickly returned their conversation back to perfume and his talented valet. “You know he makes my boot polish with a hint of bay rum. What else, besides perfume, has he done for you?”

“Cream, atomizer, soap, toilet water, and an aromatic for handkerchiefs and whatnot.”

“He’s been busy.”

“How do you dress without him?”

“Hm. Is that an offer?” He cocked his head.

She hid a smile.

“I have a very capable footman who stands in and sometimes travels with me when I leave for Dovetail Manor. My family seat.”

“Why do you never talk about your family?” Concern edged her sweet musical voice.

“I suppose I haven’t had the opportunity. The little time we’ve had together seems to be spent doing other things than talking.” He raised a brow. “Like arguing. I’m sorry they weren’t at the wedding. There wasn’t time, and my father is a bit eccentric. He rarely travels outside the closest towns, which means my mother doesn’t either. I had one brother, who sadly did not thrive at birth, and three lovely sisters, one of which is

married.”

“I’m sorry about your brother.”

“I didn’t know him. But it brings sorrow for my mother and my father. He would have been heir to our family.”

“Is that difficult for you?”

“No.” He smiled at her obvious concern. But she’d known far more loss than he had. “My family blames no one. They are a good lot if not an annoying one.” He didn’t say so with intent but more as a typical sibling sarcasm. “I go home for winter every other year. I should be there this year, but business has kept me.”

“As it has my brother.” She watched out the window as they rounded St. James to Piccadilly. “I look forward to meeting them. I should write them. Or do they not know?”

“I sent word. And I said nothing about the reasons, so you needn’t worry.” When they crossed over to Bond Street, the lavish coach was almost barred from moving for all the onlookers. He checked to see Clover’s reaction to the hubbub. It wasn’t necessarily the scandal they created, but that something so new, refined, and emblazoned with a monogram had pulled in.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Nowhere, currently. We’ll never get around this traffic. It’s the new vehicle. We should have taken the carriage, but I thought it too cold.” Honestly, privacy was the real reason. He knocked on the roof to stop, although they could have jumped out without injury being stuck as they were. A footman cleared the street and ushered them out and onto the walk. “It’s not far from here.” He folded her hand over his arm

and enjoyed the luxury of looking like a normal couple. Even one who might be in love. Especially when they walked into the jewelers.

“I don’t need anything from here, Hugo. Why the jewelers? The ring you gave me is quite enough, really.”

“Not jewelry, my lovely little sprite.” She yanked his arm when they closed in on a case of spectacles.

“Oh, Hugo. How could you?”

“Clover, they’ll help you see. Why do you care if you look like a bluestocking now? You aren’t husband hunting. I hope not, anyhow,” he teased.

“I don’t mind looking like I read books. I mind they are for the elderly. I’ll look twenty years older, and they’re not attractive.”

“But you’ll see.”

She stopped him before the jeweler could approach. “Which is to say you agree that I won’t be attractive.” She was quite serious. Her nose flared, and her eyes looked too shiny not to be close to tears.

He lifted her chin and stared into her blue eyes. “Clover, you are a beautiful woman, and if you don’t think I believe that, then I’ll have to work harder at reminding you. Besides, I didn’t think you cared to catch my eye.” He smiled, and if they had not been standing in a shop, he would have kissed her.

“No woman wishes for her husband to have reason to look elsewhere.”

He chuckled, running a thumb along her jaw, then down her throat. “We haven’t been

married a week, and you're jealous of a phantom, nonexistent woman."

"I'm not jealous."

He put her hand back on his arm and said, "What if I tell you this is not the surprise? And I think you'll appreciate the extra sight when I tell you where we're going this afternoon."

"Where?"

"The eyeglasses first. I'll tell you in the coach."

She looked at him every few seconds as the proprietor helped her find a pair of spectacles that worked.

"Hold right there." Hugo walked to the entrance and waved at her as she stood in the back of the store.

She held a hand to her mouth and giggled. He'd missed that. She had been far too serious since the announcement of their nuptials. She waved back, nodding her head. And the woman couldn't look more adorable if she'd tried. And Lord help him if she tried.

"You don't have to wear them out. But keep them with you because if I ever catch you dancing with Albert Franklin, I will have to call him out."

"And me? What will you do with me?"

"I'll trounce you in chess. It's currently the best I can do."

They found the coach, and before the tack could spring into action, she was asking



him about their destination.

“You don’t want to wait?”

“Hugo!” She quickly snatched up the package that held her spectacles cradled in a velvet pouch like a pampered piece of fine jewelry. Delicacy aside, she popped them on the bridge of her nose and rested the arms on the tops of her ears. Then, she blinked her eyes wide like a baby bird and directed her attention to him. “I’m wearing the specs now. So? Where?” She held her hands in her lap, and he could see she fought to keep them still.

“All right.” He choked out a laugh. “Strong’s.”

She sat back, stunned into silence, but true to Clover, not for long. With surprising speed for someone trussed up in a dress and cloak, she half stood, crouching to keep from bumping her head on the ceiling of the coach, and grabbed his face between her palms, then planted a hard kiss on his mouth. “Do you know what that means to me?” she asked, falling onto his lap, her arms about his neck.

“Well, love, you’re sitting on my lap, so I think I can guess.” He pointed to his mouth. “Kiss me again, anyway. I like kissing you, Clover Darrington,” he repeated the same words she’d said to him under that tree while she melted into him. And he wanted to melt into her. Into her softness, her kindness, her whimsy. He wanted to push himself inside her until she was his forever. Or was it just this moment? So much had passed between them, so much of it forced upon them that he wasn’t sure anymore whether he or circumstance had chosen her.

But blast if he didn’t care right now. His body began a familiar ache, something that fighting in the ring would hopefully cure. And perhaps with a bit of persistent patience, there might be a little hope for them in this world.

Between her gloved fingers caressing his neck and her soft derriere wiggling against his lap, he was in the kind of thirsty pain which only a woman could quench. He greedily took what she offered. But only what she offered. He had been careful to allow her the freedom to lead the way since neither of them had anticipated the position they were in. And he fought hard not to imagine her in other positions since he felt he had no right to expect it. He, however, could not resist the fantasies when her breasts were within tasting distance, and she hovered over his lips wearing the most adorable pair of spectacles he'd ever seen. She looked down into his eyes, but instead of professing some great love for him, she crinkled her brow and asked, "What's it like to kiss a woman with eyeglasses?"

"A little bit like heaven and a good portion of desire."

"No lust?"

He chuckled. "Oh, yes."

"Then I'll keep them."

And he thought he'd keep her, just like she was today if he could manage it.

### CHAPTER 19

C lover could not be more shocked if she had jumped onto her husband's lap and smothered him with kisses.

But then, of course, she'd just done such a thing. It was equal to pinching herself.

When they pulled to an alley entrance to Strong's, Hugo slipped her hood over her head and hid her face behind the shadow of her cloak. She did not get a look at the room at large but was taken up a flight of stairs and down a narrow corridor where a door was opened for her.

When Hugo stepped into the room, he shut the door. "You can take that off now."

Her heart pounded with the scandal of it all. It felt forbidden and made her feel reckless. The room was tastefully decorated but overly furnished. It wasn't gaudy like she'd imagined. It did not look like a brothel or a place where ladies of the night would come. It looked like a room in a proper home. A settee. A table with four chairs and a platter of fruit and biscuits. A bar with several decanters and tumblers beside them. There were shelves of boxes that she assumed held tokens and cards for private games. Hugo had explained how all the rooms were a little different. Some even large enough for a billiard table. All were private, and a half dozen had a balcony overlooking the floor below.

The balcony rooms were on one side so the occupants could keep their privacy, and no one could see inside them. The bottom floor was shadow and light, with several boxing rings and one specific to the center. One could enjoy watching a bout from the

balcony, but it was still too far to see faces saved to memory or to identify with any absolute certainty who might be watching from above or fighting below. You would have to know the person well enough to recognize them from a distance. It was all very well-done.

“What do you think?”

“I think it’s wonderful. I never dreamed it was this civilized.”

“Mr. Strong is a man of good taste.”

“You know him personally?”

“I’ve met him and spoken with him enough to secure your visit. That’s all I can say.”

“I don’t need to know anything else because I am in awe and so excited I’m not sure what to do with myself.”

“Well, you came to watch a bout. Did you not?”

She nodded with fervor. “And we’ll watch from here?” She pointed to the balcony ledge.

“You, my little garden sprite, will watch from here, hidden safely away. But I will be on the floor.”

She frowned, disappointed at his suggestion. “You aren’t going to stay with me?”

He gave her a cocksure smile. “I, my pet, will be in the ring.”

Her hands covered her mouth. “You’re fighting tonight?”

“I’m fighting in twenty minutes. So, I need to get down there to prepare.” He kissed her forehead. “The gentleman who showed us to the room is in charge of keeping this room safely closed off. There is a women’s waiting room down the hall if you should need it, and there shouldn’t be anyone there because women are rarely allowed at the club. Mr. Wattley will provide you with anything you need. You can pull the bell but do not open that door for anyone else. Do you understand?”

She nodded vigorously. All she really heard was that he was to be in the ring tonight.

“It’s only a two-round match. Short by fighting standards. And then, after the fight, it will take me a little while before I return here. I like to clean up first. Can I trust you to wait here?”

“Of course. Don’t be silly.”

“I can have refreshments ordered up. Otherwise, there are plenty of finger treats and a pitcher of water and lemonade. I wouldn’t touch the decanters if I were you.”

“I understand. Now, go.” She shewed him toward the door. “You have a match. Don’t worry about me. And win if you can.”

“If I can? You don’t know my reputation, do you?”

“I’ve heard. But you will have to prove it to me.” She dared him, raising her brow and curling her lips with a hint of sass.

“Wish me luck, then.” He pointed to his cheek for a kiss.

She took his cheeks and kissed his mouth instead. “Good luck.” With a quick kiss returned, he smiled roguishly and left her there.

Clover grabbed an apple, then rested her elbows on the balcony ledge, watching men stroll intermittently in and out of view. The boxing rings were empty of opponents. She had expected to see men exercising, but then she noticed the men weren't meandering but setting up chairs. It would be a viewed match and probably one that took bets. Hugo did bring in some monies from fighting. He had said it wasn't much, but he loved the gamble of the sport, and he was purported to be good at it.

Very good at it.

When the room below began to fill, her pulse picked up a beat. She had never been so thrilled in her life, and there was an odd urge to yell like a betting spectator. She only wished she had Evelyn and Addy there to share it with. Evelyn Rochester had told her about the rooms there, but the description did not do the experience any justice.

The air was not as stifling as she imagined, either. There was the smell of a gymnasium about it, but there must have been windows placed in the right places to encourage a draft because she could smell fresh air, too.

When Hugo stepped into the light, she swallowed, stared, froze, and watched in awe as he disrobed. As a married woman, this should not have been an unfamiliar view of her husband's bare torso. But it was. Too bad he was not close enough for her to take real advantage of the voyeuristic position, like she had done the day he and her brother exchanged punches in the back garden. It was, however, clear that he had the well-built physique of one who exercised a good deal. There were men at the corners of the ring who helped them bandage their hands. She'd heard about the practice being done more often. It helped to keep damage to a minimum and made the game even more of a sport.

Hugo ducked the first punch but did not throw one. He seemed to size up the other man, perhaps saving energy for a more effective strategy. Each hit to Hugo made her cringe. She heard the grunts from the fighters directly before she heard the cheers

from the crowd. Her earlier feelings to yell and cheer fell away with worry as she watched her husband take what looked like a beating.

But then, in the second round, Hugo seemed to come to life. His jabs were planted well. His energy obviously more remarkable than his opponent. Hugo had fewer punches to deflect and more openings to do damage. She couldn't imagine how the man was still standing by the time a bell rang from somewhere below. Whether it was in favor of Hugo or not, she thought he emerged the winner, and so seemed the crowd. When he took a bow, she figured he'd won.

He furtively glanced toward her balcony, and she resisted waving. She also realized how much she had been missing without the spectacles. She pushed them back up the bridge of her nose and leaned an elbow on the balcony. Hugo had mentioned it would be awhile before he returned, so she watched another match. This one was between two men who looked a bit smaller. It would make sense that the men fighting should match in size and build for a fair outcome.

It wasn't twenty minutes before she heard the click of the doorknob turning and the latch give way. Nerves preceded her, but for what? Because she'd just seen her husband bare chested? Or because she'd watched him strike another man? Or because she was in a place where women were not allowed?

No, the answer to her nerves stepped through the door with towel-dried hair, his shirtsleeves rolled up, and a devastatingly handsome grin about his very kissable mouth. Her heels were backed against the ledge as if to retreat.

"Watch yourself," he said as the door fell into place.

She pressed a palm to her chest. "That was amazing." No matter how hard she tried to sound calm, her voice wavered. "Truly impressive. You don't even look bruised, as if you didn't take a punch. Except I saw that you did."

“I took plenty, believe me.” He joined her at the balcony rail, gazing out over the edge into the gymnasium.

She leaned closer, breathing him in. “You smell delicious. I mean wonderful.”

He gave her a side-glance. “I’ll take delicious over wonderful if you’re offering a choice.”

“I’m surprised is all.” She tried to turn away but couldn’t force her feet to move. She was drawn to him. Had she flipped the magnet?

“You were expecting sweat?”

“At least that much. Which is not to say it would be unpleasant, mind you.”

He chuckled good-naturedly. “It’s unpleasant. Take my word. Strong’s is a well-equipped gymnasium. Besides the pugilist rules being enforced for the safety of the athletes, it provides a place to wash up.” He turned toward her, resting his arm against the ledge. He glowed with a smile such as she’d never seen. “There’s even a contraption where water showers over one’s head from a reservoir above.” He made a whooshing sound while wiggling his fingers like sprinkles overhead. “It’s made for a standing bath. It saves filling a large tub or a hip bath. And it takes less water, so there’s less effort and less time for heating it.”

“Are there employees who service it and keep it filled?”

He nodded. “Most men go home and clean up. But I like to leave as I came in.”

It dawned on her that he arrived with a kiss. She wondered if he thought the same thing. Her gaze swept over him. “This is not how you came in.” The words stuttered nervously from her.



“No?” The roguish smile spreading across his chiseled jaw told her she wasn’t fooling him.

“Your sleeves.” She pointed to his bare forearm. “Your hair.”

His smile broadened.

“Even this.” She dared to touch his mouth, then quickly tried to pull back, but he wouldn’t allow it. “I didn’t mean to point.”

He kissed the tips of her fingers with tickling gentleness. “And how is my mouth different,” he said against her fingers, gazing at her from under his lashes like a rake.

“You’re smiling.” She pulled her hand back. “Truly smiling. There’s more behind it than I usually see. At least since the wedding.”

“I’m sorry about the wedding. It made me a little broody. Neither of us was to blame for that.”

“Oh? Perhaps just a little?” she asked, peeking through a tiny gap between her forefinger and thumb like tweezers. “Me, not you. I should have refused to attend that house party. That’s where it started. It’s only that Kingsley has kept such an eye on me since our parents passed that sometimes I want to run, to do anything else. Something different.” She looked over the edge of the balcony rail. “Like this.” She waved a hand toward the fight below. “Do you know what he says now?”

Hugo shook his head, pinning her with such a look in those amazing turquoise eyes.

“Kingsley says I am your problem now.” She raised a brow. “In jest, of course.”

“I don’t know about that. You dragged me here.”

“I did?” she teased with a laugh.

“You are persistent, if nothing else, Clover Darrington.”

Her cheeks flushed hot at the reminder of her married name. “I am not sure what I am anymore. But I do believe I am an impressive chess player.” She dared him to deny it. Although they both knew he was superior, by an infinitesimal degree.

Hugo had hurried through his grooming and forwent his waistcoat and jacket because he wanted to see Clover’s face as soon as the fight had finished. He had expected her to fawn over him, but instead, she took his breath away when she touched her fingertips to his mouth. He smiled down at her, then moved away to pour them both a drink.

His hand hovered over the sherry and then the brandy, then settled on Strong’s famous Irish whiskey, not just for him, but for them both. He poured a dram in one and a double in the other. He glanced at her back, her arms leaning against the balcony rail and her bottom pointed in his direction. Fancy that. Her demeanor, her stance, her everything told him she was smiling as she collected the sounds from the first floor. There was a definite enthusiasm about the way she stretched to see. And those damn spectacles. He was taken with them.

This thrill they shared here in this room, the common interest, had been missing since their farce of an engagement. No one likes a forced idea or someone else’s ideal. He couldn’t blame her for that, and he didn’t want those feelings here, in the one place that had always been a haven for him. This was his own secret garden, and she was the amusingly mischievous wood sprite. The decision to bring her here had sprouted from a desperation to see her smile. Apparently, it was a good choice for them both.

He strode toward her, taking a sip from his tumbler. The scent and spice relaxed him, and the smooth, familiar end tones of the draw made him want to close his eyes and

sigh. Instead, he stood directly behind her, bracketing her between his arms, sliding the glass along the edge of the balcony right under her breasts.

She shot him a nervous glance over her shoulder. “What is this?”

“I thought this little adventure called for something more than sherry. If you haven’t tasted whiskey, you are in for a treat.”

“What makes you think I haven’t stolen a sample?” Her fingers shook when she took the glass in hand, belying her question, or perhaps his proximity alone made her quake. Despite her lack of calm reserve, she tapped the rim of her tumbler with his, then took a stout drink. A gasping cough seized her for a breath, and her hand went to her throat. “Oh, my. You like this?”

“Try it again, but don’t hold your breath this time. Breathe it in as you swallow. Your nose provides the first taste. Let it do its job of preparing your palette.”

She blew out a breath and then raised the glass to her lips and took a small sip, breathing it in with a tiny slurping sound that produced in him an erotic jolt straight to his groin. He watched her profile as her body relaxed, her eyes half closed, and her lips turned up with an unhindered smile.

“What a difference,” she said with a wisp. “I think I like it. You and Mr. Gale have a similar approach.”

“Do we?” He nuzzled his nose in her hair right behind her ear and felt satisfaction when she shivered. “If Mr. Gale approached you like this, he’ll be the next man I pummel.”

Her breath stuttered. “Not like this. But in the way you use the sense of smell to enjoy something special.”

Hugo was charged after two rounds in the ring. But it was nothing compared to the electricity he felt with her. Each experience was new to him. He'd obviously become cynical where women were concerned. Clover, he had to admit, was a breath of fresh air, and he was not leaving this room until he filled his lungs with her, tasted her, touched her. His skin burned with the need for contact. Intimate contact.

Though her glass still held whiskey, he couldn't imagine she would wish for another. "Would you like me to take that?"

She moved to hand it to him, then must have thought better of it. She took a quick sip and shuddered. "Oh, that one burned right through my sinuses." She handed him the glass while rubbing the bridge of her nose.

"Did you breathe this time?"

"I'm afraid I can't breathe with you standing there, which isn't to say I wish you to leave." Her innocent honesty touched him.

He slipped a thumb and finger into the whiskey-wet mouth of the tumblers like tongs, bent his head, and kissed her behind the ear.

"Do that again, and I'll lose my spectacles over the edge."

"I'll buy you another pair," he said, brushing her ear with his lips. He then followed the scent of jasmine and citrus down her nape, sliding his nose along her satiny skin. He breathed her in like the whiskey and tasted, sucking gently, drawing a shivering sigh from her. Her body molded into his. Her backside an exquisite pain against his groin. She felt like a warm memory, one they should have made a long time ago.

Below, an operator of the fancy called out the next fight, and Hugo set the glasses on the edge of the balcony, then pulled her back into the room, out of view. The sounds

invigorated him, and her soft whimpering sighs and tiny gasps made the whole scene more erotic than he would have imagined. She moved to turn in his arms, but he wasn't ready to face her. Instead, he hauled her up against him, a tight fit with one arm, and with the other, he pulled her head to the side for a better, more aggressive taste of her neck. He drew the taste of her into his mouth, and she took his breath away when she reached back over her shoulder, her warm fingers tangled in the bottom of his hair, and then brought him into pressing contact, refusing to let him go, encouraging the growl that rose from deep in his chest.

His mind left. His body took the lead. And with any luck, she would follow. His palms itched for her flesh as he wrapped his hand around one breast, hooking his thumb in the bodice of her gown, stroking between fabric and heated skin until he was surrounded by the soft hollow between her breasts. The place so protected from the world, from fabric, from touch that it felt like new silk, and his mind went to places he had not earned the right to take.

Marriage may be a contracted invitation to take as one pleased. It permitted a husband all rights to every detail, but the best part of joining two bodies was the agreement, the pleasure of a shared experience. Thus far, she had no idea what she did to him nor what he wanted to do with her.

Theirs was not a marriage of love but convenience. Forced would be the better word. But there was no denying the desire that burned between them, like the fiery destruction of a ship at shore where there would be no turning back, driving the explorers to make a new way. A new home.

Attraction between them was not the issue. Marriages had been built on less.

The pulse in her neck thumped vigorously against his sucking mouth, and it made him want to taste her, to feel the wave of pleasure on the tip of his tongue, to drive into her with a wanton greed.

It was too much, too fast for a virginal bride. He strove to alter the direction of his libido, his brain, his hands. Lord, not his hands.

He smoothed his thumb over the soft swells until he felt the exquisite pleasure of one tantalizingly puckered nipple. Such a tiny distraction to drive a man mad. She gasped. Her knees buckled while he held her tight, taking little nips along her shoulder, pulling her harder, torturing the length of him. He wanted to pull up her skirts and sink his fingers into her, hear her climax.

But he didn't want to frighten her, not after he'd given her the choice of when. He wished they weren't married. He wished they were in their secret garden where every move was a blessing, a gift between them. The last thing he wanted was an obligation to their vows.

He wanted her.

She wanted him.

Why did it have to be anything more? Would they have come to a marriage naturally? These questions would never be answered.

As if she knew his thoughts, she turned in his arms, slid her hands around his neck, and pulled him down for a devouring kiss. Her mouth opened under his. She lustfully stroked his tongue and bit his lip. She was his for the taking. He pulled at her bodice. He rubbed her nipples. The sensation against his thumbs made him throb with wanting.

And then she pulled back, broke contact with his mouth, and looked down at his hands touching her. When he kneaded the hard buds, she gazed up at him, bewildered with desire.

Her breathing came fast. “Take me home, Hugo.”

“Anything you want is yours.”

At his remark, she lifted a smile, arranged her bodice, and took one step back. “If I asked you to take me home and play chess, would you do it?”

He wanted to bite his tongue. “Yes.” The word sounded hollow, even to his ears.

She licked her lips. “I want to play chess.” He saw her throat bob on a swallow. Her eyes were a mixture of fascination and fear.

He was a gentleman if anything. Hadn’t he, in the most cold-water-dosing way, proven that when he married her? Presently, he didn’t think there was enough ice in the Arctic to cool his ardor now.

He called for the coach.

### CHAPTER 20

Clover wanted to die. Her body was hot all over. Her cheeks were aflame, and her heart was beating so quickly she wasn't sure it was healthy. She had never been so close to wanting a man.

Lord, she'd never been this close to a man at all.

When she looked down to see his thumbs rubbing her nipples, the exquisite torture was multiplied tenfold. In that instance, the moment became reality, and she wanted more. Embarrassment had brought on her question of whether he would honor his statement to play chess. Of course, for the love of God, she did not want to play chess tonight. She wanted him to play with her more. To show her, guide her through the steps of a dance she'd never tried before. There was supposed to be great pleasure in it if she believed her friends. So far, the pleasure he'd given her with a simple touch had caused a rushing ache between her thighs.

It was dark out when they emerged from Strong's. As soon as Hugo helped her into the coach, she pulled her hood from her head. The cloak felt confining after the experience she'd almost had.

Hugo cleared his throat as the coachman pulled the bays into the street. Clover put her hand on the seat for balance. "There's something special at the theater tonight, so the roads may be a little slow getting home. I hope you can wait to trounce me in chess."

"Me?" she pointed a finger to her chest. "I cannot beat you in chess on a good day,



and certainly not tonight.”

He nodded, absently looking at the window with a sigh.

Her pulse raced as her mind groped for the right words without sounding like a wanton woman.

“I’m sorry about tonight. I hope you at least enjoyed the match,” he said without looking at her.

“The... the match? Hugo, I enjoyed it all.”

“The whiskey?” He turned to gaze at her, a bit of confused hope in his warm eyes.

She nodded.

He stared at her, waiting for what?

“Since when does a husband apologize for... for... kissing?”

“I thought you wanted to play chess?” He sounded completely serious.

“Hugo, you are an idiot. You know that? A fool if you think I want to go home and play chess with you.”

His brow cocked. “I’m a fool?”

She nodded, and his gaze dropped to her mouth, then her breasts, then the rest of her.

“Take off that cloak.”

“Why?” she asked as she unfastened the frog and pulled it from her shoulders.

“Because I want to touch my wife, and I don’t think I can wait in this sea of carriages to get home.” He reached for her wrist and pulled her into his lap, the very place she’d flung herself into when he told her about the club.

He reached up and took off her eyeglasses. “You don’t need these. There won’t be an inch between us for the rest of the evening.” He set them aside, then cupped her cheeks and brought her mouth to his. The moment his lips touched her, the world went away. The sound of hooves, the roar of a crowd, could not permeate the sounds he made or the ones she heard coming from her own throat. She prayed the streets stayed clogged.

Hugo stretched and shut the curtains on both sides. He then pulled her bodice down, trapping her arms, exposing her breasts to a blast of cold, which made his hands feel searing hot against her skin. She struggled against the gown.

“You’re going to have to undo my dress.”

He growled in her mouth, then twisted one button and then another, and then she heard the fabric rent. Heard the sound of a dozen cloth-covered buttons sprinkled on the floor like rain on the roof. And she didn’t care, just pulled her arms from the shackling sleeves and wrapped them around his neck, stretching up so he might kiss her throat. But he surprised her by pulling her higher against him, so his mouth came over her nipple. His tongue swirled around the bud, making her feel tight all over. He sucked and nipped. He teased her until she moaned with pleasure.

When he pulled away, she didn’t know what to make of it.

“Sit,” he said breathlessly. “Right here.” He moved aside and smoothed a hand over the seat.

She obeyed, thinking he wished to take a break. If he felt as hot as she did, she could not imagine how he could want to stop. Then, without a second thought to his fine clothes, he knelt on the dusty floor of the carriage and pulled her skirts high. Her breasts still exposed to his gaze, to the cold, and she put her hands over them.

“Oh, yes,” he said. “Like the statue in the maze.”

Her heart hammered. The female statue’s hand had been on her breast and a pleasurable smile on her stone face—and then she knew what he was saying. She shook her head, taking her hands away, but he patiently put them back, rubbing her thumbs over her nipples, watching her with fascination.

“Tell me you don’t like that, and I’ll stop now.” His warm hand was on her bare thigh, and she could feel her own body instinctually preparing for him. But not what he did next. He licked her bare thigh. She rubbed her nipples.

He spread her legs.

She rubbed her nipples harder.

He kissed her where she never thought to touch, and her head lolled back against the seat with a loud groan.

He did with his mouth what she had expected him to do with his body. Such erotic pleasure came from it all. From her hands. From his delicious mouth. And his fingers, sliding in her, made her push against him. She plunged her fingers into his thick hair while she writhed against his tongue. With both hands, he gripped her hips, and she could feel his wet fingers against her skin as her need tightened, and then her body pulsed and jolted with unashamed satisfaction.

She shook with little pants, relaxing back as she felt her skirts thrown back over her

knees. Her eyes were closed, and she felt the dip in the cushion next to her and heard Hugo sigh. She glanced sideways at him to see a smile on his face, his head in the same relaxed position as hers, and she pulled her broken dress back over her chest, closing her eyes again.

“Are we still playing chess when we get home?” she asked with as much cheek as she could manage between gulps of air. He pulled her hand from her dress and placed it on his hard, thick desire.

When she peeked at him, he was smiling. “We are not playing chess when we get home.”

She gathered her courage, gave a little gripping slide to his groin, and laughed. “You said you’d do anything for me?”

“Please, I beg you, do not ask me this, Clover.”

She ran her hand down his thigh. “Are you in pain? You look as if you’re in pain.”

He chuckled. “You do not play fair, my wicked little sprite.”

When they arrived home, Hugo helped her throw her cloak back on, fasten the frog, and bunch the edges closed with her fist. She tried to pick up the scattered buttons.

“Leave them,” Hugo said, almost commanded, as he helped her down the steps.

“But they’ll know.”

“Everyone will know by tomorrow.”

“Everyone?” she asked, a little distressed.

He stopped and turned to her, put one arm beneath her knees, and hauled her up, cradling her against his chest. He carried her the rest of the way, ignoring the butler as he opened the door. Ignoring Mr. Gale as he passed him in the hall. Ignoring every servant who stopped and then quickly busied themselves with some inane task.

She smiled, her face buried in his shoulder, relishing the feeling that, for a moment, her husband loved her. She giggled, that perverse nervous titter she could not squelch when Hugo kicked open the door to his bedchamber and shut it in the same way as a backward-kicking mule.

“I’ve missed that sound, you know?”

“Which one?”

“That silly little laugh you have whenever you’re anxious.” He unceremoniously plopped her onto the bed, then began untying his cravat with remarkable speed. “The cloak,” he said, waving a finger at her. “And the shoes.”

“You’re pointing at me, Mr. Darrington.” There was a playfulness about him tonight. She gladly removed her cloak and shoes.

“Leave the stockings,” he said as he pulled his shirt over his head.

“You are very demanding this evening. What is my incentive to obey?”

He chuckled and unbuttoned his breeches.

“I don’t think that’s going to work.”

“Oh, it works.” His misunderstanding was plainly clear.

“Your boots,” she pointed to his feet.

“Oh, dammit,” he cursed, almost falling onto the bed while he rid himself of his boots. “You have me at a disadvantage.”

She watched him, fascinated by the proximity of his finely chiseled body. She’d seen him without his shirt from a distance, but she’d not had the opportunity to see how his muscles moved under his skin. He was a superb specimen. All that exercise in the ring had done him well. She traced his shoulder blade. The sinew beneath rippled under her finger. His skin was soft and tight like silk on marble. Like the statue in the garden, except he was carved from hard work, exercise, a decided rhythm in his life which he obviously pursued with purpose. That she had not been a part of his plans was something she was happy to put aside for a night.

He reached over his shoulder and took her hand from touching him. He cocked his head and kissed her fingers. “Touch all you like.”

She needed no other invitation. Letting her dress fall from her shoulders, she slowly moved her hands around his waist, kneeling as she did, pressing her chest against his back. Every part of him was hard, even his stomach. With her cheek lying on his shoulder, he stopped all movement and sighed. His broad shoulders gave way a little, and she breathed in the scent of him as if living required it.

His hand covered hers. “You are a surprise, Clover. A beautiful surprise.” His boots stood next to the bed as if his legs were still in them, and with his breeches still partially unbuttoned, he turned. “I apologize about your dress.”

“None needed. Your impatience was palpable.”

“It still is, quite literally, I’m afraid.” He cocked a brow, and she knew what he meant. The thought scared her a little. “You give over that tattered dress while I blow

out the candles.”

What he did was a kindness, and hopefully, someday, it would be unnecessary. She drew her dress over her head and quickly undid the knots in her short stays where the cording had been stretched to its maximum when he had pulled every layer she wore from her shoulders. The chemise came next, and she noticed with a smile a small rent in the fabric. His impatience excited her. She felt wanted. Needed. Desired. Perhaps loved, even if it were foolish to think so.

She saw his silhouette standing by the bedside table where he left one candle burning. His breeches were now missing. The view was breathtaking in a virginal gasping sort of way. Her friends never complained about bed sport. Somehow, it must all work out for good.

Her gaze met his. His smile was a mixture of apology and passion. What little light was available was more than enough, and he worshiped her with one long grazing look.

“One last chance to play chess.” The statement held a measure of truth. He at least cared enough to give her the choice. Clearly, he was aroused. To make such an offer must have taken a good deal of self-control.

“Hugo, I never wanted to play chess tonight, but I love that you would do so if I asked.” She smiled shyly.

He walked toward her and crawled up on the bed over her. “I just want to kiss you, Clover.” Then he smiled wickedly. She suspected he couldn’t help himself. “All over.”

She covered her mouth, reining in a giggle.

“Nervous, or did I do something funny?”

She nodded. “Both. You rhymed my name.”

His gaze moved to the corner of the room in contemplation. “All over Clover,” he said almost to himself. Then he turned his smiling gaze back to hers. “It’s true, though. You know?” A serious wave of dark passion flooded his pupils. “I’ve wanted to kiss you like I did in the coach for an age.”

Her smile fell away. If he didn’t love her, he certainly desired her, and longer than she knew. She swallowed hard. “How long?”

“Since you dressed like sleeping beauty with those ruby red lips.” He bent his head and kissed her.

What started as sweet nips quickly turned into unquenchable fire. She was surprised her body responded to him after being so thoroughly sated, but his tongue was like magic, and this time, when her pleasure came, it was with a wild, delightful anticipation. No wonder it was called sweet death. As the waves subsided, he kissed his way back to her breasts, her shoulders, her throat. He took her mouth with a frightening but exciting hunger. His hips moved against hers, and she could feel his erection, hard as stone, like the rest of his body. It all felt so good. But she wasn’t ignorant of what came next.

A tickling sensation caught her by surprise as he teased the threshold with the tip of his cock. An enjoyable sensitivity. Then, he slowly invaded and withdrew. She tried to relax against the pressure until she knew he could go no farther, safely, painlessly. She would not be delivered from virginity by hope alone, but she was delivered by the sweetest words she’d ever heard.

“I can’t hurt you, Clover. I can’t.” He pressed his forehead to hers, and his honesty



gave her courage.

“Even if I want you to?” She brought his mouth to hers and kissed him with everything she had to give. She tasted him, following his moans into a whirlwind of excited exhalations. She was panting by the time she noticed his movements had brought him deeper into her. He was lost to them now, and he pulled her hips with fierce abandon to his. She heard herself cry out and forced herself to wrap her legs around his middle and relished the sounds of him finding pleasure.

He collapsed against her, holding himself on his elbows. Her neck hot with his slowing breaths. He raised up and gazed down at her, then closed his eyes like he was ashamed.

“It’s all right, Hugo. I’m all right.”

His eyes met hers, and he wiped an errant tear from her cheek. “I made you cry. That’s unforgivable.”

“No. It’s unavoidable. And you were kind. Not to mention, you brought me to such a place twice in one night, and you only just arrived. I think I had the better deal.” She wobbled a smile and held back crying outright, not because of any pain but because he cared more than she had hoped. “Is it not a good sign that you’re still lying here, and it doesn’t hurt?”

He began to chuckle. “Clover, only you would ask such a thing.”

“I have no one else to ask. Unless you’d like me to put my questions to my friends.”

“No,” he said quickly. “A man isn’t hard all the time, you know? But even so, next time, it will be different. Better. Very much better.”

“I can hardly wait.”

“Stop. You’re making me blush,” he said against her mouth, kissing her with a smile.

“What comes next? And don’t say chess.”

He removed himself with care. “Next? It gets a little messy, I’m afraid. Something no one likes to talk about.” He gathered the sheets in a bunch. Put part of it between her legs and threw the rest over her. “I’ll be back.” He retreated across the room and behind the privacy screen.

She heard a slosh of water and then an expletive, she guessed, over the temperature. He emerged holding a washcloth and wearing a ruby silk banyan for purposes she could not fathom since it was hanging open. No longer aroused, he looked less frightening. Perhaps she should have started with the less intimidating version.

“If you keep staring at me like that, I’ll be standing proud again for certain.”

She felt a blooming blush spread over every exposed inch of her body. With a kiss on her cheek, he handed her the washcloth. She looked at it and then at him.

“I’ll be a minute.”

She was afraid to look at the sheets. To look at her nether parts for fear of seeing something gory. But this, too, was less startling than she imagined. She made quick work of the washcloth and wondered how anyone slept comfortably in such a state. The answers to all this might have come from her mother. Then again, they may not have. Married women didn’t generally converse about such details with unmarried women. Everything she knew, she’d learned from Evelyn and Adeline as well as her maid. She could be thankful for that.

Hugo returned with one of his shirts. “This is big enough for a nightshirt.” He handed it to her. He tossed the damp washcloth on the bed and began pulling the sheets into a pile.

Crawling to the side, she flung her feet over the edge of the bed and dropped to the floor as he finished. “I had no idea this entailed so much work.”

“It’s an enjoyable act, but no one wants to sleep in the middle of the aftermath.”

The shirt she wore hung well below her knees, and she was embarrassed to see a smear of blood on her stockinged toe. With her other foot, she overlapped the smudge. “Would you like some help making up the bed?”

“No, my dear. We’re sleeping in the other room. Yours, to be precise. Unless you’d rather me stay here. Which I would honor, of course.”

She wished he would stop treating her like an honored guest and more like an honored wife. She had little doubt he thought he was doing just that, but it only reminded her of their arrangement. “You’re waiting for an invitation?”

“I told you I’d never invade your privacy.”

“I believe you’re serious.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” he looked dashing, his hair mussed and his legs like pillars.

“I cannot think of a less private thing than all this.” She spread her hand to encompass the room, which looked as if a storm had blown through.

“Daylight. That would be less private. We’ll tackle that later.” He smiled with good nature and directed her to the adjoining door leading to her room.

She didn't think sleep would come, but it did. And quickly. Thoroughly. Restfully. Happily. And right beside a man she was hopelessly falling for.

### CHAPTER 21

Rarely had Hugo woken up to a beautiful woman beside him. Not that he hadn't been with some vainly gorgeous women. He'd just rarely stayed the night with them. This felt fresh and new and somehow lovelier than he had expected. With one arm behind his head, he examined the room around him. Dark wood furnishings, teal blue curtains, and a bed which matched were not the colors he imagined Clover would choose. If there had been time, he would have had the rooms redecorated, which caused him to ponder the things he did not know about her.

What was her favorite color? Did she like pets? Had she ever envisioned herself living year-long in the city? There was no denying she was a passionate woman, and chess was a game she loved to play, although she clearly hadn't had a challenging partner in some time. Hugo learned her strategy quickly, and if she were to win the game, she'd need to change her tactics.

Even through the heavy beige and brown carpet, the cold of the coming winter chilled his feet. The fire had been lit last night, but since she hadn't gone to bed in her room, it had not been tended and had gone out long before he woke. He scouted for a taper and tinderbox, grabbing his banyan on the path to the small hearth. He had chosen this particular home to rent because it boasted hearths in the most important rooms. Burning coal didn't suit him as well as a blazing fire. And he liked the foyer with its striking, smoky gray Baroque marble tile. It made a good impression should he need to entertain.

He had not considered having a wife who might wish to amuse herself with women's luncheons or meetings with charity organizations. His knowledge of marriage was

limited, though his parents were still alive and well.

Mostly well. His father was eccentric and talked to himself. But Philip Darrington hadn't always been that way, according to Hugo's mother.

A not-so-delicate yawn sounded behind him, and he glanced over his shoulder. "You're awake. You can call for your maid. I simply wanted to light a fire so your feet would not suffer the same shock of cold mine did. The carpet helps, but it's not enough."

"I don't mind the cold." She flipped the covers back, and he had a nice, shocking view of her breasts chilled to a peak against the muslin of his shirt. She tried to roll up the sleeves, but they weren't having it. She placed a foot on the floor. "Good Lord, it feels like we completely skipped October."

"It's this house. It's warm enough with the fires lit. I imagine you're used to things done differently."

"Why? Because I'm the daughter of a duke? Or sister, as it were, now?"

"Frankly, yes. I live like a bachelor most of the time." He slanted a look toward the ceiling. "This room, for instance, has not seen a woman's touch. I look forward to seeing what you can do with it."

"It's not important. I'm not as pampered as you might think."

"Hm. Are you pampered enough to expect a turn about the park today?"

"I'd like that," she said. The statement lacked excitement, but he blamed it on the early hour. Most ladies and gentlemen of the ton rose later than eight o'clock.

“I’m glad you’ll have a friend close by this winter. It can be a little uneventful after the crowds flee for their country seats.”

“You mean Evelyn?”

He nodded. “I’ll wait for you downstairs whenever you’re ready.” He tried not to look overly long at her, but her hair was temptingly tangled.

“You’re smiling like the Cheshire cat.”

“It’s nothing. Just your hair.” He circled his head with his open hand for emphasis.

Immediately, her hands went to her hair, a most womanly gesture.

She slanted a half smile and an adorable grimace. “Better?”

“It was perfect before. But if you’re asking if your exercise in post preening was successful, the answer is no.” He chuckled. “Thankfully. I’ve always preferred it as if you wrestled styling it and failed.”

He decided the wait had been worth it when he caught a glimpse of her on his arm, parading the inner walkways of Hyde Park, dressed in cornflower blue with a matching wool cloak. They walked in silent camaraderie as if they shared a secret, nodding to the few passersby until he caught a few choice words from a not-so-gentlemanly gentleman. There was little hope she didn’t hear it. He wouldn’t have thought broad daylight would bring the sort of discouraging word that coarse gentry spewed only in private. The words matched those in the betting books, the fool mumbling them under his breath as they passed, avoiding eye contact with Hugo, and Hugo needed no better excuse.

“Excuse me, darling.” Hugo left Clover’s side for a private moment with the man. In

truth, he wanted to lay the man low, to plow his fist into his aristocratic nose and leave the bridge between his eyes displaced. His hands were clenched tighter than his jaw, and it took everything in him to keep his voice even and steady. A blast of cold air invaded his flaring nostrils. “A word if you will?”

“Me?” The man had the audacity to insult Hugo’s intelligence.

“I’m guessing you know who I am?”

“Indeed, I do. You’re the man who got lucky with Clover.”

Hugo struck first and second and then caught himself on the upswing that would have indeed taken the man’s jaw out. Hugo choked the man’s collar and pulled him close for a dangerous warning. “You will leave, good sir, or I’ll pummel you right here instead of waiting to challenge you properly in the ring. Then again, I’m guessing by your inexcusable vulgarity that you don’t do properly very well.”

“You’ll not get me in the ring,” the man ducked away, picking up his hat as he spoke. “I’m not stupid enough to join you there.”

“Lovely. Guns before dawn, then?”

“No,” the coward blustered.

“Hugo,” Clover said, tugging gently on his sleeve from somewhere behind him. “He’s not worth it.”

“No, he isn’t. But you are.”

“You see, she’s not even fazed by such a jest.”



“I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name,” Clover said as she stepped from behind Hugo.

The fool grunted and coughed, and Hugo just smiled with a sinister tilt of his mouth.

“Mr. Trundle.”

“The correct address is Lady Clover, I believe. Or Mrs. Darrington in case you weren’t aware.”

Mr. Trundle looked nervously from Hugo to Clover, who stood proud, lovely, and frightening as hell like any good duke’s sister. She was fortified with title and money, the two most important factors in this godforsaken city.

“You look as if you might be sick. So allow me to finish for you. If you know such a foul thing as to be aware of the betting books, then you must have placed a wager of your own.”

Hugo slid her a glance.

“Now, I am a woman, so the rules of such intelligent games as wagering on frivolity like raindrops on windowpanes escapes me. But I do believe, if I have it correctly, you owe my husband a sum of money. Do you not? I believe they’re called winnings.”

“I... don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Again, that’s Mrs. Darrington. Or, of course, Lady Clover. My brother is the Duke of Kingsley, but even my untitled husband outranks him in the ring. So, I say again, you must owe my husband money. You may have your bank write up a draft and deliver it yourself.” She linked her arm through Hugo’s. “My husband will be waiting at Strong’s. You can either show up there with a banknote or answer the challenge in the ring. I’d place a wager on the game, but I’m not sure anyone would be foolish

enough to set the odds.”

Mr. Trumble visibly swallowed. “I’ll see to it, Lady Clover.”

Hugo blasted him with a cold, piercing stare.

“Uh, Mrs. Darrington,” Mr. Trumble said as he backed away in a perpetual bow.

Clover bowed her head regally. She’d been born to play this game, and Hugo enjoyed every irreverently improper moment. The rush of excitement stirred his blood even in the crisp autumn air. The trees were losing leaves like a balding man, and it smelled like churned wet earth, like something new, fertile, and refreshing. Or maybe it was the jasmine and honeysuckle he kept getting a whiff of coming from his wife’s hair. He wanted her again, but he wouldn’t impose himself on her until she gave him a clear indication that she wished it. It was as if they were courting after the vows, which left him to wonder again whether this attraction would have led to this place. He couldn’t shake the mystery. Or perhaps it was the control of it that he had such a difficult time resolving.

“This reminds me of the Pleasure Gardens,” she said, strolling easily beside him. The backdrop with hues of red and gold burst around the blue of her cloak as if the park worshiped her. “Do you recall?”

“So long ago, it’s difficult to put a finger on it. Remind me.” He teased her, enjoying the way her tongue darted out to wet her lips before she replied.

“Well, first I accosted you, and then you held me against a tree,” she said as she grabbed his hand and took three skipping steps to a large Elm. “I was pressed against the bark like this.” She replayed the position for his amusement. “And then you placed your hands on either side of me so I couldn’t get away.”

He chuckled, rubbing his chin with his fist. “What a terrible man.”

She nodded. “Like caging a tiger.”

“Or tigress. I might agree with you there.”

“Oh, so you do remember? I was giving you the benefit of your aged brain in case you’d become forgetful.”

He stepped toward her, resting his forearm beside her against the trunk. “I remember now. You kissed me.”

She gasped. “I wouldn’t dare try.”

His gaze fell to her mouth. Such a game to play so far from home and a warm bed. “I wish you would.”

She gave a shy smile, a sure sign that she’d lost control of this game.

Briefly secluded from view of the few couples taking the air, Hugo bent his head and kissed his wife lightly. “You are welcome to kiss me back or initiate it anytime you please.”

“That’s very thoughtful,” she murmured as if she could do no more. “Would you invite me to play chess again?”

“Again and again and again.” By the flare of her pupils, he could see the meaning was clear. Chess had just become a game of intrigue and playful strategy between tokens of flesh and blood.

The little kiss in the park had set Hugo on fire, and it apparently put his new wife in a

state of shy reserve. Dinner had been a quiet affair, and the night had been even more so because he was left to sleep alone once again. Before, whenever he had thought of marriage, he didn't expect love and devotion, but he had assumed it would come with the average benefit of a satisfied libido. Not that he wanted her to fulfill his needs exactly. He rather wanted to fulfill hers. She must have them. The woman was passionate and erotically adventurous for a virgin, which led him to think she might be frightened, and for that, he couldn't blame her.

Bachelors learned patience from necessity and explored other options, none of which Hugo cared to partake. Not with a beautiful blonde sleeping next door with her hair mussed and wearing one of his shirts pulled open at the neck. It was pure fantasy. He didn't know what she wore to bed, but the imprint in his mind of her wearing his shirt was a picture captured like a miniature in a locket.

He was busier than usual between the Belgravia project and the investments he had been nurturing toward new ideas in transportation with steam engines. Kingsley's friendship was paramount in the former, but his involvement in the latter was coming to a head.

His desk was organized accordingly. He liked organization, files, and everything in its place. He moved the ink pot an inch inside the boundary of the blotter because that's where it belonged. That's what he was used to. A rich, dark mahogany desk. A leather chair with rollers. The maroon settee matched the curtains. The study was his world.

A flurry of cream muslin caught his eye, and he looked up to see Clover standing just inside the door.

"Are you very busy?" She tilted her head, a clear uneasiness about the question.

Hugo stood. "Never too busy for you, my dear. Come in. You're practically standing

in the hall.”

She glanced behind her and took several more steps into the study until her feet were just inside the large floor carpet. It reminded him of his inkwell. She cleared her throat. “I was wondering whether you were going out tonight.”

“Where would I go?”

“The club. I wasn’t certain what your boxing schedule was like or if you even had one.”

He could see an obvious question involving another trip to Strong’s. “I don’t have any plans tonight, and I’m not certain I can take you again so soon.”

“No, that’s not it at all. I was considering the dinner menu and thought it would be nice to serve something you like.”

What he liked was standing in front of him. Regardless, there was little truth in what she said. The lie was evident in the way she pulled at her fingers one by one, stopping on the third to spin her wedding ring around. He wasn’t sure what she was about. “Whatever Cook has planned, or you have planned, is good with me.” He pulled his mouth into a friendly, benign smile.

“I’ll let her know.”

“I never thought to leave you my schedule. I do apologize. If there’s anything you wish to do, please say so, with perhaps the exception of the Pleasure Gardens unless you take me.” Now, he smiled genuinely.

She blushed prettily, either for the reminder of the gardens or something else. The silence made her seem farther away than the twelve feet or so between them.

“You can visit with your friends anytime you wish, you know.” He rocked on his heels, his hands behind his back. “Take the coach, I’ve got the carriage, or I can have a hack hailed if I need to be anywhere in the city.”

She rubbed her lips together, drawing the bottom one through her teeth. “It’s not that.”

“You want to play chess?” There was no innuendo in the question, but as soon as her head popped up from staring at the red paisley print carpet and she locked eyes with him, he knew. “What are you trying to say?” He cocked a brow, and one edge of his mouth ticked up.

She shut her eyes, her spectacles moving up on the bridge of her adorably scrunched nose. “There were promises made.”

That announcement completely baffled him. Back to square one in the conversation. Promises? “Vows, you mean? Which ones?”

“Not vows. A promise recently made.”

He was beginning to understand. With a fist to his hip, he rubbed his eye. “That sounds a little like an invitation.”

“Exactly,” she said with a long sigh.

“Exactly what?”

Her magnified gaze, exaggerated by the eyeglasses, absently searched the room, and the finger pulling increased. “I thought perhaps tonight if you weren’t busy, you might fulfill your promise. Your next time promise,” she clarified with her cheeks fire branded with embarrassment.

“Ah, the next-time-it-will-be-better promise. Is that the one?”

She looked to the ceiling, closed her eyes, and then pinned him with a wide-eyed stare. She nodded.

“I’m not busy now. Are you?” Oh, dear God, she was precious.

### CHAPTER 22

C lover had not expected Hugo to answer her call to action immediately. She only thought to prepare him and herself for an evening in the same bed. She knew that married couples were often separated by rooms and events, even people, but she hadn't thought it would occur so quickly. She enjoyed sleeping with him after he'd made love to her. And she honestly wanted to know if it would be different next time because everything that came before the actual consummation had been extremely pleasurable.

"Now?" she asked when he suggested fulfilling his husbandly promise in the middle of the day. The proposal stunned her and left her standing in the middle of his study, her feet frozen in place, her mind frozen in time. "That's not necessary, really."

"Why not?" He looked conspiratorially around. "You're here. I'm here. No one else is here." He spread his hands wide, encompassing the room. "Here seems to be the perfect place."

"But this is your study. It's a public place."

"Not entirely," he said as he passed her on his way to the open door. He did not hesitate before he shut it ominously into place.

"The servants," she whispered, even though they were completely alone now.

He walked up behind her. "The servants,"—he whispered near her ear—"know everything that goes on in this house."



She pulled her head away from his warm breath and his nose tickling her neck. “They do not.”

“If it makes you feel better to think it, then you are entitled to do so.”

“You’re teasing me.” She turned fully around, facing him now.

“I have not begun to tease you, my sweet.” He slid his palms down her forearms until their fingers were laced together. He pulled her arms around his body. Cinnamon and bay rum dizzily permeated her senses. She wasn’t sure if she should leave her hands where he put them.

He cradled her cheeks and kissed her mouth, small little pecks until she answered with an involuntary whimper. He pulled back, but before she could feel disappointed, he directed her to the window overlooking the back property, where an herb garden was planted in the distance and a gate led to the mews. Flowerpots bloomed with seasonal flora and lined a little patio off the study. One would have to reach it from another room, but it was pretty. She saw her reflection and his as he lowered his mouth to her shoulder.

“We are alone, and the view is lovely.”

She swallowed hard. “Why do I feel as if you’re speaking of more than the back garden?”

“Because your perception is exceptional.” His arms enveloped her, and his hand cupped her breast.

She clung to his arm, feeling the muscle and tendon underneath work as his fingers pulled the edge of her bodice down. She could have pulled his hand away with a little tug, but she preferred the little tug he gave her nipple. The view of the garden was

nothing to the reflection of him biting her shoulder. To see her flesh in his hands. Her chest rose with a panting rhythm. “The window,” she whispered on a shudder.

“This view is private, I assure you. And I like it.”

“Hugo.”

“I thought you were my little wood nymph,” he said, all the while caressing her into oblivion. “A sprite who prefers making love outdoors, in her own little secret garden.”

She straightened, having melted back into him, and turned in his arms, her breast still half exposed. “People don’t do that outside, do they?”

“Coaches? Need I remind you?”

How had she forgotten about that? She buried her burning cheeks in his shirtfront. “Not exactly outside,” she muttered, gripping the fabric of his lapel. Before she could think or speak reality into the moment, she pulled his jacket wide and over his shoulders. He shrugged out of it quickly and then, with one hand, unknotted his cravat and, with his free arm, pulled her in for a devouring kiss. Before she knew what was what, she was helping him pull his shirt from his breeches. As he lifted it over his head, she ran her hands up his bare torso, stopping for a moment in wonder at the hard plane of his stomach.

“How does a man get so hard?”

He chuckled, throwing his shirt aside. “Just looking at you makes me hard, darling.”

“What?” Her gaze popped up to his, and his wicked mouth bent in unison with his wicked eyebrow. And her wicked thoughts came flooding in. “You’re not... I was

speaking of your stomach and waist and chest.” Her gaze roved over every inch.

“I know what you were saying, sprite.” He lifted her chin and kissed her until she forgot about the open window, the unlocked door, the sounds of an echoing hall, and gave in to the fantasy she didn’t know she’d initiated.

Without a thought, she ran her hand around the band of his breeches and hooked her fingers over the edge. His shuddering reaction gave her courage, and she sunk her fingers deeper under the fabric like he’d done to her bodice minutes before. The tips of her fingers contacted the head of his smooth, rigid member. Hugo moaned against her mouth, and she felt his hand warm on her wrist, pushing hers down until she felt the length of him in her palm. She smiled against his mouth, and he stopped kissing her long enough to look into her eyes with such a storm in his black pupils, surrounded with vivid turquoise.

“You do that to me, you know.”

For a nice change, she cocked a devilish smile at him with a coy tilt of her head. “So much power in a touch. Who would have thought?”

“Who indeed,” he said as he took her hand and led her to the settee. “But I did promise you something, and if you keep up with this, I’ll be spent right here.”

“Is that true?” She giggled as he pushed her back into the cushions.

“Oh, yes. Too much so.” He undid the fall of his breeches, then took her glasses from her face. Leaning a knee between her legs, he pulled up her gown. His fingers slid between her legs as he nipped at her breast, pulling her dress down an inch with his teeth.

Two nights ago, it had been all but dark, but today she saw every inch of him, hard,

ready, cocksure. And she didn't have time to be scared, not while his fingers were inside her, not while his tongue teased her nipples. He moved his hips between her thighs, and she tensed.

He kissed her mouth softly, slowing the hunger she felt beneath the surface while he dug his hands into her hair. "Trust me, sweet. Relax those beautiful thighs."

She breathed out a sigh and let her knees fall open. He rubbed the head of his cock over the part of her that felt like heaven until he was wet with her need, and she wanted to die. He moved to the entrance, and she was far too gone to think much further until he pushed himself inside her, and she felt a delicious wave of tingling pleasure which started from her core and spread in a fury through her body from the inside. She heard and felt the groan from her own throat, and her legs relaxed even more while her hips began to thrust against him. Each time her body met his, she felt a surge of pleasure until her movements were as frenzied as his.

She wrapped a foot around his calf and was surprised to feel his boots were still on. Oddly, that gave her a rush, and she burst into a sea of thumping, climactic pleasure almost at the same time as he made a fierce growl and held himself in place. She felt him, too. The experience was like nothing she had ever imagined in her wildest dreams. Coming together to such fulfillment made her feel deeply connected to him.

With her arms wrapped around his neck, she pulled his head onto her shoulder and held him there, and she knew she'd fallen in love with him. And she hoped he might someday feel the same.

"Did I make good on that promise?" he breathed the question against her neck.

"Oh, yes." She felt a giggle well up inside.

He pulled back. "I know you want to laugh. Go ahead."

“I can’t help it. Nerves have always done this to me.”

“If I didn’t already know that, my manhood would be none too eager to come near you again.”

“Don’t say that. I truly cannot help it.”

He kissed her mouth. “Yes, my sweet, I’ve known for a long time.”

“Most men hate it.”

“Tell me which ones, and I’ll blacken their eyes.”

“No need.” She placed her hands on his cheeks and brought him down for one last kiss. “As long as I don’t drive you insane.”

“Too late,” he said, brushing a thumb across her eyebrow like he was memorizing her face.

It turned out she and Hugo were quite compatible in the bedroom, but Clover had been initiating it all. He had taken his vow to make the time her decision to such a level that she was frustrated. No woman wants to feel as if she is so undesirable that her husband doesn’t need her in a biblical way. Which bore the question of whether she needed him or just wanted him. Did he only want her, or did he need her? One thing was certain: his schedule remained a mystery most days.

They’d been married for two weeks. Had made love four times and still barely talked about anything important. She missed her friends and had so many questions about Hugo’s family that she didn’t know where to begin. Apparently, he didn’t know either. He rarely spoke of them except to mention his father’s eccentricity and that he made music boxes. It all sounded rather lovely to her.

For three nights, she waited up for him. For three nights, she fell asleep before he returned. Apparently, he enjoyed his boxing club more than home. Or perhaps it was her. The question of need and want, of love and libido, were answered by his absence alone. Her feelings for him no longer bordered on excited infatuation, and her only comparison for married couples was that of her friends, who seemed to enjoy a certain shared anticipation with their husbands. Rochester and Markham spent time with their wives. Clearly, this was what love looked like. What Clover and Darrington had was lust. She believed that more now than ever.

Pleasant enough. True. But fulfilling? No. And this was to be her life. If she were to survive with any happiness, then she needed a family larger than her and Hugo alone. She needed her brother. She needed her friends. And she needed to know Hugo's family. Once children came, she figured her need for love would be fulfilled. Until then, she wanted to know more about him. It could be far worse; this she knew. There were plenty of women who neither loved nor liked their husbands, and after having an heir, they seemed relieved not to share a bed. Hugo was an excellent lover. Perhaps that would be enough.

On the fourth straight night of eating alone in a dining room large enough for a small army, she wandered into his study. His desk was polished and devoid of work as if he'd never been there. The window where she'd watched him seduce her was covered with heavy curtains. The books all aligned as if no one ever read them. It was hollow, much like her chest felt.

"Do you need anything before I retire?" Mr. Gale asked from the open doorway to the study.

Clover pivoted on her heel, feeling awkward, as if she'd been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. "No. I was just thinking of reading before bed. Thank you, Mr. Gale."

Even Mr. Gale, with whom she had enjoyed a measure of freedom, seemed distant. It

dawned on her that if Mr. Gale were retiring, then Hugo would not be home anytime soon.

“On second thought,” she said before Hugo’s valet was out of earshot. “Are you aware of Mr. Darrington’s schedule on any given night?” She had no more time or patience. It wasn’t normal to involve the staff with such familial discord, but currently Clover didn’t give a fig what anyone thought anymore. She was just this side of angry to be forced into querying Hugo’s servants.

Hugo’s servants. Not hers. Esther had been the only servant she’d brought with her, and she wondered if her maid also felt on the outside.

Mr. Gale looked visibly uncomfortable. The tendons in his neck flexed with his slight grimace. “I’m aware most evenings, yes.”

“And tonight?” She thought she already knew but forced an answer anyway.

“I’ve prepared his room as he wishes when he isn’t expected to return early.”

“And tonight?” she asked again, more forcefully. “You see, Mr. Gale, no one has taken it upon themselves to divulge my husband’s schedule to me.”

“I apologize. I assumed his lordship would provide it, but I’ll inquire tomorrow how he’d like me to proceed if you’d like.”

“I don’t wish for you to ask for me, Mr. Gale. I’m capable of that. What I want to know is when he’ll return tonight. Or if he will return tonight.”

“I cannot say.” Mr. Gale looked flustered and then amended, “Not because I am forbidden, my lady. It’s only that I don’t know.”

She took some pity on poor Mr. Gale. It was possible he felt as awkward at finding a wife in Hugo's home as she felt being a wife in Hugo's home. When would it feel like her home? "I suppose that makes two of us, Mr. Gale." She smiled weakly. "Thank you for your time."

"As always, Mrs. Darrington."

Mrs. Darrington, indeed.

Tonight, she purposed to wait up for her absent husband if it took until sunup. Not once did she believe he was out kicking up mischief. But she did imagine he was avoiding her.

She waited until she was sure Mr. Gale had retired and then proceeded to Hugo's room on her way to her own. She saw his empty valet stand, the bed turned down, and the chess table with each piece in its place. So much of it depressed her. Even the chessboard, which had become something familiar to share with her husband, stood ready for a new game. No piece had been moved for days, attesting to their lack of communication. That would stop tonight. She went into her room and penned a note, then left it on the chessboard, assuming Hugo would find it when he returned.

Clover figured she had two choices. Either she requested to return to Kingsley Manor until Hugo's business with the Belgravia project was finished, or she requested a visit with his family. She didn't expect him to join her. In fact, she didn't want him to. She needed to figure some things out for herself if happiness was to be part of her future. Still, her heart ached for what might have been between them had they enjoyed a normal courtship. Then again, Hugo had never suggested he wished to court her. Now, she'd never know.

Clover didn't mean to fall asleep and had refused to change into a night rail because she thought staying dressed might help her stay awake. As if her body and mind



waited for Hugo's late return, she heard the tiniest click of the adjoining door.

"Clover?" Hugo whispered loudly.

"I'm awake."

"In your clothes?"

She rolled into a sitting position with her feet over the side of the bed. She grabbed her eyeglasses on the bedside table and forced them through her hair, sliding the scissor arms over her ears.

"I see you made a queen's pawn opening." He pointed a thumb toward his room.

"I didn't mean to leave it for you. I'm quite used to playing the game alone. But my heart was not in it tonight."

He stepped fully into the room, concern etched across his brow. "Are you not feeling well?"

"How I feel and how I feel are two different matters, I assure you. My health is of no consequence, but my emotions are teetering on the edge."

"You wanted me home earlier?" He moved farther into the room. His confusion clearly stated by his tone alone.

"No."

"If you don't tell me, I cannot fix it."

"Hugo, I realize you've never been married before, but surely you've lived with

others long enough to know what good manners are.”

He shut his eyes and shook his head like a marble came loose. His hands went to his hips in a commanding position. “My manners are in question? I don’t think I’ve ever been told that before.”

“Not even the night you and Rochester got drunk and lost a fortune?”

A pained expression fled across his features, but anger ruled. “How long must I be punished for that? And may I remind you that it had nothing to do with you. Ever.”

“Are you angry, Husband?”

“You can see I am.”

“Perfect, now the playing ground is even.”

“What on earth do you have to be angry about?”

“When your valet knows more about your schedule and you than I do, then something is amiss. I had to ask Mr. Gale if you planned to return home early tonight. His look might have been comical had I been in a good humor.”

His hands dropped with a relieved sigh, his posture no longer stiff. “You’re right.”

“Am I?” She didn’t want to dismiss her irritation with one of his good-natured lessons.

“It’s simply something else I need to correct. I’ll be sure to leave you my schedule as soon as I make plans.”

“Without me,” she said, finishing his sentence with her own concerns at the forefront.  
“You make plans without me every day.”

“What do you want from me?” The question was on the verge of sounding angry again, but Clover could see he was fighting with himself and maybe a little tired, too.

“I want you to initiate a conversation with me. I want you to think about me not as a guest but as a...” She licked her lips. “A friend.”

“A friend?” He chuckled the words. “I’m not interested in a friend.”

“No? How did I get that wrong? You never come to my room without an invitation. Even friends are less considerate than that.”

He stood back, crossing his arms, and he dared to slant a smile at her. “You want me, Clover? Is that what you’re trying to say?”

“No. I don’t want you if you must know. What I’d like is for you to want me.”

Now, he began to stalk her from across the room. “You don’t think I want you?”

She shook her head, edging farther back on the bed. “I’m not asking here and now. I simply want you to be more considerate.”

“I’m only responding to your suggestion that I not wait for an invitation. Or I can go to bed and lie there, hoping you’ll open the door.”

“You don’t do that.”

“No?”

She shook her head again.

He stood before her. Her feet now tucked under her skirts as she looked up at him, daunted by his height and seductive smile.

“Don’t feel the need to patronize me now.”

“Patronize?” His voice had turned playful. He crawled onto the bed, bracketing her in, leaning over her with his knees at her hips.

She lay back, spreading her hands over his chest. “Not now.”

He looked at her mouth. “First, you infiltrate my study in the middle of the day.” He touched her lips with a smiling kiss. “Then you haunt my dreams when I’m alone.” He nuzzled her neck. “And then you leave a message seeking my company in the middle of the night.” He bit her ear. “And you expect me not to patronize you? I’m not sure you know the meaning of the word because I want you, Clover. Never doubt that.”

Want, yes. This she knew. But desire or love, these things were missing from their marriage.

She pushed against his chest without any real force. “It’s bedtime.”

“I’m in bed.”

“My bed.” She gave him an arched look. “Hugo, I wanted to talk with you.”

He narrowed his eyes. There may have been disappointment there, but for what? He moved away, climbing up to the pillows where he rested his head against his bent arm, his knee drawn up in gentlemanly leisure.

“Get your boots off my bed, please.”

“You’ll have to take them off. Besides, you didn’t seem to mind me wearing them in my study when you accosted me.”

She started to comply with his suggestion and yanked at one bootheel. “I did not notice your boots until we were quite involved.” He sat up and pulled off his other boot. “By the time I noticed, it was too late to take them off. As I recall, I was wearing my slippers, too.”

“And your dress.”

“And you, your breeches.”

“It was fun, though. Don’t you think?”

She didn’t want to admit it. He looked too sure of himself just yet. “It was pleasant.” She looked away, brushing dried dirt from the beautiful teal spread.

“Have I lost all my charm so soon in our marriage?”

“You have it in spades. It’s conversation I want.”

He sobered, and she could see him giving her his full attention. He lay down again, still a man of leisure but listening.

“I want to visit your family,” she said, turning her back to him.

He let out a loud sigh, and she could only imagine the look of disappointment on his face. “We talked about this.”

“No,” she said, looking over her shoulder. “You said our wedding had been planned too quickly for them to make the trip. You never suggested we shouldn’t visit them.”

“And what part of I cannot leave the city now did you not understand?”

She pulled her mouth into a line, rolling her eyes shut. “You’re being rude, and I don’t know why since rudeness is not your general reaction. But every time I bring up your family, you turn surly. Do you not get along? Am I missing something?”

He lay back against the pillows, staring at the canopy. “We get along well. They are genuinely kind people.”

“Then why, Hugo?” She pulled herself into a sitting position next to him.

“I don’t know.”

“I think you do.”

He gazed at her. “Then you tell me.”

She shook her head, exasperated. “You’re a child. Do you know that?”

He cocked a half grin. “Absolutely. Is it charming?”

Her gaze fell to his mouth. “Sometimes.” His smile grew wider. “But not now.”

He let out a groan from his throat. “There are many emotions attached to going home, to seeing my sisters whom I feel responsible for, to seeing my mother who deserves a holiday but won’t take one, to my father who deserves patience and understanding because he is so damaged he cannot speak of it.”

“And?”

“And because I acted carelessly, and I’m still trying to make up for it.”

“What sign have they given that they don’t wish to see you?”

“None,” he grumbled. His arm went about her waist, and he pulled her down beside him. Both of them watching each other from their own pillows.

“Then why not allow me to see them? Perhaps I can bridge some of that gap.”

“No, Clover. You don’t understand.”

“No, I don’t because I lost my parents, and I’d do anything to see them again.”

He smoothed a hair from her cheek. “When I’m ready, I’ll take you there. I promise.”

He looked sincere, but she didn’t trust him to know himself so well that he’d keep his promise. However, she couldn’t resist the weariness she saw in his eyes, either. She put an arm around his hips and laid her head on his chest. “Just promise me you won’t table this conversation. That’s all I ask.”

### CHAPTER 23

Hugo had fallen asleep in his wife's bed, with her head on his stomach and his hand in her golden hair which smelled like heaven. He should have anticipated her desire to meet his family. But against all odds, he had taken pleasure in their honeymoon stage, trying to imagine it as something that came before. The thought helped him cage the forced part of their marriage agreement. He wanted to throw away that key for good.

Hope had lasted two and a half weeks, and now the question had been born, threatening to destroy the few gains they had made as a couple. She wanted to talk, so they talked for precisely two minutes before he said no. It was the aftermath which took all night. He was having a hard enough time finding his footing without having to explain his family. It's not that they weren't wonderful people because they were. It wasn't embarrassment precisely, either. It was his father who lived a bit like a hermit away from the house, tinkering with his music boxes and mumbling to himself. How was he to help her understand the mystery of his father when he hadn't discovered all the truths himself? He had enough on his plate juggling business contacts while trying to figure out what marriage was supposed to be or answer the terrifying question of how he would handle his responsibilities when children came. He'd remained a bachelor so he could pursue a comfortable living without failing his family.

Business risk, he understood. If everything fell apart, he would go home and start again. But now, he had a wife and a future he could not fathom.

It was nearly noon, and Clover still slept. It had been close to dawn by the time their



discussion subsided, so Hugo left her slumbering and paid a visit to Rochester's home in Mayfair. Hugo half hoped to see Rochester's new wife because Evelyn Rochester was Clover's dear friend. He needed insight because every day they were married, he realized how little he knew Clover.

"The green salon," Rochester's butler said as he directed Hugo through the foyer to a room he had never seen.

He had always conducted business with Rochester in the drawing room. Few rooms had been finished for visitors, so the salon was something new. The butler left him alone while he announced his visit. Hugo had come without notice. But his friendship with Rochester didn't call for it. They'd been through more than most friends, and their bond was more family than anything.

"Hugo," Rochester said, his bouncing voice paving the way for good cheer. "What do you think?" Rochester asked about the new room, his arms spread wide. "Puce green."

"Puce is not green."

"That's what Evelyn says. She's not fond of it, but it's rather grown on me."

Hugo gave the room a cursory look. Comfortable furnishings, a settee, two chairs, four side tables, and a small bar with spirits.

"I prefer the drawing room, if you must know. But Evelyn says we need to break in this room. That somehow friends will make my choice of color feel inviting and warm. That and a pianoforte."

"No doubt it's warm. You picked this?" Rochester had beautiful taste, but Hugo thought the room would take some time to get used to.

Rochester motioned for him to sit and then poured two drinks. “Brandy? I hope it will do. The whiskey is in the billiard room. Or we could always play a game.” Rochester jerked his head toward the hallway.

Rochester was always up for a game, but Hugo needed to relax with a friend who understood him. “This is perfect.” He raised his glass.

“Why the surprise visit?”

“Home is getting more difficult to recognize these days. Even the mirror looks back at me like a stranger.”

Rochester sat opposite Hugo in one of the facing chairs. “It’s easy to lose oneself after marriage.”

“Not you. Not Winn. You both seem to flourish. I’m floundering. I find myself staying at the club and signing up for fights I’m not interested in.”

“You must be winning because you don’t look worse for wear.”

“It’s been a good place to work out frustration.”

“I wouldn’t be too hard on yourself.”

“I’m not worried about me. I’m worried about Clover. She seemed happier than I initially did, but lately, she looks as forlorn as I feel.”

“You didn’t plan this, so give yourself time. She’s a beautiful woman. That ought to make it easier.”

Hugo shot him a dissecting stare, a warning. “That isn’t the problem.”

“Then what is?” Rochester sat back, placing his snifter on a doily. Fastidious to a fault.

“I’m not certain. At first, I was angry because no one wishes to be told who to marry or when.”

“I understand better than most, my friend.”

“Then I thought my anger was because of the business. As I told you before, risk is easier when there isn’t a family involved.”

“But what you’re doing has always been for family. Your family. What’s different now?”

“My safety net has always been to move home if everything goes to shite. Now—” He sighed. “Rochester, I don’t want to take her there. I don’t want that to be her life. Or mine. She’s grown up as the daughter of a duke. Balls, the Season, all of it. These are things I’ve hoped to provide my own sisters. What if I fail and cannot provide for anyone at all?”

“That’s not going to happen. You are a genius when it comes to investing and weighing risk. Why do you think we all trust you so much? And by the way, I have part of what I owe you. Maybe that will help.”

Hugo waved it away. “I’m not hurting. There’s no rush. This is bubbling up from fear, not reality.”

“I think it’s more than that, my friend.”

Hugo shrugged, examining the contents of his glass.

“What have the past two weeks been like?” Rochester asked thoughtfully in a steady, calming voice.

“Surprisingly good. We both seem to be making the best of an awkward situation.”

“But not good enough?” Rochester asked the right questions.

Hugo rubbed the back of his neck. “No. I can’t seem to put a finger on my feelings about it.”

“You’ve always been attracted to her.”

Hugo looked up. “Yes. And that’s the thing. Had our friendship continued, perhaps it would have led to courting her, to a connection which springs naturally into something eternal.”

“But you’ll never know. And that’s the crux, isn’t it? You need to know the sure bet, and it’s eating away at your pursuit of perfect truth. No risk, no gain, my friend.”

He snapped his finger. “Exactly. I’ll never know how I truly feel about her. Or how she feels about me.”

“Does it matter?” Rochester sat forward. “Let me tell you something about yourself, Darrington. You weigh everything by risk. You study the facts, the market. You watch people walk in and out of the Bank of England for hours just to see who frequents it the most. You play the odds by instinct and have the most amazing intuition. But this is something different.”

“Yes. It’s a woman.”

“A woman you had not considered because why? Because you haven’t had time, not

because you weren't interested."

"For a man who is supposed to be good with risk, I was a fool to place that bet against the idiots who tried to defame her."

"The real question is, why did you do it."

"I'm afraid I'm not ready to answer that question, except to say no woman deserves that." Rochester studied Hugo for a quiet moment. "Thursday, we were strolling the park. The weather was chilly, and there weren't many people out. But there was a man who made the grave error of poking fun at my wife, so I poked my fist into his eye."

Rochester sat back and chuckled. "I wouldn't expect less."

"I wanted to do more, the foul-mouthed heathen. Before I could throw the third punch, Clover was tugging on my sleeve. I was ashamed for possibly embarrassing her. But then she took this man to task. It was a thing to witness, you know. This quiet woman who plays chess with herself stood up against the dunderhead and not only insisted he address her properly as Mrs. Darrington but also expected him to pay me the wager due because I had obviously won her over."

"And have you? Won her over, I mean?"

"I might have thought so until yesterday. She wants to meet my family. But I don't want her to. I knew you might understand a bit of that."

"Somewhat. Except your family has always been good and kind."

"My relationship with them is complicated and marred by such responsibility that it's difficult to see anything else. But I am truly not resentful, you know. My father isn't

in a good place.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Oh, hell. He’s never been in a good place as far as I can remember.”

“He’s ill, Hugo. But not like my father, who suffers from something explainable.” Rochester’s father had lived a life of drinking too much and hating too much.

“All well and good, but his injuries are emotional, mental, and what most would deem unstable. Unsuitable for the general public. The backlash for a man is great. My mother lives in fear he’ll be declared a lunatic and taken to an asylum.”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t aware of that. But you are also smart enough to realize the truth.”

He nodded with a sigh. “It doesn’t make it easier. Clover is from a family of consequence who may look upon a mental condition with severe bias. There are those who believe lunacy is hereditary. The fact I don’t believe he’s a lunatic means nothing. With the power of his title alone, the duke could have my father institutionalized. Add to it that his sister is married into the family, and the duke would have more clout.”

“I doubt it. Even the duke doesn’t seem the type to judge.”

“No? He judged me right into a wedding. Worst of all, I could have invited my family, but I purposely sent them notice too late. And Clover doesn’t know that. What will she find if I allow her to go? How will it affect the way she sees me? No one likes a liar.”

“You didn’t lie to her. Besides, what’s the worst that could happen if you allow her to go? That she falls in love with your family? That she finds your father a sweet, eccentric, fascinating man?”

Falls in love. This gave Hugo pause. He felt crushed, like his heart weighed him

down because dammit if he didn't want her to fall in love with him. The notion was ridiculous under the circumstances, and conversely, Hugo didn't feel the need to reciprocate that love. Today, he might admit it was because he was afraid to care too much. It might silence his instincts into the poor house because he knew the odds were against them.

"I hate to ask, Rochester, but I need a favor." Hugo sat forward, balancing his elbows on his knees, steeping his fingers against his chin.

"Anything in my power."

"I need your wife."

"Anything but that." Rochester laughed despite how it all sounded. "I assume you're looking for insight." He sobered but still held his signature smile. Rochester had always been the amiable, easygoing one in the group.

"Clover trusts her. I'm not looking to breach that trust, but perhaps she can help me understand why Clover might choose this moment to visit my family without me."

"Evelyn's about somewhere. Give me a moment to find her." With his hands on the arms of the chair, Rochester pushed himself up in one smooth motion and left the room.

Hugo's pulse ran, and he tried to temper it by examining the room at large. It was big enough for a pianoforte, and he had little doubt they'd be visiting often, listening to music and lilting voices. He wondered if Clover played an instrument or if she sang. Music soothes the soul. Or so he'd heard. Until now, he'd never needed his soul massaged. He had accepted its inevitable pursuit of fire and brimstone. Fate was truly fickle as well as humorless.

“Mr. Darrington,” Evelyn Rochester said, preceding her husband into the room with her hand outstretched. Hugo took it, bowing over it, eager to launch into his agenda.

“It’s a pleasure, as always, Mrs. Rochester,” Hugo said, standing, politely waiting for the woman of the house to signal they should sit again.

Rochester took the same chair as before and his wife the settee.

Hugo brushed his palms down his jacket as he sat on the edge of the seat cushion. “I was hoping you might lend me a hand with Mrs. Darrington.”

“I assume you mean Clover and not your mother.”

Hugo gave a half smile. “Assuredly.” He took a deep breath. “Has she shared with you her feelings about the wedding? More importantly, about my family’s absence?”

“Mr. Darrington, my relationship with Clover is bound by trust. Do you expect me to break it?”

He put up his hand. “I understand that. I’m not asking for you to share a secret.”

“Then why ask me at all? Why not ask Clover if she missed your family being there?”

Hugo didn’t need much more than that to form an assumption. The way Mrs. Rochester said the words pointed to conversations involving his family and their lack of attendance at the wedding. He scratched his head, avoiding Mrs. Rochester’s eyes. “You needn’t say anything more.”

“But I will.” Evelyn Rochester had been the author of the Breaking the Rules game. Her outspokenness was part of her. “Has she asked to visit them? Your family, I



mean.”

“Precisely,” he said with relief.

Before he could expound, she continued, “We’ve spoken in length about visiting our families. Your family estate isn’t more than a few hours’ drive from my father’s. May I suggest you allow her to go with me? I’d like to see Papa before Christmas, and now is the perfect time. We can take our coach,” she said, turning to Rochester.

Rochester didn’t say a thing. He just raised his brows at Hugo.

“That’s more than generous. I’ll think on it.”

“Don’t take too long, Darrington.” She left off the mister because before they’d all been married, they had enjoyed a convivial friendship. Doing so now made the atmosphere feel more intimate, giving her words additional weight.

“Do you think she’d like that?”

“No. I think she’d love it.” She turned back to Rochester. “Dalton, you can send with us as many outriders as you wish. We won’t need a companion or chaperone because we have one another.” She turned back to Hugo. “And we’ll have hours and hours to talk.” Her gaze softened on Hugo, and her genuine smile was a plea for his approval.

“I agree,” Hugo heard himself say. When he arrived, the idea had been so foreign to him that he hardly believed he was agreeing to it now. “But take our coach. It’s new. A gift from the duke, and I’m sure Clover would enjoy sharing it with you.”

Hugo left the Rochesters without a solid plan, but he had worked through the bumps by the time he reached his townhouse. He wanted to see her excited and happy again like she had been when he sprung the visit to the boxing club on her. That night had

culminated in a passionate exchange. He didn't hope for that now. But he did anticipate her smile.

Hugo passed off his coat to Mr. Langley. "Where is Mrs. Darrington?"

"I believe she's in the drawing room, sir."

Darrington slowed his steps. He paused outside the door and then turned the knob. Clover looked up from the window seat when he crossed into the room. She gave him a cordial smile. Her hands were busy with a ball of yarn and needles. He didn't even know she knitted.

"You're knitting," he said, pointing to her project. "Booties, perhaps?" He was teasing, but his stomach flipped into his throat when she nodded. "You... Are you?"

She scrunched her forehead, then opened her eyes wide and put aside the needles. "Not me." She chuckled, putting him at ease. "Oh, Hugo, I'm sorry. I am making these for little Chase Markham."

He held a hand to his chest and felt the need to sit. "You gave me a start."

"I hope a good one. There's no telling when a babe will come unless, of course, I take Evelyn's advice."

Perfect opening. He let the remark about children pass. "Speaking of the Rochesters, I've just come from there, and I had an interesting discussion with your friend."

"Evelyn? What about?"

"You."

“Hugo Darrington. You discussed me with my dear friend? Are you spying or prying?”

“No, no, no.” He pointed to the knitting, and she gathered the light-blue wool and placed the lot in a basket at her feet. He swept his hand over the green paisley cushion and then sat next to her, their knees touching. The little alcove was a cozy fit, and he was suddenly bursting to tell her. “I was discussing your trip to Dovetail Manor.” When she didn’t respond, he splayed his hand on his chest and leaned in. “My family home.”

She sat back as far as she could. Her eyes pleaded with him as if she didn’t believe it. “You’re taking me to meet your family? But I thought you couldn’t leave.”

“Not me. Evelyn Rochester suggested you travel together. She’s in need of a visit with her father, and their estate is no more than two hours from my family. You can take our coach and show off the pink interior, and I’ll send outriders and Mr. Gale. You can take your maid with you or not. You and Mrs. Rochester are both married women, so a companion isn’t needed.” He waited for her reaction, but none came. That worried him. “I was hoping you’d be happy. You don’t have to go.”

She blew out a hard breath, and her gaze slowly reached his. “You’re trusting me to travel alone? To meet your family without you?”

“Clover, I can’t get away. If you’d like to wait for me, it will be after the winter thaw. I’m happy to do that, though. This is your decision.”

“Oh, I’m going.” The smile he’d been waiting for burst across her cheeks, a ray of sunshine in a home where shadows had formed. “Thank you for trusting me.”

“It’s not a matter of trust, darling. It’s a matter of fear.”

She put a hand to his arm. Through his sleeve, through his anxiety, that one action penetrated his heart, and he knew he had made the right decision.

“You’ve nothing to fear.” A chuckle bloomed into a smile. “I’m delighted to meet your family. I cannot wait to share our family with them.” She waved a hand between them.

He’d never thought of it that way—they were a family, the two of them. He almost wished she was with child. In that moment, he enjoyed a freedom like he’d never known. There were no investors, no business deals, no odds to consider. It was her smile. And he had his answer to Rochester’s question. Why did he do it? He did it for the love of Clover. He allowed the joy to penetrate his heart and almost wished he was going with her.

Almost.

### CHAPTER 24

As Clover left Hugo behind, she wondered if she would miss him. She wondered if they had spent enough time together to form that kind of bond. She wondered if he would miss her or find his familiar solitude comforting.

By the time she and Evelyn reached the outskirts of the city, there was one thing Clover missed. She missed the overly jovial smile he'd been wearing since he told her about the trip. A small part of her wished he would have come. But a more significant part of her was happy to meet his family without a mediator. The trip seemed to make him nervous, and she wondered if he didn't wish to see them at all. It was one more mystery about the man and their strange marriage. A forced wedding wasn't so unusual amongst the ton. But the way theirs had come about had left her feeling confused.

"Evelyn, thank you for coming with me. I don't think Darrington would have allowed it otherwise."

"I was happy to offer. And look at this coach. It's simply gorgeous. Darrington said your brother picked it out."

"Kingsley thought the interior would make me feel as if I still had choices because I'm certain Hugo would not have chosen powder pink. Anyway, it must be destiny because here we are, best of friends, both dressed in burgundy traveling costumes that complement the seats. Who can tell us apart?" she teased.

"You're the one wearing spectacles, and I'm the one wearing a hat."

Clover laughed for the truth of it. “I was wearing neither this morning when Darrington settled me into the coach. He ran back into the house and grabbed the eyeglasses and the hat. Actually ran, Evelyn. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him move so fast. When he got to the coach, he threw the hat on the seat and instructed me not to wear it because he knows how much I hate them. And then he placed the eyeglasses on my nose and fixed the hair over my shoulders.”

“He’s going to miss you. I just know it.”

“Perhaps. He’s very busy right now. He plans to spend all his time with Kingsley and Rochester while I’m gone. He promised not to participate in a pugilist match until I return, though.” She couldn’t help the little leap in her chest that he would wish to wait for her.

“Do you know you smile every time you talk about him?” Evelyn gazed at her thoughtfully.

“I do not.” Clover blushed despite her denial.

“You do. Sometimes it’s a sad smile, but it’s a smile, nonetheless.” Evelyn took off her hat and placed it on the seat opposite Clover’s. “Do you love him?” Evelyn asked while she busied herself, patting her hair back into place.

Clover couldn’t understand how someone could look so beautiful all the time. Evelyn was a masterpiece. Even her hair obeyed. Unlike Clover’s. Whenever she removed a hat, her hair went to pieces like a haystack in the wind. The color even resembled the metaphor. “It’s too early in the trip to discuss something so baffling as love. When did you know you loved Rochester?” The coach was so new and well-sprung that Clover hardly heard the tack jingle.

“When he was standing on the sidelines at my come out. Do you remember them?

Winn, Rochester, and Darrington showing up at Almack's? They nearly made me swoon, for the shock of it, mind you."

"I think your brother was so taken with Adeline then that he convinced Darrington and Rochester to attend him."

"He did the same at your Christmas party. I dare say his marriage to Adeline was nicely wrapped up that weekend."

Clover bit her lip. "I believe you're right. When was your marriage wrapped up and made a certainty?"

"When I fell out my window in the middle of the night right into Rochester's arms. It's a wonder he spoke to me at all after that stunt."

"How could he resist?"

"He did try," Evelyn said, with a wicked smile curving her lips.

Clover watched the countryside. The green bowing grass, forever wet with dew and mist at this time of year, waved at them like they were an important procession. It reminded her how significant this trip was. "You and Addy have such a wonderful love story to tell."

"Scandalous ones, to be true."

"I've managed the scandal part easily enough, but the love match..." She shook her head, unable to say more.

"The love match is there. Any fool can see that."

“Then I wish I were a fool. Although I feel as if I’ve played that hand already, too.” She took a deep breath. “Did you know he kissed me in a secret garden at Mrs. LaDow’s weekend party?”

“It sounds beautiful.”

Clover looked at her friend, pretending for a moment that she was right. “He kissed me again in the Pleasure Gardens while I was backed up against a tree. That kiss is what culminated in a wedding. I suspect Kingsley was there spying on me.”

“And the duke didn’t kill Darrington?”

“No doubt he didn’t know about the wagers at the time. But I did. I went there to confront Hugo.”

“And you fell in love instead.”

Clover shut her eyes against the tears she felt building. “Perhaps. The truth is I don’t know anymore. He made me forget where we were. The trees were a hushed whisper overhead telling me it was real, and Evelyn, I could have stayed there forever. Sometimes, I wonder if the wagers hadn’t happened if we would have found each other at the altar.”

Evelyn remained quiet, her gaze sympathetic and supportive. She listened without opinion or judgment.

Clover took off her spectacles, retrieved the little velvet pouch they came in, and placed them inside. “They give me the headache, sometimes. Hugo insists I wear them because I missed acknowledging him across a ballroom more than once.”

Evelyn’s laughter cheered the air. “Did you tell him about Mr. Franklin?”



Clover nodded, joining in with a chuckle. “These”—she held up the drawstring pouch with the eyeglasses—“were the second gift he gave me. Can you imagine? He walked me into a jeweler’s without a word and guided me straight to the glass counter with a dozen eye pieces lying atop. He bribed me with a trip to the boxing club.”

Evelyn sucked in a breath. “You went? Oh, Clover. Don’t you see, he does love you. Why would he risk such a thing if he did not?”

“We kissed there, too,” she said shyly. Evelyn’s dreams were more optimistic than Clover’s.

“What was the first gift he gave you?”

“A pair of lace gloves because I managed to smear a bit of Darrington’s blood on them when he scraped his hand in the maze. Evelyn? Do you think Hugo is embarrassed of me? Or his family? He doesn’t like to speak of them. He didn’t even seem upset they didn’t make it to the wedding. I don’t know what you said to him, but I thank you for it because I fear I might have never met them otherwise. Darrington said he couldn’t get away until after the winter thaw and didn’t encourage me to write them. He seemed overly concerned about me meeting them, especially his father.”

“Rochester says Darrington’s father is eccentric. Perhaps that’s his fear.”

“The man makes music boxes. He sounds lovely to me, but Hugo has expressed several times how his family’s welfare is on his shoulders. He carries an emotional load I don’t think people are aware of. He didn’t deserve to be saddled with me. I ruined his best plans.”

“I don’t get that impression. In fact, I believe he cares very much for you. Why else would he chance to ask Rochester for a word with me?”

Clover breathed in the new coach with its thickly tufted pink squabs mingled with the scent of rain like a fresh start. Like the future. “He’s very attracted to me. That’s as much as I can say. It’s all I can say about our relationship. It could be worse, I suppose. We could hate each other. My fear is when the infatuation wears off we will hate each other.”

“Passion burns at both ends. As long as you’re not somewhere in the middle, there’s hope. Besides, I don’t believe for one minute you are only infatuated with him. I saw you dance at your Christmas party two years ago. Dressed like Sleeping Beauty. He couldn’t take his eyes off you.”

“Keep that thought close and don’t give up on me.”

Evelyn reached across the seats and squeezed her hand. “Never.”

“Now, tell me again how you and Rochester manage to avoid having children.”

Evelyn blushed, choking on a laugh.

“That’s what you said when we were visiting with Adeline. ‘Not the way Rochester does it’ were your exact words.”

“It’s messy business. Need I say more?” Evelyn’s cheeks competed nicely with her burgundy outfit.

Clover giggled, a sure sign she was feeling like herself. “Say no more. I’ll ask Darrington.”

“Don’t you dare,” Evelyn said on a gasp. “He’ll wonder why.”

“Then I suggest you start talking.”

Evelyn bit her lip. “Well, he doesn’t finish.”

“At all?” Clover couldn’t imagine Hugo would wish to sacrifice his own pleasure, although he’d taken care of her often enough.

“Oh, heavens, Clover. Don’t make me say it out loud.”

Clover waved a hand. “It’s all right. I’ll just ask my husband.”

“Do not.” Evelyn closed her eyes and rushed on. “He does not finish inside me.” She peeked one eye open.

“It makes perfect sense. I don’t believe we’ve tried that yet.” Clover was truly intrigued. She wanted children. For goodness’ sake, she could be carrying one now for all she knew. But such a trick would come in handy between children, surely.

“Clover, since we’re having this candid discussion, tell me something. Are you enjoying it?”

Clover’s brow creased. “Am I supposed to not enjoy it?”

Evelyn shrugged. “I think some women don’t. I’ve heard some wives are relieved when their husbands stray or keep a mistress.”

“Truly? If it were me, I would use everything my husband has taught me about throwing a punch and cuff him in the eye and, perhaps, somewhere lower.” She raised her brows for emphasis.

“He may rue the day he taught you that,” Evelyn said while laughing. She cleared her throat. “Do you want children?”

“Yes. Eventually. But first, I’d like to give us time to figure out where our feelings lie. My hope is his family will help me understand him better because most of our conversations are superficial. His answers seem guarded. We’re both careful not to hurt the other. Everything is a question, and all the answers are appropriately timed, each word weighed, the mood examined so much that truth has become static and unreliable. I fear if we keep on like this, we will be lucky to hold a friendship tight.”

“You just need time to give it a chance to bloom. That’s all. As for family, it can be complicated. Rochester and my father walk on pins and needles, and Rochester’s father is on the mend from a lifetime of hate.”

“I’m afraid if we have a family too early we’ll never find each other, and I’ll be destined to live out the real Sleeping Beauty’s fate. I feel as if I’m asleep, Evelyn.”

“Absence is great fertilizer.”

“Like manure?” Clover comically flared her eyes.

After dropping Evelyn at her father’s, Clover missed the company. The ride to Dovetail Manor took another hour, and the silence devoured and undermined her confidence. She began to question the wisdom of showing up alone at her in-law’s home. Hugo had sent a letter ahead of her, but there was no way to know if it arrived in time.

When the coach pulled off the main road and took a private lane, she wrestled her hat onto her head and fought with the ribbons under her chin. She smiled, remembering how Hugo had pulled a finger through the knot of her bonnet in the Pleasure Gardens and whipped it from her head. He had placed it between them. She felt as if it was still there, a barrier to her happily ever after if such a thing existed.

They passed an empty gatehouse, and minutes later, the coach rounded a well-paved

circular drive, which put her at the front door. The lawns were neatly manicured. She could imagine, in spring, the colorful blooms of flora that would complement the lush green hedgerow following the front steps from the drive to the door. The simple taupe bricks were made more beautiful by the stark white of the window casements. A magnificent sheen of burgundy red paint, a color that rivaled her traveling suit, covered the large front door.

Mr. Gale helped her up the steps and pulled the brass knocker. Clover waited, her heart hammering away like an overzealous woodpecker. She licked her lips as the heavy door opened. A tall man with blond hair that must have once been red stood in front of them, the look of a butler about his unflappable countenance.

“Mrs. Hugo Darrington,” Mr. Gale said with a short bow.

The butler’s surprise showed only in the raise of one bushy eyebrow. The door swung wide, and while Mr. Gale held back, Clover followed the butler to a formal parlor that overlooked the front lawns. She stood in the middle of the room, unsure for the first time in her life how to go about the introductions. Pastel yellow silk covered the walls, matching the furnishings and curtains. Simple but elegant would be her description.

“Lady Clover,” a woman rushed into the room, her hands gathered, her eyes wide. “We expected you tomorrow. I would have had my staff waiting for you.” The woman whose brown hair had streaks of gray strode toward Clover. “Forgive me, I’m Hugo’s mother, Mrs. Catherine Darrington.”

Clover supposed that much, but she smiled with relief, nonetheless. “Mrs. Darrington, I apologize for the early arrival. I assumed the post had the correct information.”

“Not to worry, I’m glad you’re here.” Mrs. Darrington gathered Clover’s hands, making an arc with her arms. “Look how beautiful you are. I admit I never thought

my Hugo would marry. We are thrilled beyond knowing. And I imagine you're a bit overwhelmed." Mrs. Darrington motioned to the settee. "Please sit, refreshments are coming."

Clover gladly removed her hat and sat next to Hugo's mother. The refreshments came with a gaggle of young women. Three, to be exact, looking suspiciously like Hugo's sisters. Phoebe, who was married, was the oldest of the girls, with the same nut-brown hair as the rest of the family, including Hugo. Then came Emma, who looked to be old enough for a Season, and Grace, a couple of years younger than Emma.

"We've made up Hugo's room for you. I hope it suits. I've assigned a maid to look after you while you're here."

"I'm certain it's all perfect."

"Is there a babe yet?" Grace asked, an innocent excitement about her. "I cannot wait to be an aunt, and Phoebe has not blessed us yet."

"Grace," her mother admonished. "The question is inappropriate no matter the company."

Emma rolled her eyes, and Phoebe gave Clover an apologetic smile with a hint of humor behind it.

"I don't mind, truly," Clover said. "None that I'm aware of, Grace. But you will be the first to know."

The maid, Charlotte, greeted her as she was shown to Hugo's room. It looked like him, with dark-walnut furnishings and a bed frame with a high, carved headboard. It was surprisingly made cheery by a sky-blue coverlet that matched the small settee before the fireplace. She settled herself on the settee, allowing Charlotte to help with

unpacking, and then fell upon the bed when the maid left.

Although the room looked like Hugo, it didn't smell like him. It smelled of wood polish and aired fabric. By the time she changed clothes, the sun was setting, and dinner was called. Never had she been at a table with so many family members. It had been just her and Stratford for too long. She tried to imagine it as a party, but Grace's excitement kept her focused and present where she should be.

"Are you really the sister of a duke?" Grace asked. Clover had assured her and Mrs. Darrington that she welcomed the questions. Clover knew too well what it was like not to have answers.

"I am a duke's sister and now the wife of your brother, a very prominent man."

"Hugo could be an earl someday. Is that why you married him?" Grace continued.

Phoebe interjected, "Grace, take some time to quiet yourself. Lady Clover will be here tomorrow."

Clover smiled and winked at Grace. In truth, she was relieved to escape answering the question of why she married Hugo. It was possible his family did not know. "Grace, would you like to call me Clover? We are sisters by law, after all. And my friends don't use titles."

Grace looked to her mother, who nodded her approval.

Clover missed meeting Hugo's father, and no one spoke of him or made excuses for his absence. She wanted to meet him but wasn't sure how to go about it. If Hugo's fears were valid, she wondered if she would ever meet him. Manners told her not to ask, but her heart was willing to take the chance. This man was the reason Hugo worked so hard.

### CHAPTER 25

Everything Clover had seen of the property was beautiful, warm, welcoming, and she could see why Hugo wished to keep it well for his family. In just a day, she had grown fond of his sisters. The shy, awkward discomfort of meeting her mother-in-law without Hugo by her side dissipated with every delighted smile from the woman. His family was precious.

But like yesterday, Hugo's father was absent. The word eccentric had been used several times to describe him, but Clover wanted to meet him without additional input. Sometimes, one gets what they expect, and she wanted no other obstacles.

She joined the girls in the music room and listened while Grace played the pianoforte and Emma sang an Irish ballad which Clover had never heard. Phoebe seemed to be assigned for her entertainment and had planned to spend a week away from her husband to visit with Clover. Clover suspected it may have been to keep Grace from asking too many personal questions.

"Phoebe, I understand your father makes music boxes. Hugo has spoken of it on occasion. Is there any way I might see one?"

"Papa builds the most wonderful music contraptions," Emma said between songs. "Each of us has one."

"Does Hugo have one, also?" Clover's curiosity was piqued.

"Oh, he does," Grace said, with her fingers resting on the piano keys. "We all do."



“I’ve never seen it.”

“That’s because he leaves it here,” Emma said. “He says it’s too delicate to travel with.” Emma’s long brown curls were like polished mahogany. She was bound to have offers her first year. Clover hoped she would wait for the right one.

“But Hugo doesn’t live here. How does he enjoy such a personal gift?”

Emma added, “He comes home at least every other Christmas, except for the time he was absent for several years. But Mama won’t let us ask him about that.”

“He has important business which takes him away sometimes.” Clover felt the need to not only discourage the questions but to defend her husband as well. Hugo’s mother had to know the details of his three-year absence, but it was clear she didn’t want his sisters affected by it. Emma would make a come out next year, and Grace two years after. They didn’t need the worry of a past scandal on their minds while they maneuvered the war zone of matchmakers and husband hunters.

Phoebe had become something of a guide for her, but on the third day of her visit, with no news of Mr. Darrington, Clover decided to broach the subject with Phoebe. She had been married for over a year and was closer to Clover’s age, which meant they had more in common than anyone else in the house.

“You promised to show me the gardens. Might we do that today?” Clover asked Phoebe that morning after breakfast.

They donned their cloaks and gloves, and Phoebe and Clover made their way through the back property, where she was delighted to see a small labyrinth of low-cut hedges. Not one to get lost in, but a work of art. Many of the bushes were cut into shapes, and in the center of the maze, on a rectangle-clipped shrub, stood a topiary of a peacock. It was delightful.

“Hugo and I were almost lost in a hedge maze once.”

“How romantic,” Phoebe said, looping her arm through Clover’s.

“I wouldn’t say that exactly. We were just two people trying to find the way out. I don’t believe he would have ever found his way out had the hostess not given me a map. We traversed it together.”

“Is that where you fell in love?”

Clover’s heart skipped on the word, and she didn’t wish to lie, but neither did she feel the need to share everything. “It was the first time we ever spoke without an audience. I hadn’t anticipated running into him, but I believe he had come to find me to protect me from getting lost. How ironic I was the one with the map.” Then she thought how it must have sounded. “We’ve known each other since my come out.”

“Oh, so it must have been a long courtship.”

“Not in the least. We have mutual friends and were bound to continue running into one another. I guess it was a matter of time.”

“And then you fell in love.”

It was a statement, so Clover let it stand without comment, but she did change the subject. “I was so hoping to meet Hugo’s father. I’ve heard so much about him.” Phoebe’s steps slowed. “Hugo told me he’s unconventionally passionate about his work.”

“Well, that is one way to put it. Papa is a bit of a recluse, I’m afraid.”

“Does he know Hugo married?”

“Oh, yes. He was quite happy about it. I’m sure you’ll have the opportunity to meet him before your visit is over.”

“Phoebe?” Clover stopped and turned toward her new sister-in-law. “Is there any way I might visit with him at his place? Is it nearby?”

“He has a little cottage that he calls his workshop. And in truth, it is a workshop, but Mama has made it as comfortable as a home for him. He’s not always there. There are times when he stays at the main house.” Phoebe swallowed hard, her gaze darting over the ground as if she were considering something. “I wouldn’t ask Mama about him. She’s very protective.”

“I appreciate the warning.”

“But if you’d like to see him, I can take you there.”

“Oh, I don’t wish to cause you trouble.”

Phoebe gave her a thoughtful look. “I believe he would want to meet you, and he’s much better when company is at a minimum.”

“Was he always that way?” Clover hurriedly clarified, “I don’t mean to pry, but Hugo gets uncomfortable when I ask, and I do want to know you all.”

“I’m not entirely sure, but I believe it may have started with the late-century wars. Hugo was born during them, as well as our late brother, William who did not survive. I came along after Papa returned from his obligation. That’s Papa’s word.” Phoebe looked behind her and then back. “Since you are family, let me just say Mama worries someone will try to have him sent to an asylum. I believe that’s Hugo’s fear as well.”

Clover now understood why Hugo worried and why he didn't say much. It didn't sound to her like his father was a lunatic. The importance of meeting him multiplied her need to know. She persevered. "Can you take me there today?"

"I can take you there right now."

Clover followed Phoebe to a cottage built not more than a ten-minute walk from the back lawns. The path was well tended and shored up against the weather with finely ground sandstone and measured stepping stones. The facade matched the brick and windows of the manor house, except it was one story with five windows. Indeed, a large workshop if that's what it was. It looked like a retreat, a painting, with a large oak shading the west side.

She urged Phoebe to speak with Mr. Darrington first and ask permission to visit, which he agreed upon. Then, her remarkably wise sister-in-law made tea and left her alone with Hugo's father. The quaint room looked like any well-furnished English salon decorated in shades of blue. She didn't see a workshop anywhere in sight, although the house was big enough for one and more.

"I always thought Hugo would marry well someday, you know. And such a pretty one he found." Mr. Philip Darrington said as he and Clover settled in for tea.

Clover felt the heat of a blush in her cheeks. But the reaction was more for his features than for his words because Hugo looked a great deal like his father. Even in some of his movements, the way his lip curled when he smiled and the slight dimple at the center of his chin. Although the entire family sported brown hair, Mr. Darrington's and Hugo's were a shade lighter. She began to wonder if their similarities scared Hugo. It stood to reason Hugo might feel uncomfortable if he thought his father's condition was a hereditary mental ailment. Just that simple insight made the trip worth it.

“Thank you, Mr. Darrington. That’s very kind of you. Your son is a handsome devil.”

Mr. Darrington laughed. “He is. Isn’t he? I’ve always said so, you know.”

Even the way he ended a sentence with, you know, reminded her of Hugo. “And it was meant as a compliment for you because the two of you look remarkably alike.”

“It’s been a long time since I’ve heard that. You do an old man well.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know of whom you speak. I see no old man here.” She looked over each shoulder for emphasis. In truth, he couldn’t be any older than fifty-six, but she had to admit he looked a trifle more. Like a man who worried. A man who had survived something. “I’ve heard a rumor that you have a fancy workshop here.” The tone was playful and unthreatening.

“If that’s the only gossip you’ve heard about me, then I count myself lucky. You must wonder why I haven’t been to the house since you arrived.” He sighed, the only sign that this was more than an innocent conversation but one that perhaps weighed on him. “Catherine told me you were here, and she described you to me. I wanted to be there. I really did, you know.”

“It’s of no concern. Hugo has told me many grand things about his wonderful, inventive father.”

“Eccentric father. Now that I would believe.” He held up an index finger.

“He means well.”

“He means what he means, my dear lady. I’ve no delusions about my relationship with my son. He has never had it easy.” She saw his throat bobble as he turned his head away, his gaze vacantly wandering.

Clover had seen this behavior before. The fading out. The heightened joy was followed by what seemed like confusion but certainly was not. She had felt it in herself days after losing her parents. “Mr. Darrington, would it be too forward to request a tour of your workshop?”

His eyes lit up, and his smile radiated warmth and life into the room. Hugo had inherited his passion from the man. “Oh, I thought you’d never ask.”

He showed her to a large room filled with unending projects. Several tables lined the walls, with one high enough to stand and work at in the middle. Most of the surfaces had scattered bits and pieces of tiny screws, metal cylinders, sheets of flattened brass, small boxes, and watch cases. There were gears that reminded her of the belly of a clock, along with beautifully polished pieces of wood and snuff boxes.

“My word, look at this room.”

“It’s chaos. But it’s my chaos,” he said with unabashed happiness.

“Oh, no, I see the workings of a very talented, meticulous inventor.”

“You flatter me. I did not invent the carillon, which was the original name of such a device. But I like to think I’ve perfected it on some level.”

“May I hear one?”

He jumped into action as if he’d known her for years. The energy in his step could be measured by his smile. “Here is a new cylinder I’m working on with an aria from Mozart’s opera, *Le Nozze Di Figaro*. The opening in the last act, where the lovers and cast meet in the garden, is perfect. The notes are clear, distinct enough for a good go, and few enough to make sense.”

The pieces scattered on the table didn't look very musical, but then Clover had never seen the inside of a music box.

“The cylinder rolls like this”—he turned the brass cylinder between his fingers—“and the comb pops against the pins that stick out through the little hammered holes.” He placed the pronged comb over the top of the cylinder. “And there you are, music.” He looked at her as if that said everything. As if it was as easy as all that. The sheer number of gizmos, gadgets, and gears told her otherwise.

“How do you know where to place the holes and what notes the teeth will play?”

“It's like a piano. When you discover where middle C is, the music comes.”

She chuckled her response, “It's that easy, is it?”

He made a thoughtful frown, tapping the cylinder against his chin. “I suppose I've been at this long enough to believe my own musings.”

“I love it. I think it's wonderful, and I hope you'll play it for me someday.”

“It would be a pleasure, my dear. Perhaps you'll come for a long visit. This place is Hugo's, for all intents and purposes. He sees to its care now. He could live here if he wished.”

She was under the impression Hugo's father did not know the details of the finances surrounding the estate. It was clear those around him underestimated him. A plague that seemed to infect the misunderstood like a disease.

“Hugo has talked of living here on occasion.”

Mr. Darrington cocked a brow, and for a moment, it was as if she were looking into

the cynical eyes of her husband. It was the first time she'd missed Hugo since arriving. "He's never said so. How well do you know him?"

"I'm married to him. I suppose I know him well enough."

"Well enough to know his peccadilloes?" The atmosphere was palpable enough to fog the view of cogs and wheels and even the excitement of this place.

"Yes. Our acquaintance goes back a long time, but our friendship is more recent, meeting again after his long absence from London."

Mr. Darrington turned away with a nod, hiding a look of pained disappointment.

"I know he's paid heartily for his mistakes," she hurried to say.

"Too much so." Mr. Darrington surprised her with that comment. "Does he think I'm still upset with him?" He sounded almost desperate. The back of his shoulders stiffened. His head at a questioning tilt.

"Oh, no. I think any resentment or anger he has is aimed at himself."

"It shouldn't be." He turned to face her again. "He takes care of us all, you know."

She smiled at his phrasing. "Mr. Darrington, you remind me so much of Hugo. His speech pattern is the same as yours. His smile, when it comes, is as bright. I believe it would be good for his soul if you told him you're not angry or disappointed with him. He feels his failure so deeply. He's not a man who likes to lose."

"How well I know that." He winked at her. "Neither do I. But Hugo knows. I've told him a hundred times. Or it seems that way. In truth, his visits are short and far between. Hugo saved us. Especially me. And I fight my own demons and guilt every



day for it.”

There was more to this than either son or father was saying. Mr. Darrington idly picked up a tiny gear, rubbing it between his fingers and examining it as if he’d gone somewhere else.

She took a cleansing breath and soldiered on. “Five years ago, my parents’ carriage took a tumble on the highway, and they were both lost to us. Stratford, my brother, was old enough to take over the duties of a duke, but it cut his carefree years with his friends short. Friends he doesn’t have anymore. I don’t think it had to be that way, but Stratford is very methodical and takes his responsibilities perhaps too seriously. Which I can tell you was not good for a girl at her come out.” She ran a finger along the edge of the finely sanded table. From the corner of her eye, she saw him glance her way. “Neither was it good for the girl to be without her mother when she needed her most of all.” She looked across the table, her mouth twitched in a wan smile. Not quite there. Not quite a frown. “Everything changed for me then.”

He put down the gear and watched her intently but said nothing.

“My friends noticed it, too. I had been cheerful, taking such goodness for granted. As for Stratford, he went from being a brother to being the duke. I lost more than Mama and Papa. I lost my brother, my confidant, my friend. We are almost as strangers in some ways now. I rather retreated after that without even thinking about it. Of course, my friends, my real friends, stayed close. But the rest.” She shook her head. “The ideals of the ton and the tediousness of the Season made me feel detached, and I realize now how it was too much to expect everyone to understand something I didn’t understand myself.”

“Like pain.” His eyes were full of concern, shiny with unshed tears, piercing her with such careful intensity as if she were like glass.

“I could hardly eat for months after. All the precepts I’d learned were suddenly enforced, and the pudding had to be perfect before it was proved. I did a good job of it if I say so myself. But also at the expense of myself.” She laid her hands flat on the table and leaned into the conversation. “Mr. Darrington, pain is pain. Hurt is hurt. Trauma is trauma. Or am I wrong and just being a child?”

“You said that so well but missed it for yourself. You’re not wrong, dear girl.” He licked his lips. “I know some of this, too.”

She felt a unique connection to him. Something she saw in his eyes. Something familiar.

“I married the woman I loved. We had several months to write our happily ever after story. And we were na?ve enough to believe it would always be so. The love remains, I assure you. But I have seen things I cannot forget, even in my sleep. It’s why I stay here. It disturbs the only woman who could ever love such a soul. I don’t know what it is about you, but I am inclined to tell you some truths.”

She didn’t answer because she knew sharing such painful memories was something that should not be overly processed. Especially by others.

“I will say of all the men I saved during the revolution, I remember the ones I lost the most.” Silent tears lapped his cheeks. He swallowed hard. “And I cannot forgive that. Even my failure here does not touch that.”

“My pain cannot be compared, except to say you are not misunderstood. You have found a safe haven here.” She spread her arms. “And with your family as well. They adore you.”

“Oh, sweet girl, you’re not hearing me. You’ve yet to accept the lesson, so let me teach you.”

She thought he was going to admonish her for daring to say he was safe or to know anything about him at all. Much less to say it out loud. Her behavior was questionable. But also desperate.

“You already said pain is pain, but you don’t take that within you. Do you think the pain I experienced was more than yours? I ask you, what loss is great enough to claim then? There is always worse out there, and if that’s so, then no one has a right to suffer, do they? The truth is in the question. How much hurt, pain, suffering does it take to validate its reality? My answer is all that you feel. Every bit of your own circumstances is the full limit. That measure belongs to an individual heart. It should not be put on trial, but the world does it daily. People will always weigh pain and hurt, except those who have seen it. And you, my dear girl, have seen it.”

Tears rolled down her cheeks unchecked. She had not thought to learn something about herself. She had accepted her life and plight and rarely talked of it because he was right. She had compared herself to others.

“You are stronger than you think. Remember, the king may need to be conquered, but his movements are few. You are a queen with the freedom to move anywhere. To keep safe, to make safe, and to sacrifice when necessary. Don’t ever stand still. Don’t ever forget that.”

She brandished a handkerchief and dabbed her eyes, thankful she had left her spectacles in her room. “Do you play the royal game, Mr. Darrington?”

He smiled wide then. “Yes, I do.”

“Would you grant me a game sometime?”

“You come back, and I will have the board set.” He walked around the table and took her hand. “How did you know about me?”

“I didn’t until I saw your eyes. You’re right. I know the look, vacant and in pain.” She gave his hand a squeeze. “How can I help you? Can I do something to make it easier for you to visit the house before I leave? If not, that’s all right, I understand. I just want you to know you are welcome with all your feelings.”

He leaned in and kissed her cheek. “As well you are. Hugo is a fortunate man. You are precious. I’ll come to the house soon, and we’ll visit more.”

“Another thing. I’m afraid I did not ask Mrs. Darrington for permission to see you.”

“Phoebe told me. Not to worry.”

As she left him to his life’s hobby and therapy, she said, “I must warn you that I am not very good at chess. I had mostly played by myself before I married Hugo. His game is superior to mine.”

“I will tell you a secret.” His eyes softened. “Hugo is better than us all.”

The meaning was clear. Hugo’s father was proud of him and thought him to be a better man than Hugo would ever accept.

She was beginning to miss her husband. Did she dare hope he missed her too?

### CHAPTER 26

Since he'd been gone for almost a week, and Hugo was losing his mind. How could a woman affect him so keenly? They had been married less than a month, and he felt like a besotted fool. He hadn't planned on missing her so much. True, he had been afraid to send her away without him. Travel alone held risks, not to mention Clover's loss of her parents in a carriage accident. Had his reluctance been for that or something else? If Evelyn Rochester had not suggested traveling with Clover, he would have never let her go.

Now, he wondered what she was doing to stay busy. He wondered if his sisters were overwhelming her. And he wondered most of all if she'd met his father. The margin of error he'd calculated for her introduction to his family, her opinion of his father's idiosyncrasies, and the fact he'd sent notice of their wedding too late for his family to attend was grand. The bloody odds had been against them from the first day.

He didn't mind risk if his gut insisted. But his instincts had not been kind where their involuntary marriage was concerned. He also knew one generally got what they expected, and he didn't want his marriage to fail. Failure was not an option. Not anymore. Not after he'd worked so hard to recover from a gambling loss that almost cost him everything.

The deal with Bastion and Torrent was all but settled. Their good-faith agreement was an inch away from being signed. Never before had he been nervous about such a sure thing, but his alternative plan was no longer an option. Not since Clover.

He placed the inkwell at the corner of his blotter and adjusted the quill in its brass

perch. The ink stains were a testament to how hard he'd worked on this project. His success was paramount because his next venture would change the entire landscape of the world. Steam power and rails. He refused to believe it all hinged on something he had no control over. A family. He already looked after his sisters and the estate, but his obligations would shift as soon as he and Clover had children. His children's future, inheritance, and success were on his shoulders, and it felt like the world.

He checked his palms and rubbed his ink-stained fingers. He looked like a working man. The titled gentry hardly worked at all. They looked down on such drivel, but Hugo thrived on it. The fact he held no title helped. A half dozen men would need to die before he ever inherited the earldom in his family tree. He was not considered the height of aristocracy. Not like Rochester. Rochester saw the difference in how people treated him because his viscountcy was certain. Winn Markham stood to inherit a fortune from his father, the man who saved them all from their foolish, outrageous gambling debts. But Kingsley was a duke. His reputation among his peers would suffer the most. The fact that his sister married Hugo, a man considered beneath her class, was bound to further affect Kingsley's reputation. And to complicate matters even more with the beau monde, Clover preferred his name in place of her ranking address as Lady.

Admittedly, these were not the worst problems a man could have. But Hugo did not care for cogs being thrown into his smoothly running wheel. His timing had been off since he and Clover met in that secret garden.

He donned a jacket, threw a cloak over his shoulders, and stuffed his portfolio with his final findings on Belgravia. The cost, the risk, the hidden treasures the average investor would miss. Kingsley, Rochester, and Hugo were bound to make a mint.

He headed for Kingsley's.

When Mr. Jennings showed him into the billiard room instead of Kingsley's office,

Hugo was pleasantly surprised.

“You read my mind, Kingsley. I’ve been at this for weeks, and now that it’s finished, at least my part, I’m ready for a day of relaxation.”

“Drink?” Kingsley asked, holding the crystal stopper to a diamond-cut decanter.

“Please,” Hugo said. “When’s the last time you played a game with Rochester?”

Kingsley gave a quick look while pouring two glasses of spirits. “Yesterday, actually. He’s too damn good. A man who can shoot with his eyes shut is not safe to challenge or even fun to play a game with.” Kingsley chuckled, a clear indication his words were said in jest.

“Everyone should be a master at something, I suppose. What’s your specialty?” Hugo asked, nodding his drink over to a table while he sighted down a cue stick.

“It isn’t women. I can tell you that much.”

Hugo cocked a brow but didn’t look at him. “What problem could you possibly have with the petticoat set? Your title alone lends itself to all manner of success.”

“And that’s exactly why I don’t frequent the ballrooms during the Season. Do you know how many invitations I toss out daily for tea and musicales and rides through the park? It’s nauseating the way mothers throw their daughters at suitors like tokens. It’s a little like throwing bets on a table. How does anyone find a companion that way?”

Hugo shrugged and moved the billiard balls into place. The conversation was too ironic for his input, and he doubted he could add anything of value. He took a shot and missed. “Doesn’t look as if I’m going to give you a run today.”

Kingsley stepped up to the table, and Hugo took the time to pull back a dram. He leaned a shoulder against the dark paneled wall, glass in hand, and cue stick balanced against a chair. The flippant way the duke addressed companionship —what a godawful word—threw his humor into a gray area. His own reflections into that territory were not something he wished to visit upon his new brother-in-law, who happened to be a highly important business ally. His feelings could not be described with any accuracy today. He pondered that thought for a moment, examining his stained fingers through the distortion of amber spirits in his glass, then emptied the rest in one swallow and allowed the warmth to penetrate his taut nerves.

“What about your marriage, Darrington? How is that going?” Kingsley asked as he bent to take a shot.

Hugo was glad he’d emptied his glass before the question was asked because he was just loose enough to tell the truth. “None of your damn business, Kingsley.” The words flowed as smoothly as the whiskey went down.

Kingsley eyed him while he flicked a noncommittal expression at Hugo.

Was it a warning? He couldn’t afford to lose a business ally. Not now.

The duke sank a red ball and straightened. He took a step, sizing up the table and possibly the room like a panther. “Business. An interesting choice of words. You speak of business to me? Was she more than a business arrangement when you agreed to marry her?”

“Fine time to ask. And still, none of your damn business.”

“My sister’s happiness is every bit my business. Did you know she asked to borrow my coach? What happened to the one I gifted her, I wonder? Or was she planning a clandestine trip to run off?”



Hugo felt the overwhelming, bloodthirsty urge to hit something. “She took our coach, you fool.” Hugo racked his stick into its proper place. The game was over. “And she did not run off. She went to visit my family.”

Kingsley’s nostrils flared as he pierced Hugo with a look. “Why then did she ask for my help?” He pointed to his chest.

“You seem to have all the answers, so you tell me. You wanted me to do my duty as a gentleman, and I’ve done it. What the hell else do you want from me? If you think I intend to allow you to eavesdrop on my marriage by prying into it with questions you do not deserve to ask, think again.”

“You think you wouldn’t have been married if I hadn’t pressed it?”

Hugo stared at him in disbelief. What was the man about? “I see, you concocted the whole hairbrained, scheming idea. And for what? Business? Perhaps you’re the one without scruples, planning a hostile takeover using your own flesh and blood.” He’d said too much. Pushed too hard. And was mad as a hornet.

“You’re a lunatic and completely out of line, Darrington.”

Lunatic. That was the wrong word for Hugo’s pickling pride. He ground his teeth and rounded the table, and before he could think of a better reaction, he pulled back and cuffed Kingsley in the eye. Fist on bone, the sound that usually spurred him on, just sickened him now.

Knocked off-balance, the duke stuttered backward but managed to stay on his feet. He reached toward Hugo, an arm’s length away, and grasped a choking handful of his neckcloth and jacket lapel. He could see the intended hit before Kingsley had a chance to throw it.

Hugo pulled his chin in and looked down contemptuously at the fist gripping his shirtfront. “You think that’s all it takes to leverage a shot at me? You forget yourself, Kingsley.” Hugo’s tone was dark and pointed. His stance, menacing in a way that generally dissuaded foolish moves from his opponents.

The duke held back, eyes flashing, but the tight grip remained.

Hugo laughed outright, hurling an intimidating challenge. “You’ve picked an adversary you can’t beat, Your Grace. If you wanted to win, you might have chosen someone without a backbone, like Albert Franklin.”

“No. I chose right, Darrington.”

Hugo easily blocked the oncoming punch. “Your stupidity goes before you. If you plan to throw a right, then don’t use the bloody word in the sentence that precedes it.”

“You made the crude bet, Darrington,” Kingsley spoke his deepest truth, and it cut Hugo.

“I tried to salvage what I could of her reputation, and what do I get in return? Married.”

“What I did was no different, except my interference was more effective.” Kingsley put three fingers to his cheekbone directly under his eye and moved his mouth around, testing it for a bruise. “You get one punch, Darrington, and that’s all I’m willing to give. My patience is short-lived.”

“I’m not frightened of you.”

“No? Just scared enough to marry my sister on the first request.”

“You”—Darrington pointed his finger at the duke—“have defamed my wife’s good name.”

“Which happens to be my name as well,” Kingsley said smugly.

What did the duke hope to accomplish? “She no longer carries your name. She’s given up Lady Clover for Mrs. Darrington. Insists on it, actually. If I hear one more word from you about my marriage, I will see you in the ring. And I swear to God you won’t get a cuff in.” Darrington was deadly serious.

“I’ll take that coward’s bet,” Kingsley said. “You’re good at them, aren’t you?”

That was all Hugo planned to take. “I’ll meet you there, you blackguard.” Not for a moment did he think the duke wouldn’t follow. To hell with their business agreement. He’d rather move home than listen to this.

Strong’s Club was filled. With the Season’s amusements over, those left to the city had few places for entertainment and none better than Strong’s. Even as crowded as it was, Hugo’s good-standing name in the pugilists’ community gave him precedence, and he had a time set even before Kingsley arrived.

Neither of them said a word. Each disrobed. The duke had changed into breeches before he left the house. Darrington still wore his dress trousers, but he didn’t care. He was confident in his own abilities to outperform any man. Especially this one. Tonight.

They took a moment to size each other up, and before the duke could throw a punch, a crowd had formed around the central ring. Hugo thought he heard roars from the balconies of the private rooms two stories up. He had a couple of choices. Beat the living shite out of a well-respected duke in front of his peers. Or back down and allow the man to clobber him.

The latter was not an option. No. This he did for Clover. Her name was worth that and more.

Kingsley threw punch after punch, and Hugo either deflected them or completely dodged them. His punches connected with the duke's gut, his ribs, his jaw. He'd already blackened his eye. He avoided his nose for the sake of the rules. He granted him his teeth by missing them on purpose. He'd been a saint, for God's sake.

After two rounds, Hugo was getting winded. Although the duke managed to connect with Hugo's midsection several times, and once to his jaw, it was clear the man wouldn't last another round.

"Is that enough?" Hugo spat.

"You ask that after you scandalize a duke's sister? You made her a pawn in your scheming attempt at the betting books. Did you not think I'd see them?"

As soon as the bell rang, Hugo clocked Kingsley without hesitation, sending him sprawling to the mat.

Trying to catch his breath, he looked up at Hugo, holding out a hand to stop.

"I think the world of my wife. She is not anyone's pawn. She won me over years ago. You ever say a thing like that to me again, and I will ignore the rules and beat you until you're unrecognizable. Are we clear?" Hugo fumed, his breath coming in heaving pants, not because of the fight but for the adrenaline over Clover's own brother saying such things—after he'd accomplished everything he wished by giving Hugo no other choice but to marry her.

Then it dawned on him. "You sly bastard."

Kingsley smiled and then grunted, touching his lip. “You’ve ruined my chances with the ladies.”

“You did this on purpose,” Hugo accused, the edge of his anger dissipating.

Kingsley chuckled and then grunted again. “Believe me, my sacrifice was greater.” Hugo helped him stand, and the crowd cheered and roared when the duke slapped Hugo on the back.

Hugo didn’t know what to think. Should he be angry? Or thankful? In one evening, Kingsley had proven in public that Hugo had chosen Clover. That it had not been a marriage of convenience born from scandal but one born of something else. Like love.

The thought buckled him as thoroughly as his last crippling punch to Kingsley.

### CHAPTER 27

Phoebe's husband, Mr. Tobias Corbel, made a showing on the seventh day of Clover's visit. He was a handsome brute of a man with sun-kissed walnut-brown hair. Not as tall as Hugo, but every bit as strong from what she could surmise under his jacket and waistcoat. He was a landowner who raised barley and wheat and, according to Phoebe, loved the physical aspect of farming and cultivating. It certainly showed. He was also a creative sort, perfecting a method for brewing fine ale.

"Mr. Corbel, perhaps on another visit, I might see your crops."

"They are nothing special, Lady Clover."

"Tobias, you know that isn't true," Phoebe said, seated on the sofa in the family drawing room. He stood next to a fogged window attesting to the cooler temperatures outside. "You talk my ear silly with words like malt, mash, and resin acid."

"Acids in resin, my dear. It's science, really," he said to Clover. "Just something I'm playing with."

"Don't let him fool you. He's a mastermind at brewing ale."

"I believe I am surrounded by scientists. My husband's valet, Mr. Gale, concocts the most interesting perfumes."

"I should like to meet him," Mr. Corbel said. "The chemistry used to extract and create oils would be similar. It's all reaction, oxidation, and fermentation."

Clover blinked rapidly behind her spectacles. The tips of her eyelashes brushed the glass. “That’s quite a lot to take in. I shall never beat Mr. Darrington here if I am digesting chemistry.” Hugo’s father had joined her for a game of chess every day since her first visit to his cottage. He had shown her a few plays, which she promptly forgot in favor of the ongoing visits with her new family. And he never teased her when she opted to wear her eyeglasses so she could see the game better.

“I believe the only one who can beat Philip is Hugo,” Mrs. Darrington said from her wingback chair set before a cozy fire.

It was a room overflowing with energy, something Clover could not ever remember having. She was thankful for her brother, but this house had so many people in it that one’s heart was always full. Miss Grace and Miss Emma, seated at a table of draughts, were quiet for a change. Emma had explained she wished to practice table games for her first Season. Clover understood her excitement. She had shared those early days with her closest friends, Adeline and Evelyn. They were carefree and full of hope, something she had been missing for a while.

“Lady Clover has bested me once, I dare say,” Mr. Darrington said, moving a pawn.

“Because you allowed it,” Clover added with a smile. The knights were her favorite pieces and ones she was reluctant to lose. She placed one knight a jump from her queen, protecting the one piece that possessed the freedom to move across the entire board. Mr. Darrington set a rook to overtake her exactly as she’d hoped. She would lose the knight, but her queen would triumph in three moves. And the wily older man who sat smiling across the table knew it, too.

“Nicely played, my dear,” Mr. Darrington said. Whether he intended her to win, she couldn’t know, but his company and conversation were the real game. She had risked a certain amount of trust when she visited him the first time and came out the winner. Risk was a game she understood too well. She had married into it, and in every

encounter with Hugo, she felt the weight of it.

“Mrs. Darrington?”

Both Clover and Hugo’s mother looked up simultaneously to find Mr. Gale standing in the doorway, his hands clasped behind his back.

“Forgive me, Lady Clover,” he clarified. “There’s someone to see you.”

“I don’t need an introduction,” the deep, resonating voice called out just before Hugo made a showing. “I’m not a visitor.”

Hugo’s valet winked at Clover and then left the family to welcome Hugo home.

Clover was stunned into silence, her heart galloping like horses at the clang of the dinner bell. She had not expected Hugo to come at all. She and Evelyn had planned to return in another two weeks before the brutal weather set in.

“Hugo!” Phoebe called. “What a wonderful surprise.”

“You are a sight,” his mother greeted him.

“Don’t touch me, I came in on a horse.” He bent to kiss his mother’s cheek, then looked up and caught Clover’s eye. His gaze swept over her intensely before he let his attention sway. “Corbel.” Hugo nodded to his brother-in-law. “Girls,” he said to his sisters, bowing formally. Then, his gaze shifted to his father, who stood next to the chess table. “I see you’ve met my Clover.”

“Indeed. She’s currently walloping me at this deuced game.”

“That’s impressive unless she’s distracting you with her delightful conversation .” He



looked at Clover, his handsome eyebrow cocked just so and a knowing smile on his face.

“They say only you can beat him,” Clover said in a raspy voice. She cleared her throat as Hugo walked toward the chess table.

“You have him, my dear, and he already knows it.” With his hands clasped behind his back, Hugo studied the board for all of two seconds.

From a distance, she thought his eye was dirty from the ride in, but on closer inspection, it looked slightly bruised. She was shocked. Who had bested Hugo? “I see you’ve lost a game of your own?”

His hand went to the tip of his cheekbone under his left eye. “Let me clean up, and we’ll talk.”

The ominous words made her queasy. Either Hugo’s presence or the fact someone had bested him put her nerves on edge. She couldn’t tell whether he was happy to see her or not. But if she were being honest with herself, she wasn’t sure if she was happy about his intrusion on her visit, which was just silly because these precious people were his family and not hers. Not by blood, anyhow.

“Did you put Clover in my room?” he asked his mother.

Phoebe answered instead, “I did.”

“Perfect,” he said, looking softly at Clover.

As Hugo turned to leave, Clover glanced at Mr. Darrington. “I think I should resign and help him.”

“No need to resign. Hugo’s right, you’ve won this one.” He laid his king down. “Never forget who you are,” Mr. Darrington said as he took Clover’s hand and laid the queen in her palm. He rolled her fingers closed, and it reminded her of how Hugo had taught her to throw a punch, which was apropos considering she had been fighting for her happiness since the day they married.

“I shall play to the draw if I must.” She kissed his cheek. Mr. Darrington had seen through her trip. Two days prior, he had asked Clover if she loved Hugo. She had smiled then and declared her tender regard, but she could not say the words. More importantly, she was afraid to say them. There were still too many questions, and loving him if he didn’t feel the same might destroy her.

Hugo couldn’t wait to get out of his clothes and into a bath. He met his valet on the way up the stairs and sent him to heat the water, then smiled when he saw his room. It looked more lived in than he’d ever seen it just by her being there. He tossed his cloak on the bed, his jacket over a chair, and was unbuttoning his waistcoat when he heard the doorknob turn. It was too soon for it to be Gerard with the water.

His heart turned over like a key in a lock, the click almost audible in his imagination when Clover opened the door. Her gaze fell upon his disheveled garments as she swung the door closed. She hurried to the bed and snatched up his cloak. “You’re going to ruin the counterpane.”

“I’m just anxious to get out of these clothes.”

With his cloak over her arm, she turned to him. “I... I didn’t expect you to come.”

“Disappointed?” he asked as he unbound the cravat from his neck. When she didn’t answer, he raised both eyebrows. He took a step forward and kissed her cheek. “Perhaps you’ll change your mind after I bathe.” He gave her a shining smile.

She shook her head. "I'm not disappointed, Hugo. I'm simply stunned. I'm not sure I'm capable of disappointment anymore."

"Understandable." The words squeezed his guilt-ridden soul, but he had to believe they still had a chance for a real marriage.

"Is it? It shouldn't be." She took his neckcloth from his hands. "I feel like it shouldn't be, don't you?"

"I never said I was disappointed." He took a cleansing breath.

"I thought you had business to attend to which was much too important to delay for the trip."

"Your meddling brother can take care of it. I wanted to see you."

His desire to see her felt strange. New almost. To travel all that way on horseback, even stopping to change horses, was grueling.

"Did you ride the whole way? You could have borrowed Kingsley's coach. I'm sure he would have lent it to you."

He chuckled at the irony after his conversation with the duke. "Not with the chance of rain. Too many obstacles to hold back a vehicle. But horses can maneuver around displaced trees or mud holes. It was the fastest way to get here. If it worries you, then I'll say Rochester joined me."

"Rochester? That would make me feel so much better if he had."

"Then yes, he did."

“Hugo. I’m serious.”

“And so am I.” He gave her a quick kiss on the mouth. He’d missed kissing her. “I’ve taken you by surprise. While I freshen up, you can process the data.”

She scrunched her brow.

“You know, tally the columns of pros and cons.” He made slash marks in the air. “Reasons I’m glad he’s here. Reasons I wish he’d jump in an ice-cold lake.”

A chuckle escaped her, and she turned away, hiding herself with the excuse of putting his clothes in a neat pile. “You could make the latter a pro if you included a bar of soap.”

“That bad?”

She turned, leaning her lovely bum against the back of the settee. “No. You smell like leather and horses with a hint of cinnamon.”

“That’s my boots.” He sat on the bed to remove them. “I missed my little mouse. My wood sprite,” he said with a grunt as he pulled the first boot free. “I think I may be jealous of my father, you know.”

“How so?”

“Because”—he made a straining sound as he removed the other boot—“he was playing chess with you.”

“Is it chess? Or chess that worries you?” She held his gaze for a suspended moment.

He wagged his eyebrows. “Chess.” He was joking, of course, but he wanted her to

know he'd been thinking about her, that he'd missed all their chess games.

She looked up through her lashes, a smirk on her face.

He chuckled good-naturedly. "Too soon to ask, but I don't promise I won't grab you every chance I get or pull you into an empty closet and kiss you senseless. And believe me, I am privy to the location of all the empty closets."

She pulled her mouth to the side. "I might like that." She pushed away from the settee and walked to the bed where he sat, his heart on fire in his chest. "Suppose you tell me about this." She placed her fingers, the softest thing he'd felt in a week, against his cheek.

He wanted to turn into her palm and kiss her. "If I tell you, will you feel sorry enough to kiss me?"

"Before your bath?" she teased.

"I'll take whatever I can get. I am a starving man."

She giggled, brushing her thumb over the bruise under his eye. She stood between his legs examining the minor injury, and he planned to enjoy every stealing moment of it.

He squeezed his legs around her hips playfully. "At least kiss my eye."

She took his face between her hands, and as his heart beat a staccato when he thought she would kiss his mouth, she tilted his head and pressed her lips to his nose.

"You're trying to kill me. I know it."

She pulled back. "Honestly, I don't know what I want, Hugo." The words weren't

said to harm, but she was serious, this he could tell. He let her go, regretting it the moment she rested her hands on his legs as she took a step back. “Are you going to explain the eye? Who bested you?”

“No one bested me. I assure you.” He stood, then pulled his shirt over his head on his way to the privacy screen. He flipped the shirt over the top rail. The soiled sleeves had taken the brunt of it, leaving all the covered parts under his waistcoat white. The woodland scene painted on each panel of the screen made the white muslin almost glow, further emphasizing the mud-spattered cuffs. He washed his hands in the basin, calling over his shoulder. “Are you certain you want to know the story about my eye?”

“Yes,” she said, her voice closer than he expected.

Drying his hands, he poked his head around the screen. He wasn’t ready for the sight of her sitting on the edge of the bed facing him. Before she could hide it, her gaze fell to his naked torso. Inside, he smiled. Outside, he pretended not to notice. He washed his face and then came from behind the screen. “Would you like me to put a shirt on while I wait for my water?”

She looked at his chest. “No. It doesn’t bother me.”

But it did affect her. A nice check on the pro side. He reached for her hand and rolled the fingers into a fist. Bending near her, he extended her arm and rested the flat of her knuckles at the corner of his eye. “That’s about right.”

“What is?” Her brow furrowed, and he breathed her in. “Did a woman hit you? Finally?” She bit into a smile for that cheeky response.

He cupped her jaw. “No, my sweet. Just your brother.”

“Kingsley? Hit you? Whatever for?”

“First, he invited me to play billiards.” He kissed her forehead. “Then he picked a fight.” He kissed her cheek. “And then he insulted my choice of wife.”

“Your choice? I hope you mean me.” She looked confused. “Or not.” Her gaze darted toward the ceiling and back again. “Why would he insult me?”

“Not you. Just me. The idiot accused our marriage of being a business transaction.”

She looked up at him. “It was.”

“It damn well was not.” He wanted to growl the words but held back.

“What are you saying? And why on earth did he cuff you? And who won?”

“You wound me, darling.”

“Oh, Hugo, how badly did you hurt him?”

“Not nearly as bad as he hurt me.” He sat next to her. “Emotionally speaking, of course, because I laid him out in the ring an hour after I threw the first cuff in his house.

“You brawled at home and then took it public? Has our life not been public enough?”

“According to your brother, I would say no, it has not. I believe that was his intent.”

“To beat you with an audience present?”

“With a bloody crowd, more like. I even heard hollering from the balconies overhead.

And, by the by, there was never any question who would come out the victor. But the best part of all was the anger I'd been storing burst out of me. It left me invigorated."

"That's why you came here?"

He nodded. "Partly, yes. But don't you see, Clover? I wanted to see you. You. Not my family. Not anyone else. Just you."

"Should I be flattered?" She shook her head as if to clear it. "You have the strangest way of fixing things. First, you wager on my virtue—that it should remain intact—which, by the way, you lost through marriage alone."

"Gladly. Besides, I beat all the fellows who wagered to take it."

"And then you pummel my brother as some kind of psychological experiment. No one else would question whether you'd beat him in the ring, but did Kingsley know you would?"

"What do you think, love?"

"I think you're all mad."

He licked his lips, with his head turned to see her beside him. He wanted to throw her into the pillows and ravish her right there. "I agree he may have gone beyond the pale to prove a point, but the public display and his incessant chirping, which brought the crowd, proved our marriage was my choice and not?—"

"What it really was? An arrangement?"

"Yes." He took her hand and forced her to hold his gaze. "He did it for you and me. And the circumstance may have been ill-planned, but Clover, do you really think we



didn't have a choice?"

She searched his face for the truth he was trying to tell her without saying it outright. Not that he didn't wish to. He didn't think she was ready to hear it and believe it. Lord, he'd just come upon it himself.

"Your name in the community would have taken a beating, so no, I don't think you had a choice."

"I see. You think my good name was more important than a lifetime commitment?"

"As a gentleman, yes. Are you going to try to tell me now that you were secretly in love with me? Because I wouldn't believe it if you did say it. So, don't. I'm not so fragile, Hugo. I never have been."

"No, you haven't," he agreed. He lifted her chin and kissed her lips, willing her to accept at least that much. Her response was tentative at first, and then she threw her arms around his neck and pressed into the kiss, feeding his already burning passion. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her tightly against him. He kissed her jaw, nibbled her neck, dragging sweet memories with his mouth to her ear. "I missed you so much it hurt," he whispered, feeling the words shake out of him.

"I didn't know how much I missed you until you were standing there in that doorway." She pulled back. "We at least have this much, don't we?"

His mouth slid into a half grin. "I love you, you little mouse." Before he could say another word, she placed a finger against his lips.

She swallowed hard. "I can't hear that right now. You're eager because of the adrenaline boost from a fight over me."

“Clover.”

“Please. I cannot. It’s not real, Hugo. I missed you when I didn’t think I would, and that’s enough. And the fact that you missed me too is enough. Let it be enough for now. The past several weeks have been so confusing.”

He brushed her cheek, his fingers sliding to the back of her neck, and he pulled her close, pressing his forehead to hers. “I will happily accept whatever you offer. But it will not change my heart.”

“I don’t want to change your heart. I just want to know mine.”

### CHAPTER 28

Why had Hugo's words scared her? Weren't they the ones she had wanted to hear for ages? He loved her.

He loved her. So why didn't it feel good? Why hadn't she been overwhelmed with happiness and relief? All the emotional mountain climbing they'd done since that house party had exhausted every explanation until nothing made sense.

Attraction was not their problem, and if she were to know her own heart, then she needed to know him outside of the physical pull he had on her. Last night, he'd held her until they both slept, but she wanted more. He wanted more. That much was obvious. Which begged the question of how she would come to a relatively honest conclusion concerning her feelings when the physically intimate part of the relationship was what she hungered for now. They'd cut their marital teeth on the magnetic pull between them and had ignored, or skipped, the part where friends fall in love. When Stratford told her to flip the opposing magnet in favor of the match, she hadn't expected such a strong connection.

Hugo was already up and gone before Clover woke. With the help of a maid, she dressed quickly, throwing her hair over one shoulder in a twist, and hoped she hadn't missed breakfast. Not that she was hungry, but she knew his family would find it odd he might be there without her. Heaven forbid they thought she needed the sleep.

Before stepping over the threshold of the sunny breakfast room, a place that had been a cheery part of her day for over a week, she saw Hugo at the family table. In midsentence with his mother, he stood when Clover entered the room. He offered her

a chair. His sisters were there as well. The only family member absent was Hugo's father. Nothing unusual about that.

"Good morning, Lady Clover," Mrs. Darrington said pleasantly with the morning sun shining behind her. Clover swore she saw a mischievous glint in her mother-in-law's eyes. She feared the soft blush on her mother-in-law's cheeks was more than a trick of sunlight.

Clover tipped her head. "Good morning." She tried to sound conventional and confident, but those were two forces at war inside her.

Hugo strode to the sideboard, ignoring the footman whose usual job was to serve the plates. "What can I get you, love?"

Keeping her eyes on Hugo and away from everyone else at the table because she could feel them gazing at her, she replied, "Just a scone, please. Thank you, Hugo."

He brought her the scone with cream and a cup of hot, freshly brewed coffee. After serving her, he crossed behind her chair, grasped the intricately carved finials, and pressed a kiss to her cheek. The formal gesture felt too intimate, with his family staring at them. She cleared her throat and forced a smile.

"I'll be with my father today if you need me. Is there something you'd like to do this evening? Or tomorrow?"

Heat seeped into her cheeks. Every word he said felt like an innuendo. All his affection branded her as a Darrington in the eyes of his family. And rightly so, under normal circumstances. However, none of it felt normal. "Enjoy your visit. There's plenty to occupy my time."

She nibbled at her scone and was thankful Hugo had not brought her an entire plate of

eggs, ham, and buttered toast because every eye was on her. Their breakfast had all but ended before she arrived. When friendly scrutiny was over, they all left the room in tandem while Clover held a step back, enjoying the sight of family camaraderie. This was a side of Hugo she had never witnessed. A side absent from her own life, not that she and Stratford didn't enjoy a strong sibling bond because they did. Circumstances alone made them close. Losing their parents had made them both more responsible. Too responsible, perhaps.

Inwardly, she smiled, knowing her children would have a wealth of family surrounding them, bleeding warmth and love into their little souls. She wondered if she was pregnant now. She didn't feel any different, and a part of her hoped she and Hugo would have more time to know each other before little ones pulled their attention away.

Phoebe looped her arm through Clover's. "Lady Clover, can I steal you away for a minute? Unless you have pressing business somewhere else."

Truly, it felt like a reprieve because Clover had nothing planned, except to wonder what Hugo and his father were discussing. "I would love that." Clover squeezed Phoebe's arm and felt an unhindered smile tug at the corners of her mouth. "I hoped to spend some time with you before you and your husband returned home."

"Actually, I think we're staying for a few more days at least. Mama and I have been making some plans since Hugo arrived," Phoebe leaned close, whispering the last part in case Hugo was not out of earshot yet.

"A surprise?"

"Yes." Phoebe led her in the opposite direction of Hugo. "Let's take Papa's study. The girls aren't allowed in there without a good reason."

Mr. Darrington's study was immaculate, which spoke more of his absence than anything since his workshop had the feel of a chaotic genius about it. Clover inspected the bookshelf behind the large oak desk, thankful that Hugo had dragged her into a jeweler's for eyeglasses.

Most of the books were business-related with the exception of Robinson Crusoe . She sidled up to the shelf, her shoulder barely brushing the spines as she ran a hand over the leather binding. She stroked the raised, gold-leaf lettering of Defoe's name. In some ways, it made sense. Mr. Darrington must have felt like a castaway when he returned from fighting too many wars, seeing too much violence, back to a family with too much to lose. Even love can feel overwhelming at times. Like Crusoe, Mr. Darrington had been surviving on an island for decades. Clover wasn't far behind.

"That was one of Papa's favorite books when we were children. Hugo and I would beg him to read it to us during the holidays when everyone was together. Sometimes, we would sit right here in the middle of the floor, and Papa would do his best to sit beside us. He never looked quite comfortable, bless his heart."

"What a lovely memory." She slid the book back into place, enjoying the rich smell of bonded leather and paper. "Did Hugo go away to boarding school?"

"He did. Mama thought it best not to saddle Papa with a strange schoolmaster in the house. The governess taught us all, but when Hugo was ten, he moved to school and came home for breaks."

The practice wasn't unusual, but it still made Clover sad. Her own brother had gone away at the age of fifteen. At the time, she thought nothing of it. Now, she considered what Stratford must have felt when he left home. Perhaps that was one thing which contributed to his cold public visage. At home, he was kinder, more flexible, and pleasant. But outward, he honed the same passionate involvement as Hugo did with his special projects.

“I wanted to speak with you privately because I cannot trust Grace to keep her tongue. She gets excited, and before we all know it, she’s said something completely outrageous. You’ve witnessed your share already, I’m sure,” Phoebe said.

“She’s still young and finding her voice.”

“She’s found it plenty.” Phoebe’s eyes widened, and she chuckled. “Come sit with me.” Phoebe motioned to a beautiful leather sofa, large enough for a tall man to stretch out upon. She pulled Clover down beside her, seated at an angle, their knees almost touching. “Mama and I would like to have a small party for Hugo’s homecoming. We don’t usually make such a fuss, but he’s brought a bride.” Phoebe’s excitement warmed the study, and Clover could feel the energy that must have been present when children sat on the floor listening to their father read.

Clover couldn’t blame them for wanting to celebrate, especially since they could not attend the wedding. “Whatever you need from me, I’m available.”

“Just your silence. I’m afraid it’s coming rather quickly.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow night. You needn’t worry about a thing, though. I have Tobias taking Hugo to see his crops. Hugo loves anything with a hint of coin about it, and Tobias can make a field sound like a bucket of gold sovereigns spilled on the tile floor of the London Exchange.”

“That is a fair description of Hugo. Are you sure one day is enough?”

“It’s a small affair. Neighbors, some townsfolk, family. That kind of thing. Mama will speak with Papa, and hopefully, he’ll join us for a dance or two. Nothing fancy, but if you need a dress, I can arrange that.”

“I’ll manage. I didn’t bring a ball gown, but I’m sure I have something nice which will do.”

“Lovely.” Phoebe shifted in her seat and cleared her throat. “Now that’s settled, may I ask you something private? No is a perfectly acceptable answer.”

Clover feared personal questions, but she did not fear this family. “Please. I’m happy to answer what I can.”

“You didn’t expect Hugo to come, did you?” Phoebe’s brows were pinched together, and the concern was clear.

“I… don’t believe I did.” Clover feared if Phoebe noticed the awkward atmosphere when Hugo arrived unexpectedly, the others must also have felt it.

“So, you were simply surprised when he showed up?” Phoebe sounded relieved.

“Very much.” Clover had little else to say, but she was sure her short answers would not suffice.

“Then you weren’t disappointed?”

Clover looked away. “Phoebe, what do you know of our marriage?”

“Nothing, really. Hugo’s letter was short and came too late for us to attend.”

Clover took a deep breath. “Do you know if he’s ever been in love before me?” The question was too big a subject, but Clover didn’t have time for subtleties. If Hugo had ever been in love, then what he felt for her may not be true.

“Not to my knowledge. Why do you ask? I’m sure he loves you. Anyone within a



pace of him can see it.”

Clover wrung her hands. “I am simply trying to understand him, and maybe myself as well. I feared Hugo had not told his family the circumstances of our marriage. If you don’t mind, I’d like to tell you now.”

Phoebe nodded, a look of gentle concern on her face.

“The circumstances that brought us here happened at a weekend house party. It started with a scandalous joke about me. One which Hugo and I overheard, bellowed by two drunk men.”

Phoebe reached for Clover’s hand and gave a reassuring squeeze. “Sometimes women have few choices. Is that what happened to you?”

“Yes, in some ways. Hugo and I were the only ones who witnessed it, so the damage was all on me. But later, it escalated into an overwhipped sour froth when the same talk turned up at one of Hugo’s clubs. He defended me.”

Phoebe made a sound of relief. “I hope he laid them out,” she said forcefully, with pride.

“I wouldn’t allow it.”

“Why not? They deserved it. To besmirch a woman’s name, especially the sister of a duke would be enough to cause a frenzy.”

“Exactly, and pouring fuel to the fire was not the answer. Hugo was kind enough to listen to me, but he did do something ill-planned. I won’t bother with the details, except to say I was angry with him for his interference. He was consequently caught between a duke and honor. He had made a comment at the club, which my brother

took for a proposal of sorts.”

“You were forced to wed.” Phoebe’s tone was a sigh of defeat.

“Yes. But that doesn’t mean we don’t have a deep affection for one another.”

Phoebe looked up. “He loves you. I can see it.”

“For the first time since our wedding, I feel you may be right.”

“You doubted he loved you.” It was a statement, one filled with a measure of sisterly understanding. This warmed Clover’s heart and made her more comfortable with the subject.

“It all happened so quickly, and Hugo tends to weigh the risk of everything like an investment.”

Phoebe looked at the ceiling, making a grunting sound in her throat. “Did he call you an investment, the idiot?”

That made Clover chuckle. “He’s far from an idiot. He’s as much a genius with investments as your father is with music boxes. Our marriage was a lifetime risk neither one of us was ready for.” Clover leaned in. “But I’m getting there. And meeting Hugo’s family has helped me know him better.”

“We all adore you.”

“And I you.” Clover patted Phoebe’s hand, feeling more accepted than she could have imagined. “The girls say Hugo has a music box here, but I’ve yet to see it. Do you know where it is?”

“It’s in his room. Has he not shown you?”

Clover shook her head.

“Ask him. I have a feeling the two of you could use a good private conversation about something innocuous.”

Clover knew Phoebe was right. She and Hugo needed time to explore who they were together, and who they were apart. No person is whole without knowing themselves or loving themselves. She’d been following rules, dictates of protocol, and precepts for too long. The only people she really knew anymore were Evelyn and Adeline. She wanted to know her husband because she feared she loved him more than her heart could contain. Perhaps staying out of his bed would help her know him better. Because being loved by him was almost too good to be true.

Hugo wondered if Clover’s nervousness around his family at breakfast had something to do with his arrival because last night, she looked completely comfortable playing chess with his father.

Hugo forwent the knock and let himself into his father’s second home. That’s what Hugo called it despite everyone else describing it as a workshop. His father might work there on his hobbies, but he stayed there because sometimes he lacked the ability to have a fluid conversation.

“Hugo,” his father bellowed from the kitchen. “I thought you’d come.”

“I told you last night I would. I’ve left the ledgers in your desk drawer if you’re interested.”

“You have a family now. You shouldn’t be taking care of an old man’s responsibilities.”

“You’re not an old man,” Hugo said, taking the cup of coffee his father had offered.

“Perhaps not, but I am an unhinged one.”

Every time Hugo returned home, his father made the same statement. Sometimes, he used the word crazy. Sometimes lunatic. He would call himself the mad music maker. Not one of the statements was true. Hugo refused to join him in his self-deprecation. “I have plenty of time to take care of the books, the planning, the bills. I only leave the ledgers in case you ever wonder where the finances go.”

“I know where they go. For frippery.” His father smiled despite the false harsh tone.

“I also don’t want you to ever worry I’m behaving irresponsibly again.” Hugo followed his father to the room he used for a workshop.

“No one blames you for that. You were a boy.”

“I was a young man.”

“Young. That is the word. You’re still young.” His father winked at him. “How’s your Belgravia project going?”

“Signed and in the hands of the project architects. Clover’s brother teamed with me along with Rochester.”

“Where’s Winn? You three are never far apart.”

“Winn is married and has a child. His wife is one of Clover’s dear friends.”

“That’s how you met.” It wasn’t a question. His father made the statement while he took gadgets from shelves and spoke without looking Hugo in the eye. When his

hands were busy, he seemed to have an easier time sharing himself and communicating.

“On the outset, yes. But until recently, we were distant friends.” Hugo picked up a tiny gear with prongs set to it. He examined it without much interest. “I need to confess something, and I don’t wish to be the center of Mother’s wrath.”

“You want me to tell her?”

“If you would, but please wait until after Clover and I leave.”

His father stopped and turned to look at Hugo. “That bad? Does it have anything to do with your hurried marriage?”

Hugo nodded.

“A love match?”

“No,” Hugo said with a long sigh.

“Ah, then, not the fun kind of quick marriage.”

“No fun at all. And that’s why I sent the invitations so late because I didn’t want the girls there. Not because the circumstances were unfixable, but because I wasn’t in a place to explain, and I didn’t want to put that on Clover.” Hugo put down the gear and sat on a wooden stool by the window. He told his father everything because he’d never tell his mother the truth.

“You made a wager on her?”

“For her. I know it sounds...”

“Crazy?”

“Yes.” Hugo grinned, and his father looked at him sheepishly. “Your word. Not mine.” He rubbed the back of his neck. He needed to work out the pulled tendon in his shoulder. A nice little gift for the hellbent horse ride he and Rochester made over hill and dale. They should have taken advantage of the post stops to stretch, but he was in such a hurry to see Clover.

“I think it worked out nicely. Maybe even just as you planned.” His father glanced at him under his brow.

“I did not plan this. But I can’t say I’m unhappy about it either. Not now. Possibly a week ago.”

“Just before Lady Clover came here. You didn’t plan to come, did you?” His father worked as he talked, an oiled cloth in his hands now. His fingers were as stained with grease as Hugo’s were with ink.

“I expected she’d return in another week before the weather turned. There were business matters to see to, and I couldn’t get away.”

“More like she didn’t want you to, ay? Just tell me you came to win that dear woman over.”

“I’ve... fallen in love with her.”

His father stopped what he was doing to smile. Hugo could see a light in him which he hadn’t seen for many years. “I think she loves you, too.”

“We’ll see. She needs time.” Hugo took a deep breath and stood. “Tell me something, did you let her win at chess last night?”

“No, no, no. She’s not a bad player. I got sloppy, and she trounced me. That’s usually the way, isn’t it? Are you curious if you can still beat me?”

“Are you asking for a game?”

“Obviously. I’m finding the house rather cheery lately. And comfortable.”

“How are your nightmares, Papa?” Hugo asked seriously, swallowing down the lump in his throat which this conversation brought out.

“You haven’t called me Papa in an age.”

“I’m feeling a little boyish, I suppose.”

“Women will do that to you. But only the good ones.” His father stopped tinkering.

“They’ve been manageable this year. I’m grateful for that. I’ll be at the house later, and we’ll have that game.”

That was Hugo’s cue to leave. There was a catch in his father’s words, and he suspected he needed time to himself.

### CHAPTER 29

Hugo stayed clear of Clover until supper, and when they retired to the drawing room, he and his father took over the chess table. Clover sat with his sister, quietly discussing the latest fashions from France, and hours later, so entrenched in the game, Hugo failed to notice when Clover retired.

He stayed downstairs, visiting with his brother-in-law until almost midnight. Corbel invited him to visit his barley farm tomorrow, and Hugo agreed as long as Clover didn't object to him being gone for the better part of the day.

After midnight, Hugo retired, hoping Clover was fast asleep. He slowly opened the door to his bedchamber, remembering the precise point where the hinges squeaked. A glow from the fire cast across his boot, and he looked up to see Clover seated before the fire, her feet tucked under her nightgown.

"Why are you still awake?" He kept his gaze on her as he closed the door behind him.

She closed the book in her lap and twisted to see him. "I was waiting up for you. Why wouldn't I?"

"I don't know. I'm not accustomed to you waiting in my room for me."

"I can change rooms since this is not our habit. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to throw your night off."

He scratched his ear more in contemplation than anything, walking to the privacy



screen and hiding his dumbfounded features until he couldn't be seen. "You haven't thrown it off. I just didn't expect it." He washed up, looking at himself in the mirror over the basin stand, imploring his reflection to give him an appropriate response. "I like you here." His reflection grimaced back at him.

"I suppose that's convenient then." She sounded confused and awkward.

He left his archetype in the mirror and joined her on the settee. "The fire is nice."

"I didn't start it. You can thank Mr. Gale for that."

Hugo hadn't felt this uncomfortable since their wedding night. He took a surreptitious look about the room, knowing there wasn't a chess table there but checking, nonetheless. "We could go downstairs and play a game if you'd like."

She looked at him beside her without turning her head. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"It's a conundrum, isn't it? I shouldn't know what to do with a wife who makes my bed her own?" He asked her with a clear, teasing tone in his voice.

"Does the practice of sharing a room give us too much time alone together, do you think?" She bit her lip and raised her eyebrows.

"You know how I feel, sprite. It's been two days since I've thrashed anyone, so I'm not speaking from an abundance of manly adrenaline raging through my veins." He relaxed, with his arm on the back of the settee, and turned in his seat to see her fully. "Unless you like that sort of thing. Perhaps Corbel will volunteer to let me hit him. Or Gerard. I don't think my valet would mind."

"Don't you dare lay a hand on Mr. Gale, or he may stop creating that wonderful cologne of yours. I like the way you smell. That's one thing I have missed while

being here.”

“And what else?” he asked, a touch more seriously.

“I missed our chess games.” She looked at him shyly. “All of them.”

They played three different kinds of chess. Real chess, seated across from each other. Ghost chess in any room of the house which sported a table, where each would move a piece in passing like a ghost. And then there was the best kind. The one that involved skipping chess altogether and making love instead.

“I did miss you, Hugo. I missed you every time I conversed with your father because the two of you are a lot alike. Your speech patterns are the same, and you look like him. Has anyone ever told you that?”

“He is a handsome devil, isn’t he? I always thought so, you know.”

She started to laugh. “Do you see? The way you say you know at the end of a sentence. He does the same thing. And your smile. So much alike.”

“I wonder what he would have been like had he not been damaged.”

“That’s our problem, isn’t it? All the not knowing and wondering what might have been. If it would have been better. If we would have made different choices.”

“If I would have had a father more involved.” He didn’t say it with daggers. He really meant it. “I credit him now with how hard he has tried, but as a boy, I had no understanding. I suppose I’m trying to make it up to him as much as he’s trying to make amends with me.”

“He’s why you work so hard.”

He quietly nodded.

“And I’ve made that more difficult.”

“Not true.”

“It is,” she said simply. “Granted, it isn’t my fault, but my being here, I’m a part of your burden now. I don’t know how to change that.”

He shifted in his seat, his arm draped across the back of the settee, leisurely tracing the sculpted frame with his fingers. “You are not a burden. Nor are you a little mouse.” He pulled his knee onto the seat, facing her profile, and then asked bluntly, “Do you think I’m an idiot?”

She shut her eyes tight. “I have never thought you an idiot. Not in truth, at least.” She peeked at him, the corner of her delightful mouth pulled into a reluctant grin. “I actually think you are the smartest man I’ve ever met.”

He raised his eyebrows, and his chest expanded with pride, even if only in his mind. It mattered to him what she thought. How she saw him.

“Why would you ask me that?” Her eyes were squinted, and her mouth delightfully askew, the telltale signs of guilt.

“Something Phoebe said to me this afternoon.”

She turned away but not fast enough. Not before he saw her squelch a giggle with her hand to her mouth.

With his hand hanging casually from the backrest, he brushed her shoulder lightly with his fingers. “Tell me one thing. Did you agree with her when she said it?”

“I can’t honestly recall what I said.” She rubbed her lips together, biting into the pillowy pink flesh.

He playfully nudged her shoulder with his hand, and she turned the force of her lethally intoxicating blue eyes on him. “Am I mistaken, or did you do something to your hair after you came up?” It looked neatly brushed and purposely manipulated into a perfect coil. He tugged a piece loose and twirled the silky strands around his finger.

Her shoulders shrugged off the tickle of his fingers, and she pulled the hair from his grip back over her shoulder. “One of the maids helped me brush it out. It’s a perfectly normal thing to do at night if you didn’t know.” There was a bit of sass in her comment, unusually defensive for something so innocent.

“All this preening.” He took another piece of her hair and tickled her ear with the soft, silky ends.

“Stop that. You’re mussing it.” She ducked her head.

“I like it mussed.” He looked behind him, searching the room. “Where’s your hat or bonnet?”

“I only brought the one you gave me before we left. You know how much I hate them.”

“Exactly.” He hopped up and examined the bureau, finding a bonnet lying on a hat box. He brought it to the sofa, and from behind her, he plopped it on her head, gave it a little playful shift, tapped the top, and then pulled it free as she reached to grab it. He tossed it in her lap.

“Why would you do that? I spent good time on this.”

“For what reason?” With his hands gripping the backrest, he leaned over her, and she looked upside down at him.

“None of your concern.”

“Really? Because I fear you did it for me and then waited up. But then you know how much I like it this way.” He took the coil, unwrapping it until she had several strands of curls hanging down her back.

“You’re a nuisance, is what you are,” she said without a hint of displeasure. She twisted and hit him with her hat.

He made a feeble grunt as if she’d cuffed him in the stomach. “What should I do with this?”

“Throw it away.” She tried to fix her hair.

He tossed the hat across the room, where it landed on a rail chair against the wall. “Leave it.” Once again, he freed the locks and kissed her forehead while she looked up at him.

She combed her fingers through the yellow strands and fluffed it. “Better?” she asked, clearly daring him.

“Actually, yes.”

She sighed. “All right. I did it for you. Are you satisfied with yourself now?”

“Not quite.”

“Hugo?” she said forcefully. He could feel a playful retaliation coming. “Where’s

your music box, and why haven't you shown it to me? Your sister... you know the one who called you an idiot?" She smiled a touch too triumphantly for her question to be anything but cheek.

He cocked a brow and folded his arms.

"She said it's in this room."

With his head tilted, he bounced on his toes, examining her figure and smiling wickedly. "Make me an offer."

"To see it?" she asked in disbelief.

"See what exactly? I'm confused."

"Hugo. Don't be coy. It's not manly."

He laughed out loud. "I see. You're trying to destroy any desire I might have to muss that hair the way I really like it."

"No. I'm actually trying to get you to show me the music box." She turned fully around, kneeling on the sofa and gripping the backrest. Her breasts were far too enticing to concentrate.

When his gaze met hers, she lifted one eyebrow and managed to keep from smiling while he couldn't stop himself from grinning ear to ear. "We'll make it a treasure hunt. It's in full view, I assure you."

"Where?" She looked about and struggled to right herself, then stood. "Give me a hint."

She appeared every bit the sprite he called her, with her bare toes peeking from under her white night rail and her hair like she'd just come out of the wind. He wanted to devour her, but he put on his deepest smile and wracked his brain for a hint. "It's in an unusual box."

Her hands went instantly to her hips. Her head tilted adorably to the side.

"An item specific to me."

Her gaze darted this way and that, and she searched the corners of the room. She looked in the wardrobe and in the top bureau drawer. She even flipped aside the curtain and ran a hand over the empty windowsill despite him already telling her it was in full view. Then she approached the secretary. It had two short drawers, side by side, and she pulled each open. He heard her rummaging through the paper, and he smiled. "You are getting warmer if you need any help. But I'm sure it's not a piece of paper."

She served him a gaping look that said idiot louder than her voice could have carried it in an echoing cave. He just chuckled. The drawers slid into place, and she examined the surface of the secretary, sliding the inkpot to the side and then pulling the quill from its base. She turned it to see the bottom.

"You are very hot now."

She pivoted, holding out the quill stand. "It's empty."

"So it is."

She sighed. "Is it worth finding?"

"I'm not the one interested. I already know what it looks like. It plays a little Irish

ditty. A pleasant tinkling sound. You might like it.”

“There’s nothing else here, but the inkpot, and I’m not about to get ink all over my… hands,” she said, the last part slowly like a revelation. Holding out his hands, he wagged his fingers, ink stains and all. She snapped up the ink pot and opened the top.

The sight almost made his heart stop. She was looking at something so personal to him, so important that he’d always left it here. The tinkling music made him feel slightly melancholy, except this time, her smile and the sparkling gaze she gave him, so full of hope it crushed him, sent his soul soaring.

“Why didn’t I guess this? Of course it would be an inkpot. You’d write with your own nails if you had to.” She gave a jaunty smile, biting her lip and rocking on her toes with satisfaction. She closed the lid, stroking the pewter cast of a rabbit. “Why a rabbit?”

“Because as a boy I used to sit at the edge of the woods where I befriended a wild hare. It was quiet there and gave me room to think.”

“You’re a dreamer.” She said it with such reverence.

“I like to think I’m a doer .”

“Dream first, do later.” She stroked the carved fur and then set the box down. “I never looked very hard for it, thinking I was intruding on your life somehow.”

He walked up behind her, enveloping her in his arms, pulling her back against his chest, and resting his chin atop her head. She sighed against him. His heart picked up tempo. “You are not intruding on my life, Clover. You’re making it better.” She caressed his hands against her middle.



“Is that the truth?”

He turned her in his arms. He kissed her tenderly.

“Prove it to me?”

He took her to bed and undressed her carefully, kissing every inch as he removed her arms from the robe, her breasts from the bodice, her legs from the gown. He left the candles burning. They’d made love in the middle of the day, by God, and he wanted her to see him. There were no questions in his eyes. The panting need for her was more than attraction. When she had met her climax, and he’d poured himself into her soul, he held himself to the spot against his forearms, and he gazed down at her. “I could stay here all night.”

“You think you could hold this position?” She raised a brow. “What I mean is, I know your strength, but can you hold this position all night?” The meaning was comically clear as his structurally sound cock made a small retreat. She giggled.

“Probably not, but you’re certainly not helping.”

She wiggled her bottom. “What if we switch positions? Might that entice you again?”

He shut his eyes and grinned. “Aha, yes. Just like that, one word from you and my body responds.”

The smile left her face, and she stared at his mouth. Her throat convulsed. He challenged her, almost like a dare to even try not to love him. Their gazes collided, and she lifted her arms around his neck and pulled him down, squeezing tightly, even her legs went around him, and he held her. He felt her chest quake. “Cry, Clover. It’s all right to cry, you know.” He felt a hot tear drop on his ear and trail down the crease of his neck. “What we have is a good thing, love.”

She nodded against his shoulder. She took a deep breath. “You feel so good, Hugo. How could this not be wonderful?”

He pulled back. “We’ll just keep mixing things up. Next time, you’re on top.” He smiled down at her, and she returned it without reservation. He was winning her. He knew he was.

### CHAPTER 30

Clover slipped from the warm cocoon next to her husband. She had woken two hours ago and lay there watching him sleep, his face so boyishly handsome. She stroked his eye lightly. The bruise had almost completely faded. Tonight, she would dance with him, and her heart leaped with the knowledge. It would take some doing, but with Phoebe's help, she would find just the right thing to wear.

She grabbed her robe, sliding her arms through and concentrating on the sash.

"Where are you going?" Hugo's rough morning voice took her by surprise.

"It's not that early. You should probably get ready. Aren't you taking a tour of Corbel's property today?"

"Don't remind me." He sighed loudly and fell back against the pillows. He held out a hand. "Come back to bed. You promised to be on top the next time."

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but it is not the next time, Husband."

With his eyes still shut, he grinned. "I like husband. Can we make that my pet name?"

"Don't be silly. And get up. I'm meeting Phoebe after breakfast, and we have a full day planned."

"Doing what? Darning socks? I may have a pair or two."

She strode to the bed, pulled the pillow from under his head, and clobbered him with it. Before she could right herself, his hands were around her waist, toppling her onto her back against the mattress. He rubbed his morning beard on her cheeks. She giggled and writhed. “I have business this morning. And so do you.”

He gazed down at her with a foolish grin. “Would you like to play chess later this evening?” A lock of hair fell over his waggling eyebrows.

“We’ll see.”

“That’s as good a yes as I’ve ever heard.”

“That’s as good as it gets. Now, move yourself off my person.” She playfully shoved against his muscled shoulders and almost begged him to make her stay in bed all morning. Perhaps she would have if she were not planning a party for him. The knowledge that she wanted to stay with him did not surprise her. They’d been quite a pair these last several weeks. But the reasons were becoming crystal clear. Last night, he’d shown himself to her. All the parts that had been buried beneath the stormwaves their marriage had created. She decided to allow his confidence in their love to be her anchor. Whenever a doubt trickled in, she would remind herself how thoroughly he made her feel loved last night. And not just physically, but all the playful things he did, the touching, the hat, the music box. All of it.

He wasn’t just winning her. He’d won her. For all the folly of Lucky Clover, she had ironically become just that. She had been so lucky to have found love on the wrong side of marriage.

The day flew after Hugo left with Phoebe’s husband. With busy hands, the women, the servants, and some of the townspeople turned the modest ballroom of the Dovetail Manor into a festive venue with room for dancing, hors d’oeuvres, wine, and even tables set for whist. Torches were ready to light in the back garden for those eager to

brave the cooler temperatures. There had been no time for an orchestra, but a piano and a local cellist were ready to open with a waltz by Chopin.

Time was short, and Clover went in search of Hugo's valet. "Mr. Gale, will you please drag Mr. Darrington through another shave this evening."

"He's not going to like it, but I'll try."

"Tell him I want it and that his mother is planning a formal family dinner. Try not to let him downstairs too early. I'm told he rarely ventures near the ballroom, but if he wanders outside for some godforsaken reason, he's liable to come upon all the torches."

"Leave it in my capable hands, my lady."

Clover wore a flattering pale-sage silk with a taffeta underskirt for shape. Her hair was pinned with a pearl comb, and wisps framed her face and brushed her neck. The waiting unleashed a bevy of butterflies which rivaled the ones that showed up for her wedding day. Mrs. Darrington stood on one side and Phoebe on the other. At one point, Mrs. Darrington took Clover's hand and rubbed it between hers.

"Did I tell you he hates surprises?" Hugo's mother kept her focus straight ahead with that admission as if she said it more for herself than Clover.

"The kind of man he is, I wouldn't imagine he'd feel any differently. All the better, don't you think?" Clover smiled when Mrs. Darrington squeezed her hand, then put an arm around her, and shook her a little.

"I knew I liked you instantly. He needs you, my dear."

Phoebe shushed them. "I hear footsteps."

The doors to the ballroom opened, and the butler standing at attention rivaled any grand ball that Clover had ever attended. “Mr. Hugo Darrington,” the butler called.

Clover bit her lip. Hugo’s face was a mask of composure except for several rapid blinks—the only sign he was truly surprised. He turned her direction, caught her eye, and bent a brow.

She shook her head and mouthed. Not me .

“It’s a welcome home to you and your bride, Hugo,” his mother said, hurrying forward to embrace him. Phoebe did the same, and Clover stood back, watching him maneuver it all.

He threw her a gaze comically imbued with the promise of torture. But she knew he didn’t mean it. A throng of well-wishers crowded him, and he slowly, politely, made his way to Clover.

“You’ve met my bride, I take it,” he said to an elderly woman to his left. Someone he seemed familiar with. The woman gave her a quizzical examination and then nodded her approval. “Mrs. Clover Darrington, this is Mrs. Travis Barton. She’s renowned in these parts and an icon of propriety. We love her anyway.”

“Oh, you scoundrel,” Mrs. Barton beamed. “You flirt with me in front of your wife?”

“I’m afraid I’m oblivious to his faults. Who wouldn’t be, Mrs. Barton? We seem to have all fallen under his spell.”

“Quite the wizard he is.”

When the woman walked away, Hugo bent to her ear. “Thank you. She’s a treasure in these parts.”

“I can see why. I like her immensely.”

“Did you know about this?”

“Of course.”

“Do you know how much I do not like surprises?”

“I’ve heard.” She turned to look at him and waited for him to respond in kind. “But I don’t care. My only plan is to throw you off your game later this evening. I plan to win our next game of chess.”

“Hm. I believe you might.” He smiled at another well-wisher.

Clover turned to Hugo’s mother and nodded. The floor cleared as the first notes of a waltz began. “Dance with me, Hugo. Please.”

“This is our first waltz as man and wife.”

She wanted to cry. So much had changed between them in a few short days. He turned her in his arms with a handsome, proud look on his face while the music played, and the dancers gaily moved about twirling and laughing. It wasn’t like any ball she’d ever attended. The townspeople and the local landowners were like a small gathering of friends who shared an intimacy absent from the London Season.

She looked up at him. “You know, a long time ago, I thought I loved you. But I didn’t know you, and I realized it was a great infatuation with a handsome man who danced with me too many times for propriety.”

“At the Christmas affair that you hosted.”

She nodded.

“So scandalous of us,” he said with mock gravity. She smiled.

“I wanted to dance a waltz with you then.”

“And I was too much a dunderhead to ask?”

“Or too wise.”

“I’ll allow that.” He smiled softly.

“I was dressed as Sleeping Beauty.”

“With the most luscious ruby-red lips. The singular reason I could not ask you to waltz.”

“Did you want to kiss me then?” she asked, a little confused and very flattered. This was news.

“The bigger question was, who in that ballroom did not wish to kiss those lips?”

“Oh, Mr. Darrington, you are asking to be cuffed.” His playful side bolstered her.

He raised a brow, a hardy grin on his beloved face. “You know that does not deter me, sprite. It only makes me wish to tease you more.”

“I thought if you kissed me then, like Sleeping Beauty, I’d wake up, and life would begin. But you didn’t, and my dear friends went on to fall hard, and I was left asleep. Hugo, I’m still asleep. You’ve kissed me plenty, but I have yet to wake.”



“I failed to make you feel loved, something I’d like to rectify.” As much as she wanted to hear him say he loved her again, there was more on her heart which needed saying.

“Oh, Hugo. You sat with me in that garden. You played chess with me on our wedding night. You thought enough of me to set a wager on my virtue. You wanted to pummel those evil men for me, to slay my dragons.”

He slowed them until they were barely swaying. “I wanted to kill them.”

“But you didn’t. And that you did for my sake, too. In that moment, it wasn’t your anger or honor which drove you. It was a care for me, for my feelings. Violence is so easy. Restraint is a gift.”

“What about the park? I showed no restraint when I clocked the blackguard who dared say a word against you.”

She did smile then, despite the seriousness and importance of their conversation. “He deserved it.”

“I believe your words laid him out more effectively than I could.”

“And you let me do it. Were even proud of me, I think.”

“I’m very proud of you, Clover. Proud that you’re my wife. Proud to be your husband. Humbled by your honesty.”

She took a deep breath. “So let me be perfectly honest with you now, and when I’m finished, I want to hear you say you love me again.” She swallowed hard. Tears burned the backs of her eyes, and she held on to the catch in her throat. She had wondered if this moment would ever come to them. “I love you, Hugo.” Her voice

shook and was not more than a raspy whisper.

They stopped dancing and stood in the middle of the floor.

“I love all of you. This is deeper than infatuation, deeper than the flutters my heart gets when I see you. I know you wonder whether we would have come together under normal circumstances. I wonder that sometimes, too. I don’t know what it means. Normal. Normal is often filled with expectations that disappoint. This is what we have now. Nothing else has ever mattered. And you know what?”

He brushed a tendril of hair from her cheek. “What?”

Her breath came in gulps now. “I am absolutely delighted at how it all turned out.”

“Oh, Clover. I’m not.”

Her heart sank a little, but she imagined she deserved that after stifling his declaration. She looked down, clasping her hands. “It’s all right if you just feel kindness and desire for me now. Everyone has a right to feel all the things that are true. Even the hurtful things.”

“I’m not trying to hurt you. I’m simply saying we missed something. Let me show you how it should have been.” He knelt before her, causing the dancers to halt, the music went silent, and the room held its breath. “Clover, it’s the chase. It’s the game. The risk. The hunt for the best. These are the things I live for. And I’ve been blind to my own detriment because the best was standing in front of me the whole time.”

A fat tear splashed near his shoe, and Clover’s heart hurt as if it were broken, except it wasn’t broken. It was all the love in his eyes she could not contain.

He took her hand, rubbing it warmly between his. “Wake up, Clover, my little sprite.

Come make a life with me. A family together. I love you with all my heart, and I am dying to hear you say again that you love me because I cannot imagine a day without you in it.” He kissed her fingers. “Marry me again, Clover. For love, in the sight of those who love us. Please.”

Her throat hurt from holding it all in. She swallowed hard. “I do love you, Hugo, so very much.” She wobbled a smile. “I will marry you again on one condition.” She held up one finger, and by his smile, she could tell he was thinking of all the times he’d grabbed her and admonished her for pointing.

“Anything,” he said.

“We do it here. In your home. With your family and my family present. Our friends and this lovely township.”

He did not get up but looked to the crowd. “My wife will only marry me again here. Who will give a blessing?”

From the edge of the small crowd came a familiar voice. “I will, by God. Now, for the love of us all, please kiss the woman!” Hugo’s father’s smile had the force of life in it, shining like a beam through a prism while he stood next to Hugo’s mother. There was so much love in this family.

Before Hugo could stand, Clover knelt with him. “Why do anything the right way? Kiss me, Hugo, because you love me, and I love you.”

He cradled her cheeks between his hands and kissed her soundly but quickly. “You may have to help me stand,” he whispered to her. “My knee is jogged for certain.”

She laughed, then stood and helped him up. “First, we met. Then we married. Then we fell in love. And now I’m helping you off the floor.”

He brushed the dirt from his trousers. “For that, I will trounce you profoundly in chess tonight.”

“Promise?”

He grabbed her, hauled her against him, and kissed her again as if they were alone in the world.

The music began again. The dancers moved around them, and Clover held tightly to her future.

She couldn't help the tears that began to well like pools of promise and raw honesty. She couldn't hide anymore. And she didn't want to.

### CHAPTER 31

December 1824

Two months ago, Clover had shown up on the Darringtons' doorstep. She couldn't know then how much she would come to love this family, how much she would feel a part of them. How much they would feel a part of her. The Markhams, including Evelyn's father, had joined them three weeks prior. The Rochesters had shown up a month ago. And Stratford had taken his own time in getting there to the point that Clover thought he'd miss the wedding entirely.

She called on Stratford, knocking at the door of the guest room he'd been given. When her brother opened the door, she stood as still as stone. She wanted to thank him, but she waited instead.

"It's good to see you, Lady Clover," he said too formally. "Or should I call you Mrs. Darrington?"

"Kingsley or Stratford?" she returned the question, not quite as serious as he'd asked his.

Clover followed his gaze as he checked the hallway. "Stratford," he whispered with a smile, then embraced her like he genuinely missed her. "I was almost afraid to come."

"I was afraid you wouldn't make it," she said as he led her into a stately room of burgundy. The staff had brought in a settee for the fire and a decanter of spirits. The

Darringtons' answer to entertaining a duke. "You look every bit as mussed as Hugo when he arrived almost two months ago. Except for the black eye. I suppose you'd like to explain that?"

"Not really."

"You started it, so I understand."

"We parted on amicable terms. Am I to be chastised now?" He pointed to the sofa. "Have a seat. I'd like to wash my hands, at least. It's damn muddy out there. I couldn't chance bringing the coach this late in the year, but I admit I'm short of clothing, having packed all I could in the valise. Do you think the servants here can handle pressing my formalwear?"

"If I thought you were serious, I'd box your ears. Of course, they can. And if you need clothes, there's a proper tailor in town."

"I'll keep that in mind." He emerged without a jacket or waistcoat, then sat with her as they had often done when they were younger. He was less formal than she remembered. "So, you're having a better wedding than I could throw you, I take it?"

"Stratford, I wanted to speak with you before the family rained down."

He gave her a concerned scowl. "Don't tell me my hard work has been for naught?"

"Your hard work, Brother? You did nothing but take a lashing." She took some pity on his frown. "I wanted to thank you."

"For what?" The question held hope and was free of his usual cynicism.

"Because I know you. If I had refused to marry Hugo, you would never have forced it

upon me or him.”

“Only partly true. I took into account your feelings but not his. I expected he would agree for the sake of honor, but I could also see the fire between you. Was I wrong?”

“About the attraction? No. About the rest? I don’t care anymore.” She reached for his hand. “Stratford, I did what you suggested, and I flipped the narrative. I turned the magnet, and all our opposition fell away. Eventually,” she said sheepishly. “That fight you staged helped.”

“I did not stage his reaction. I only encouraged him to look deeper.”

“You could have met him on the field of honor.”

“Except I wanted him to win on his own terms.” He rubbed his jaw. “Believe me, it was on his terms. You must know I would not have allowed just anyone to marry my sister. He will care for you, honor you, keep you well.”

“He’s already done that.”

“Am I correct that he loves you?”

“No question.”

“I have a confession, which may not sit well with you.” Stratford squeezed his eyes shut and took a deep breath. “Mrs. LaDow and I are good friends, and I sent you to that house party because I knew Darrington would be there. One would have to be blind not to notice your feelings for him.”

“We barely spent any time together at all,” she said in amazement.

“No? How about the Christmas affair you hosted two years ago? You don’t think I keep an eye on my family?”

“And I suppose you know where we shared our first kiss, then?”

“The Pleasure Gardens. I followed you there, my dear sister.”

“You’re a beast,” she said, poking him with a finger. “And it was not there we shared our first kiss.”

“No? Then it’s good you’re wed. I’m not certain I want to hear this.”

“The place is our secret, Hugo’s and mine, and I do hope you are finished spying on me.”

He crossed his heart. “I gladly relinquish your poking, pointing, all condemning index finger to your husband.”

She giggled against the back of her hand. “It is the one thing he complains about.”

“Not that giggle?”

“No,” she swatted his arm. “It’s not my fault.”

“In all seriousness, Clover, I am relieved it turned out so well. And your family will be well cared for because, in a few years, he will be a very wealthy man.”

“His wealth is here.” She gestured to the house. “This family is so rich. As good as my memories of our parents are, they were nothing like Hugo’s. The honesty, the humility, the sheer joy they bring each other, it’s intoxicating.”



“How’s his father?”

“I wasn’t sure you knew.”

“I know your husband’s fear is that his father’s mental condition will be labeled as mad. I’ll see it never happens.”

She sighed. Even though she knew her brother would never harm Hugo’s family, it did her good to hear him say it. “I’ve missed you, Stratford, not just since I’ve been away. I’ve missed my brother, the one I knew before.”

He nodded solemnly, an emotion in his eyes which Clover had never seen before. “Promise you’ll always call me Stratford. You are my only family, Clover. I look forward to the day that number increases.”

“As well do I. But do not look here. Look at yourself. You need companionship, and I don’t mean a mistress.”

He raised a brow.

“You’re not the only one who notices things. Now, would you like me to matchmake for you?”

“No,” he said before she even finished getting the words out.

Two short days later

As Clover allowed Evelyn and Adeline to help her into her wedding attire, she smiled to herself because her entire family, both blood and chosen, were together for the holiday. Her dress was red if for no other reason than it was Christmas. She and Hugo first danced at a Christmas party at Kingsley Manor two years ago, and now they

would wed at Christmas. Like that party, she wore ruby red lip rouge and a halo of flowers in her hair instead of a veil. They had already wed, so this ceremony could be everything the first one was not.

It was more real to her than anything they'd done yet. And the look on Hugo's face when she stepped into the aisle of the makeshift church Phoebe had helped plan in the ballroom gave her confidence. His gaze stroked her from the flowers in her hair to her lips to her dress and even her feet. She half expected to see lust in his eyes. She shamelessly hoped for it. But her heart skipped a beat when she drew closer and saw tears instead. Her eyes welled, and tears of so much grief and even greater love fell down her cheeks.

When Stratford relinquished her at the altar, Hugo wiped his thumb across her cheek. She licked her lips. She felt her shoulders shudder.

"I love you, Clover," Hugo said to her.

"You're supposed to say that after the vows." She emphasized this with a gentle poke of her finger on his chest. Hugo took her hand and kissed each fingertip.

The same vows, the same ceremony, the same everything... almost.

When they were once again announced man and wife, Hugo turned to her. "Are you awake now, my sleeping beauty, my lucky Clover?" Forgetting everyone in the room, she put her palm on his cheek. He grabbed her up by the waist and kissed her soundly before their family and friends. She dropped her bouquet, wrapping him in her arms, and with her eyes wide open, she kissed him back, drowning out the roar of the crowd with the beat of his heart and hers.

"I look forward to trouncing you in chess tonight, my love," she said.

“I can’t wait to come out on the bottom of that proposal.” He smiled wickedly as he let her slide down his body.

Hugo could not believe his good fortune when all the odds had been against him.

Unlike the last one, this wedding was bliss. The flowers fresh. The bride radiant. The church-like ballroom, charming. And the love eternal. But the most magnificent thing of all was how Hugo had played the risks, weighed the outcome, found it failing, and done it anyway. As he gazed at his wife, he reveled in how profound her simple words had been months ago when they danced at the house party. Everything worth doing is scary . She had been teasing him then, but the words rang true.

She looked up at him, a beaming smile across her beautiful face. He glanced at the crowd, who looked on in anticipation.

Clover turned, wrapping her hand over Hugo’s arm, but he did not budge. “We can leave now,” she whispered. “The room needs to be turned into a party.” She smiled weakly at their friends and family.

“We’re not through.”

“We’re not? What else is there?”

“The first ring,” he said as he reached into his pocket and took hold of her right hand, “is your mother’s ring.” He slid it on her third finger, then picked up her other hand, and this time, he pulled off the elbow-length glove. “This ring I had especially made for you. The duke was good enough to procure it for me before he came. I intended to give you this at our home in London but thought a wedding was more appropriate.”

“You did this before you came here?”

He looked at her from under his lashes while he removed the amethyst he had given her at their first wedding and twisted the new band of gold onto her finger. “I did. It’s genuine and perfect, like you. It shines deeper than gems. It’s alive like the clover in the garden. It’s understated and enormously special. Anyone can wear a wedding ring, but no one can wear this one but you.”

She looked down, spread her fingers, and gasped. “It’s carved with little clovers.”

“Is it enough?” The question was more about their marriage than the ring.

“It’s everything.” She wrapped her arms around his neck. “Oh, Hugo, it’s us. Simple and true and so much love.”

### EPILOGUE

Spring 1825, London

The real test of love came when Hugo and Clover set foot in London again. The townhouse had a few shadows, but nothing they could not overcome. Without a complaint, Hugo gave up sleeping alone and welcomed his wife in his bed, his room, his personal affairs. The latter made him smile. All those nights together at Dovetail had ruined him for spending a night alone. He wanted to be with her. He loved her.

In February, he had news of a house for purchase in Mayfair, and without seeing it and after discussing it with Clover, he purchased it. He traveled back and forth, securing the paperwork and ordering any repairs needed, but it wasn't until April that the house was ready to live in.

Emma was due to arrive for the latter part of the Season—a soft come out, as Clover put it—but not before he moved them into the new house. He wanted to spend that first week with just Clover, building their first memories together in their new home.

“Are you ready to stay here for the night?” he asked as they stepped into the foyer.

“Oh, yes.” She raised her gaze to the ceiling. “It echoes in here. Is it like this all over the house? The last time I was here it was full of engineers and architects.”

“Hoo,” Hugo called toward the domed ceiling with a hand to his mouth. “It echoes because we are the only people here today. Tomorrow, the staff will join us, but not before noon because I plan on hearing my wife’s passionate cry echo throughout the

halls.”

She threw him a jaunty smile. “That sounds like you. Really, though, it did turn out beautifully. You’re very good at this sort of thing.”

“You picked the furnishings, don’t forget.”

“Yes, but you took care of color and the flooring... who knew under all that dust was a marvelous mosaic of inlaid tiles? It smells so clean.”

“That’s Gerard’s touch. Special polish with lemon and teakwood, I believe.”

“He’s a genius,” she said, sneaking an arm around Hugo’s waist.

“I wasn’t certain what to do with the back gardens. Perhaps you can help me with it.”

“Now?” she asked as he led her down a large hallway with doorways on either side.

“We can get there through the library. I had French doors put in.” The curtains were closed, and he motioned for her to precede him.

The small terrace was filled with pottery, half of them planted with seasonal flowers and the other half with annuals so there would be fresh blooms all year.

“Hugo,” Clover said in awe. “What have you done?”

His heart skipped. His smile turned up with pride. For months, he’d been working with a specialty gardener. Hedges and flowering shrubs complemented the placement of the current trees.

They descended the terrace steps. He heard her breath catch, and then she hurried forward and pivoted on her heel. “It’s a secret garden. Look at the clover, Hugo. And

a shaded bench like the one we sat upon. And the rose bushes. Peonies,” she exclaimed, pointing out each discovery. “It’s a wonder, it truly is. When?” she asked, clearly wondering how and when he had planned it.

“All those trips back and forth to Dovetail, I spent them doing this.” With one hand on his hip, he scratched his forehead with the other. “Do you truly like it?”

“I love it! I love you for doing this. I imagine you had help.”

“More than enough. I’m no gardener. But I did want it to look special, like a memory.”

“And many more, I promise.”

His pulse raced with her excitement. “It’s not just any garden, my love, but a fairy garden. I have it on good authority that magic happens in gardens such as this one.”

She looked about. “And it’s so private. Do you suppose we can fit in a chess table?”

“The bench has a cushion. Do you think it’s enough?” The innuendo was not lost on her.

She laughed. “I’m certain we don’t even need a bench. But I’m serious about the chess table.”

“I shall put in an order for your birthday. And the rest?”

“I just love it... I love it, Hugo,” she said again. “All of it. Evelyn, so near I can walk to her house. Your sister coming for the Season. Adeline and Chase nearby. You’ve thought of everything. Are you sure we can afford all this?”

He nodded. “I had a little help from a certain duke who doesn’t mind giving out loans

without interest since I took his sister off his hands.”

Her eyes grew serious for a moment. “I’m just glad you’re friends again.”

“We were never friends. We were business associates, then in-laws, then friends. A trend that seems to be working well for us.” He reached behind the terrace rail and pulled out a small gift wrapped in gold paper with a red ribbon. “There’s something else.”

“For me?”

“It would seem. I did say there was magic in this garden.” As he handed her the present, he stroked her hand covered with the lace gloves he’d given her.

“You’re silly,” she said, sitting on the bench with the gift in her lap. She untied the ribbon with enthusiasm. The box was lined in ruby-red velvet. She unfolded the fabric, her mouth paused open on a breath, her eyes danced over the polished surface of a pewter box. With great care and awe, she pulled it from the lining, and Hugo took the empty box from her. “Would you care to see it? Eyeglasses, perhaps?” he teased her, pulling from his inner pocket one of several pairs because she conveniently left them in inconvenient places.

“I would have a great reprimand for you, but I’m too excited.” She unfolded the scissor arms and placed them over her ears. The pewter box was carved with a bed of clovers in the same vein as her ring had been. She looked at the ring and then at the box. “Did you have these done by the same person?”

“The same workmanship, two different customers.”

Her eyes darted back to the box, and she turned it over while holding the lid closed. On the bottom was a winding key. “It’s a music box.” Her voice was a mixture of awe, excitement, and reverence. She wound the key, turned it upright, and slowly



opened the lid. The tinkling sound of Mozart played. “It’s the aria from Mozart’s opera, Le Nozze Di Figaro. Your father was working on this when I first met him. He was smiling just as you are right now. That same handsome grin you have.”

“He’ll be happy you liked it.”

She pulled a little card from the inside. The front was painted with tiny clovers. She read. “To our sweet, lovely Clover. You came at the right time for us all. Welcome to the family. With much love, signed Philip Darrington.” She looked up. Her eyes shined with the dew of so many good memories.

Hugo shuffled his feet nervously like a young whip falling in love for the first time. “Do you still love your ring?”

“More than ever.” She set the music box beside her. “All this clover spread about the walk reminds me of the garden where we first kissed. Whenever I look at my ring, I think of this.” She leaned down and ran a loving hand over the sprinkling of clover around the leg of the bench. She pulled up her hand and removed the lace glove, admiring her wedding band. “It means so much to me that I’ve never taken it off.”

“Haven’t you?” He knew she had not.

“No. Why? Are you planning on replacing it? Because if you are, you may think on that again.”

“I wouldn’t dare.”

She held out her hand, smiling, studying the gold band.

“Clovers on the outside, music on the inside. How clever of my father. I would say I am in good company.”

She looked up at him slowly from where she sat. “What are you saying?”

He shoved his hands in his pockets and shrugged.

“I’ve never taken it off,” she said more to herself than to him. “I don’t think I can.”

“Then don’t,” he said simply.

“But you’re smiling about something.”

“Could be.” His answers were so succinct he knew her curiosity would prevail.

She smoothed a thumb over the ring, and he could tell she had a dilemma. Never removing it had somehow become a picture of her love for him.

“It’s just a ring, Clover. You will not remove my love if you remove the ring. It’s but a symbol.”

She took a deep breath and twisted it from her finger, having a more difficult time of it since telling him a month ago she was with child. “What if I can’t get it back on?”

He chuckled. “Then perhaps it’s a good idea to leave it off until the babe is born.”

“Oh, you.” She pulled it free, holding it between two fingers. She examined it and then turned it sideways, tilting her head. “It’s engraved, and I never knew it. Why didn’t you say so?”

“Because I always wanted you to see it without an audience present, and you refused to remove it after the wedding.”

Biting her lip, she squinted at the tiny words. After she read it, she squeezed her eyes closed, and her throat bobbed. “Hugo,” she whispered.

“Read it.”

She scooped a tear from under her spectacles. She reached out for him, holding his hand while she read the inscription. “For the love of Clover.” She raised her eyes to his. “I love you so much it hurts, Hugo.”

He leaned over and kissed her softly, then knelt by the bench and kissed her hand. He laid his head in her lap and fought tears.

“I did it all for you, Clover. Everything I’ve done. It was always for you. For my friend. For my wood sprite. For the love of Clover, my patient, spirited wife. All my days and nights belong to you, and every one is like a secret garden with only one key between us.”

THE END