



# Her Beastly Duke (Damsel in Distress #5)

**Author:** Hayleigh Mills

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Briar is willing to do anything to save her twin brother from ruin and disgrace—even resort to theft. If her brother marries well, it will rescue the family and save Briar from a fate she dreads: marriage.

Lord Julius Fenton, the Duke of Berkley, is known as the beastly duke. Scarred and masked, he lives a life of seclusion, shunning society except for business matters. He never imagined wanting more—until Briar knocked the rapier from his hand in his library. She ignites an inexplicable fire within him, awakening a yearning for everything he's long denied himself. To keep her attempted theft a secret, Briar agrees to help Julius find a duchess.

Julius is determined to find a wife with the right pedigree, while Briar remains resolute in avoiding marriage. Except the simmering tension between them explodes into something neither could have imagined...

**Total Pages (Source):** 19

## CHAPTER 1

### Walcot Hall, Gloucester

Miss Briar Walcot sat in the sparsely furnished drawing room, her fingers tracing the worn edges of the beloved book she held. Its once vibrant cover now faded and dog-eared, told the tale of countless hours spent in its company. The spine, a testament to its age, had been cracked multiple times; pages, once pristine, were now almost falling out, and the edges of a few were bent. She was sure that her tears had fallen on the pages many times before, blurring her vision as she tried to read. Briar closed the volume with a sigh. She had read it so many times that she knew some of the passages by heart, and she yearned for new material, but they could not afford it.

She looked around the drab room with its tattered drapes and worn carpet. The most valuable pieces of furniture were gone, and she had long since given up on dreaming that their family's circumstances would change for the better. It had all been too much since Father died. Only then did they know how good he was at keeping secrets. She did not think they would recover from the shock after the will was read. Even the very memory was painful, and she would much rather forget it. Four years had passed since her father died, and when Briar thought they were destitute, she realized that it was only now that she understood the word's true meaning.

Duncan burst into the drawing room, his tall, lean figure, usually so agile, seemed to be weighed down by the burden of their circumstances. His trembling hands, the hastily poured drink, the unsteady gaze—all spoke of a battle he was fighting within. The room, once a sanctuary, now felt suffocating with the weight of their shared anxiety. Briar, too, felt the urgency of their situation. The brandy, usually a source of

comfort, seemed to offer no solace to Duncan. He poured another drink, his movements more frantic this time, before turning to face her. His smile, usually a source of warmth, was absent, and his eyes, usually so full of life, were clouded with worry.

Briar's heart lurched. Her brother seemed even more unsettled than usual. "Duncan, is all well?"

He grimaced and could not meet her eyes.

Whatever it was, it could not be that bad. Duncan was a good, gentle soul. He was fair and honorable; perhaps that was why he struggled to say whatever bothered him.

"Duncan, what is it? Clearly, there is something that upset you." Briar stood up, but he took a few steps toward her and flopped onto the sofa.

She reclaimed her seat in the armchair and patiently waited.

Duncan's eyes were feverish and over-bright, his gaze darting. He sat forward and placed his hands on his knees. "I have done something rather foolish. You might never forgive me."

He dropped his head in his hands, and Briar's heart skipped a beat. The hairs raised on her nape and arms. Nothing else had happened since Duncan dropped his head, yet she felt that things were moving quickly, but they were not. She forced a smile in place and attempted to keep her voice light.

"What have you done, Duncan? Out with it."

Her brother said nothing. Briar wondered what could be so bad that he would hesitate to share it with her. He usually confided in her, discussing any private matters and

problems. They were confidants, each other's pillars of strength in this harsh world. She could not think of anyone with whom she would rather share her feelings and secrets. They had always been safe with him.

"Duncan, whatever it is, just tell me. I am sure we can work it out together," Briar said with the empathy she truly felt. Whatever it was, she did not want him to feel alone.

Duncan used both hands to rub the back of his neck. He shifted as though unable to get comfortable before he raised his head and took a deep, shaky breath.

"I have gone and done it this time. Bloody hell! It is rather dreadful."

Briar immediately felt thirsty, but she was afraid to move. She had heard Duncan swear before, but it made her stomach churn this time. There was such desperation in his voice, and she swore his anxiety was infectious. Would he finally tell her they would lose their home? This was the worst-case scenario, and she had always resisted thinking about it because she hoped it would never get that far. His anger at their family's dire straits was palpable, and it only seemed to grow with time. The departure of the servants, unable to bear the financial strain, had left only Clair, their faithful housekeeper, with them. Briar, too, had taken up the household chores, not out of obligation but out of a shared understanding that they were all in this together.

Have we lost our home, Duncan ? She silently screamed. Taking another steady breath, she decided to wait and listen. He had a secret, and he certainly could not hide it.

"I have done something that, if it were made public, would certainly ruin my honor and what is left of the family name. I've passed off a fake Wellington depicting the battle of Waterloo." The words rushed from Duncan once he started, and beads of sweat lined his brow.

Good Lord! Alarmed, her heart pounded. “A fake Wellington?”

“Yes.”

Duncan did not meet Briar’s eyes, and she detected the slight tremble of his chin. He was likely berating himself for his reckless decision. Briar dazedly shook her head. She knew her brother, and he was not a cheat. If someone else had told her Duncan had done this, she would have been the first to defend him. Her brother was honest, but not only that, he had an appreciation for fine art. Was this what debt and a bit of despair had made him do? It was a desperate act, and truth be told, it frightened her.

Briar wondered how long Duncan had worked on obtaining the forgery. She understood it was a complicated process that was not limited to creating the artwork itself. The forged artwork had to look plausible, copying Wellington’s style, artificially aging the artwork, and using not only advanced chemical solutions but regular dust and dirt as well. A clean Wellington smelling of fresh paint and varnish would unlikely convince an art connoisseur. She wanted to know the details, but this was not the right time to ask.

Briar stood and started to pace, her mind furiously churning.

Things had taken a turn for the worst at Walcot Hall last season. There was a terrible drought, and they lost half of their crops. What remained was not of the best quality, and it was not enough to prevent the chain of events that followed. Briar supposed the drought was the final nail in their proverbial coffin. Duncan tried to shield them from the worst of it, but she observed that he had become restless ever since. He finally confided the bank was unwilling to provide a further loan.

There was nothing of great value left to be sold at Walcot Hall. Although they were in a bind, the last time she spoke with Duncan, he seemed resolute that he would find a way to get them out of it. She had no idea passing off a forgery was what he had in

mind, for she would certainly have talked him out of it.

A fake painting was indeed serious.

It was an unmitigated disaster .

It was described as a classy crime, but no convicted art forger would be praised for their artistic skills and tricks used to pull off the deception. In polite society, a gentleman's honor was everything. Duncan was the Baron of Walcot, and it must pain him to realize that his honest attempts to provide for them had failed, so he turned to less favorable actions.

She stopped her agitated pacing and turned to her brother. Briar could feel his desperation and frustration. "Whom did you pass the Wellington ... to?" Forgery , the unspoken word hung thick in the air.

Duncan paused, and a deep look of shame appeared in his eyes before he replied, "The Duke of Berkley."

Briar's hand flew to her chest, and she gasped. "The beastly duke!" she cried before she could stop herself.

"Yes." Her brother scrubbed a hand over his face. "I am so foolish!"

Briar's mind scrambled to think of a way they could extricate themselves from the debacle. What was Duncan thinking? How could he have sold a forgery to the duke? Everyone in Gloucester had heard about the beast. His vast landholdings and wealth did not protect him from the gossip. It was said the duke was a recluse who lived alone on Berkley Estate. He was badly disfigured, with a myriad of scars running from his hairline to his chin. He had such a dreadful appearance that he had taken to hiding behind a mask. He did not attend social events and did not accept visitors.

The reason for his scars was even more titillating for the haut ton , who never wasted the opportunity to tittle-tattle. Apparently, the beastly duke had been injured in a duel while on a trip to France during his youth. He was caught in a compromising position with a lady from the French court or something of the sort. The lady's husband was obliged to call him out, and the duke accepted. Clearly, it had not gone well for the duke.

Of course, Briar herself had never laid eyes on him, and it was just as well. The thought of a gentleman being so disfigured that he resorted to wearing a mask made her uncomfortable. "How could you act so in regard to a man everyone calls the Beast of Berkley? Such a moniker should have informed you he is not a man to be deceived!"

Duncan tilted his head to the ceiling and pinched the bridge of his nose. "The gentleman is merely scarred, Briar. That hardly makes him a beast."

Briar's brows shot up, and her voice raised in a pitch. "You have seen him?"

Duncan's lips flattened, and he shook his head. "I have not. Why do you ask?"

"I merely wanted to know if he was as disfigured as they said. After all, he caused the haut ton to descend into frenzied gossip and ladies to swoon and act quite uncomfortable in his presence. That is how he became known as a beast, Duncan."

"I am less concerned with his looks and more with my predicament, which will soon be our predicament if word gets out."

"How did you hand over the forgery to the duke?"

"I dealt with his steward, and perhaps that is why I managed to get away with it. He was less astute and not as meticulous." Duncan tipped his head to the side and

whispered, “What have I gotten myself into? I knew within a few minutes I had made a mistake. I thought about going to the duke and apologizing, but... I do not think he would understand anything I explain.”

Briar did not immediately have an answer to Duncan's dilemma. An awful, sinking feeling swirled in the pit of her stomach. “When was the transaction?”

“Yesterday,” Duncan replied sheepishly.

Briar frowned, turning over an idea in her thoughts. “Well, if it was only yesterday and you dealt with his steward, the duke may not have seen the painting yet. We could simply retrieve it,” she said with more bravado than was sensible.

“Simply, you say. And how do you propose that we do that?” Duncan almost stuttered.

“I presume you did not go to Berkley Estate.”

“I did not, but the painting was delivered there.”

Briar nodded. “Good. We know where it is, and we will go there and fetch it.” Such nonchalance, as if one decided to break into the beastly duke’s home every day and steal. She must have taken leave of her senses. But what else could they do?

There was a slight hesitation as Duncan pursed his lips in thought. “I do not see how this will work. We could hardly waltz onto the vast estate, locate the painting and waltz back out without being detected. Furthermore, what pretext would we use to gain admittance when the duke does not accept guests?”

“I take your point. He is ever the recluse.” Briar drummed her fingers against her palm and pondered for a moment. “If the duke does not accept guests, he would have



instructed his staff to turn them away. But what if the guests were in a position where he could not possibly refuse to accommodate them? Let's say they were stranded in the dead of night."

The corner of Duncan's mouth lifted. "Hmm. You may be on to something ... Hang on. They ? What do you mean they?" The smile had fallen away, and a piercing gaze replaced it.

A rather ridiculous question if Briar ever heard one. "You and me, of course."

"I can see those wheels turning, Briar. What are you thinking?"

Briar tilted her head to the side. Briar knew she needed to reassure and convince him her plan would work. Duncan hated showing any sign of weakness, and she did not like to see him so wounded. "Well, we stand a better chance of getting admitted if we are together. I hardly think they would turn a lady of good breeding away in the dead of night. We will present ourselves as aristocrats, so being inhospitable would be very difficult. After all, we are of the same class and would extend such courtesies."

Duncan nodded, but he did not look convinced.

Briar thought she knew what he was thinking. "You seem skeptical."

"Why should they admit us? What reason would we give?" Duncan asked.

She was one step ahead of him. "A broken-down carriage would be the perfect ruse to get refuge. Do you not think?"

"It is plausible, but only if it is quite late in the evening. Otherwise, they would try to repair the damage so they could send us on our way," Duncan replied.

Briar nodded in agreement. "That makes sense as we need to spend the night."

Duncan sat up and appeared more animated. "I cannot believe that I am considering this. What will we do once we are there? How will we go about it?"

"We will search for the painting once everyone has retired for the evening, and you will leave the money you were paid for it." Briar paused for a moment. "This is a sound plan unless you can come up with something else."

The frown creased Duncan's brows. "Perhaps we should not rush to act, lest we err and find ourselves in an even worse position."

"Think about it, Duncan. We will certainly be worse off if he discovers the painting," Briar said with conviction.

Duncan ran both hands through his hair and sighed. His head fell into his palm again, and he had been quiet for so long that Briar wondered if he was asleep.

Duncan sighed heavily. "We must be discrete, so we must use a false name."

Briar grinned. "I have already thought of a couple, brother. How about Fairweather or Marsden?"

"I think Marsden will do. Are we to do this tonight?" Duncan held her gaze.

"The sooner, the better. It is a few hours away so we should make our way as Mama and Victoria retire for the evening. We will leave Berkley Estate as soon as we retrieve the painting to ensure we return before we are missed." Briar spoke bravely, but she was loathe to think what would befall them if they were caught.

Duncan stood. "I will organize the equipage and everything else that we need."

Briar watched as Duncan walked from the room. He seemed to walk tall again. He had a purpose. He was undoubtedly relieved at the possibility of resolving the issue without ruining his honor. He would not escape unscathed because the duke would know what he had done, but that was the lesser of two evils.

Briar was thrilled at the prospect of doing something exciting. It had become boring at Walcot Hall since they started watching every penny they spent. Socializing was an expense, for there were new wardrobes and the cost of entertaining, and they could not host guests without the full complement of servants. The last time she did anything remotely exciting was when she was launched into society at sixteen.

She was dazzled by the London season, but her father passed away shortly after they returned to Walcot Hall. During her period of grief, she mourned not only her father but also her way of life. Duncan had returned to complete university at Oxford before he resumed full responsibility for the estate. Mother had insisted that he should see Oxford through, although Briar did not see any point other than keeping up appearances.

Baroness Irene Walcot had not taken the change from wealth to retrenching well. She spent a great deal of time in her bedchamber for the first few months before she gradually started to join the rest of the family for meals. Ever since their father passed away, her mother was fragile, so there would be no point in telling her about their escapade. Mother would become quite distressed, and she would draw within herself again. Briar was happy her younger sister, Victoria, was quite independent. She was often off alone, finding ways to amuse herself so Briar did not need to worry about her being underfoot.

It had taken quite a lot for Duncan to admit he had been foolish and that he had made a terrible mistake. She was grateful he had done the right thing by confessing because she was confident they could resolve it. The situation was not irreparable. Briar refused to accept that it could be—not until they tried everything, as there was too

much at stake.

Briar had to prepare for the journey. As she exited the drawing room and climbed the stairs, she could not help the niggling thought that crept into her mind. Neither she nor Duncan had been to Berkley Estate, and they were taking a huge risk to sneak around it at night.

What if one of the servants caught them snooping around?

Briar's step faltered, and she held onto the banister as she climbed the stairs. Worse yet, what if they ran into the duke? Her mind was blank. She did not know what the devil she would do, and she hoped she would never have to find out.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:22 am*

### CHAPTER 2

#### Berkley Estate, Gloucester

Julius Fenton, Duke of Berkley, was in a foul mood. He sat in the library surrounded by family portraits, books, and journals. His younger brother, Baxter, was meddling again, and no one meddled like him. Julius's brows knitted as he stared at Baxter's portrait, gazing back at him. His brother was off managing one of the Scottish estates, which should have kept him quite busy, but he still found time to write to Julius to annoy the hell out of him.

Julius slammed his hand on the large oak desk, which echoed in the library. The echo screamed loneliness as the candles cast a faint shadow on the wall. He remembered when he and Baxter used to stand in the light and make animals in the shadows on the walls. A fond memory from another lifetime. A time when he was happy.

No matter how much Julius told Baxter he was fine on his own, his brother insisted on telling him he was not. According to Baxter, Julius was surviving, but he was not really living. He pretended not to notice the difference. Companionship and comfort were what Baxter thought he needed. Julius had stopped caring about either a long time ago.

He was plagued by a reckless decision he made years ago, and he was reaping the rewards, rightly so. Julius raised his hand and gently ran it along the taunt, scarred skin that covered the length of his face, from his eyes to the corner of his mouth. The skin felt hard, as hard as his soul. The scar restricted movement when he smiled because he was only able to raise the corner of his lips on one side. The ladies found

it grotesque. There were times when the scar itched, and it was bloody painful. The memory of the physical pain had long faded, but for years, he took an emotional beating. Julius wasn't sure which one was worse. He no longer complained about his misfortune, for he had long since accepted his fate.

Every day that Julius glimpsed his reflection was a stark reminder of the mistreatment he had endured upon returning to England. It was expected that he would be shunned in France, but England surprised him. It was his home. The hypocrisy of the haut ton was something to behold. He was an aristocrat with connections, lands, and wealth. They did not ignore him and were only too happy to conduct business with him. They were only too happy to engage with him if it was to make the haut ton wealthier or more distinguished. What they said behind his back was another matter entirely. He knew they called him the beastly duke, and he wished he could say it did not hurt, but even after so many years, it did.

Damn them .

His wealth opened the door to the most prestigious drawing rooms, but he did not socialize with the pretenders. The gentlemen of high society were righteous except when they were whoring and getting drunk all over town, and many had a mistress or two stacked away. These pursuits did not interest him. Julius was quite satisfied to remain on his estate and do his duty, preserving the wealth of the Berkley Estate. It was time his brother accepted this. He reached for Baxter's letter and read it once more.

Dearest brother,

I hope my letter finds you well. I did not receive a reply to the previous one, yet here I am writing another. Emmeline and I are concerned about you. While you have isolated yourself from the world, there is no need to hide from me. You must long for companionship and comfort. We humans have the power of choice, which makes us

superior to other animals, and we need each other. You could choose to end your solitary life whenever you wish, and I suppose what I really want to ask is, do you not think it is time?

We have extended the invitation for you to visit us in Scotland countless times, and we wanted you to know the invitation remains open. Emmeline and I are pleased to announce that we are expecting another bairn, and he is due in the autumn. I have taken to saying 'he' to Emmeline's irritation because she hopes for a girl after Warren, Sidney, and Patrick, but I believe it will be another boy. I feel it in my bones. It has been a long time since you have seen your nephews, and if you do not come to visit us, we will make a trip to see you. Take heart, for it would be a long and tedious journey with the children. Perhaps you could visit and save us from this trial. We miss you.

Sincerely,

Baxter

Julius smiled. Baxter had been keeping himself busy. He could hardly believe that another babe was on the way. Emmeline and Baxter were literally adding sons to their family every year. He did not need to worry about succession. If he did not wed, there would be no heir from him, but Baxter and his sons would inherit. Julius did not need to feel guilty about securing the family's line. His thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door.

Julius placed the letter on his desk. "Come in."

Otis, his butler, opened the door and entered the room. "Will you have dinner this evening, Your Grace?"

Otis had taken to asking because there were days when the staff prepared an elaborate

meal only for Julius to ignore it and partake in some simple fare.

“I will only have soup, rolls, and a bit of pastry served here in the library, Otis. Thank you.”

“As you wish, Your Grace,” Otis replied before he spun around and left the room.

Julius opened his desk drawer and placed Baxter’s letter inside it, where it joined the rest. He slowly closed the drawer. He would eventually respond to Baxter, but not right now. Julius stood up from his desk and walked over to an easel that held a painting that his steward, Mr. Ainsley, had procured for him. As was their customary arrangement, Mr. Ainsley had left it wrapped in the packaging that it arrived in. Julius usually kept the painting in his library until he decided where it should be hung. He slowly removed the painting’s wrapping and gazed at it. Though he was not an art connoisseur, he appreciated the detail and depiction.

The knock on the door signaled the arrival of his dinner. Otis laid out his meal on the table and departed the room. Julius sat to eat, fleetingly thinking a good conversation with a dining partner would be welcome. He ruthlessly shut away the thought, loathing to admit he was lonely. Nor was it in his character to uselessly long for things that would never materialize.

After returning from France, he tried to court a lady, and it was an abject failure. A few years ago, Lady Hazel Chester had seemed interested in him. He met her on one of his visits to her father’s estate, where they were introduced. Julius never left the estate without a half mask that he wore to hide the scar. The haut ton could only speculate as to what his scar looked like, but they had never seen it. He did not want to be gawked at or to be treated like a specimen.

In hindsight, he should have known that Lady Hazel’s interest in him was not genuine because it went against everything he had experience of society’s fickle females.



Perhaps at the time, he was optimistic, and Julius allowed himself to be drawn in by her charm. Eventually, she got around to what she really wanted. He was to remove his mask, and in the end, he had given in because he wanted to assure himself that she had a genuine liking for him and would not be repelled.

Julius had slowly removed the mask, never taking his eyes off Lady Hazel, who recoiled as if she had been struck when she finally saw what lay beneath. Her eyes could not hide her disgust and pity, and Julius wanted neither. Her stare had made him feel hollow, dark, and ugly. He could never flee the memory, as much as he wanted to, and it pained him to realize she had no genuine interest in him. He had hastily replaced the mask and never revealed himself again.

It was a high price to pay for a stupid mistake in his youth, but he had to take responsibility for the consequences. He had no choice but to live a solitary life; otherwise, disgust and pity would destroy him.

He embraced the solitude and did not form close relationships or confide in others. He was disconnected from the haut ton's unless it was absolutely necessary and had his own little world on his estate. Did he sometimes wish that he had a loving wife and rambunctious children like Baxter; of course. Since this was not meant to be, he could always consider the alternative. He could always have a paid companion like his Aunt Blanche.

Julius did not need a guardian for his reputation, like Aunt Blanche, but perhaps someone to ease his regret when he thought about what could have been. A woman who was well-educated, reputable, had good manners and would spend time with him and entertain him. The thought was unheard of, for no respectable lady would do such a thing due to the speculations it would bring. Though a male companion would be better, it was still unusual, and that was not what he wanted.

The thought of finding such a woman was daunting so Julius pushed it from his mind.

Especially given he had no intention of pursuing that until possibly later in life.

Briar and Duncan had left their home under the cover of fog-shrouded darkness. Duncan managed to procure a carriage because they could no longer maintain one. The horses had been sold after the selected pieces of furniture. A carriage now seemed like a rare luxury.

It was spring, but even though all the snow had melted, the nights were still quite cold. Although she wore warm clothing, the wind seemed to chill her to the bone. Briar shivered and pulled her cloak tighter around her shoulders. Perhaps she trembled not only from the cold but from the rising fear thumping in her chest as the carriage pulled closer to Berkley Estate. She looked at Duncan, whose eyes were closed as his head rested against the squab as the carriage rolled along. He appeared so peaceful in his sleep. Earlier this evening, Duncan was the one who was a bit anxious, and Briar felt adventurous, but now their roles were reversed.

Briar felt a flutter in the pit of her stomach at the very thought of meeting the beastly duke. She willed herself to remain calm. Briar silently prayed that their ruse would go off as planned and they would not be discovered. Finally, the carriage came to a halt, and Duncan jerked awake. She pulled the curtain back and gazed out into the pitch-black night. Her brother lit a lantern, and they exited the carriage. Duncan turned to the driver and gave him instructions.

When he was finished, he turned around to face her. "Are you ready, Miss Blanche?"

"Certainly, Douglas." They had decided to use at least names that started with the same letter just in case they slipped up. They set off down the long driveway in silence, bracing against a strong wind until they reached the large gilded front doors to the majestic mansion. Briar was so cold that her fingers felt stiff despite wearing gloves. Duncan knocked, and they stood on the steps waiting, but there was no answer. She wondered if the servants would not come to the door. Duncan knocked

louder, and the butler finally appeared.

Her brother spoke up. “Good evening. My name is Lord Morecliff, and this is my sister, Miss Blanche.”

The butler eyed them wearily and bowed. “Good evening, my lord, Miss Blanche. How may I assist you?”

“We are on our way to Morecliff Estate in Worcester, but sadly, our carriage has broken down. It was rather foolish of me to persist in driving through the night. There are no inns nearby, and this was the only house we saw, so we are asking your lord to extend his hospitality for the evening, and we will be on our way at first light tomorrow,” Duncan explained.

The butler stiffened his spine, his expression growing remote. “I am afraid that is not possible, Lord Morecliff. The duke does not entertain guests on the estate.”

“I beg your pardon. Are you saying the duke would not consider our plight and offer us lodging for one night?” Briar ensured she sounded like a shocked, spoiled aristocrat who did not appreciate being told no .

Duncan was quick to offer her support. “How extraordinary.”

They both stared at the butler, their gazes boring into him, as they remained standing on the step. The butler’s forehead wrinkled, and he pulled back slightly.

Briar saw the hesitancy, and she smiled inwardly.

“I hardly think your lord would be pleased to find that we slept in a broken-down carriage on such a cold night. Highwaymen might even happen upon us. A worrisome notion. Should you not ask him?”

The butler's lips pressed together in a slight grimace, and he blinked. "The hour is late, Miss Blanche. I am afraid that Your Grace left specific instructions that he was not to be disturbed for the evening."

He gave a shaky smile that wavered before he stepped aside and permitted Duncan and Briar to enter the hallway.

"Please come in," he said.

He proceeded down the hallway and led them to a drawing room where a fire burned. Briar sighed her relief.

"Make yourselves comfortable. I will bring you a meal while Agnes prepares your rooms." The butler turned and left the room.

Briar moved toward the fireplace, quickly removed her gloves, and warmed her hands. Duncan immediately started looking around the drawing room, and Briar followed suit. There were paintings on the wall, but none were the forgery. Now that they were inside the estate, she was overwhelmed by how large it was and the numerous rooms they needed to search. This was going to be a serious challenge.

Once Duncan had completed his cursory search, he moved closer to the fireplace. Briar whispered because she could never tell who was lurking around. Her mother always said the walls had ears, and she could not risk being overheard.

"The house is much larger than I anticipated, so it is not feasible for us to search together. We could search all night and not be able to find it," Briar said. The house was four stories, and it would be an unfamiliar maze. "Thankfully, it seems as if the duke has retired for the evening."

Duncan tugged at his neckcloth and sighed. "I had noticed in the forecourt, and I

suppose you are right. We must split up. I will take the left wing, and you could take the right. We will return to our room before the servants are up at dawn.”

“Agreed,” Briar replied.

There was a knock on a door, and a servant appeared with a platter. Briar and Duncan ate by the fire. Shortly after that, a matronly servant entered the room and curtsied.

“I am Agnes, my lord, Miss Blanche, and I am here to show you to your rooms.”

Agnes was quite a welcoming contrast to the butler. Briar and Duncan followed her up the wide stairs to the first landing, down the hall where the doors to two rooms were ajar.

Agnes pointed to each room across the hall from each other. “My lord, Miss Blanche. I bid you goodnight.”

“Thank you, Agnes. Goodnight.”

They both replied before entering their respective rooms and closing the door. Briar curiously looked around the well-appointed room. The bed was neatly made, and the pillows and cushions made it appear so inviting. She wondered if she could take a short nap before snooping around but decided against it. Instead, she moved over to an armchair and took a seat. It was quite late, so the servants would soon be off to bed. It was a matter of mere hours before they would need to rise again, and she felt a bit guilty about robbing them of sleep.

Briar was determined that they should find the forgery by daylight. This was their one chance because now that the servants had seen their faces, it would be difficult to find a plausible reason to return where they were not wanted. Briar leaned her head against the cushion of the armchair and closed her eyes. She came awake with a start

and listened to the house's silence.

Goodness! I fell asleep .

She did not think that she had been asleep for too long. Briar removed her shoes so that she would quietly walk around in her stocking. She had kept the lantern from their walk to the estate and used one of the candles to light it.

Briar cracked the door and listened before she entered the hallway. It was silent. She slowly padded across the hall and opened the door to Duncan's room, but he had already left. Duncan had a head start and Briar was irritated that he did not wake her. She exited the room and softly closed the door behind her. She turned right down the passageway and walked with more confidence than she felt.

When she arrived at the first closed door, her knees began trembling, but she had to go ahead and open it. Slowly, she twisted the nob and entered the room, holding the lantern to illuminate the surroundings. She scanned the bedchamber and found the painting was not there. She blew out a slow breath without realizing she was holding it. This seemed less like an adventure and more of a recipe for how to become ruined beyond redemption.

She exited the room and continued down the hall, slowly opening the door of each room, only to be disappointed. She had gone through a few rooms and was about to enter another wing of the house when the hairs lifted on the nape of her neck. A voice from behind startled her.

“Are you lost, my lady?”

It was Agnes. Did these servants never sleep?

Briar's hands trembled, and her fingers tightened reflexively on the lantern. Hoping

she appeared composed, she spun around. Agnes was only trying to follow the duke's orders. She flashed Agnes a warm smile. "I could not sleep, so I stepped outside my bedchamber to wander for a spell. When I am at home, walking around somehow aids me to sleep like a baby."

"My lady, the wing you are about to enter is forbidden, and the master would be angry if you were caught there." Agnes sounded anxious.

Why was it forbidden? Perhaps this is where the duke stored the painting. Her curiosity was magnified.

"Would you like me to show you back to your bedchamber?"

"Thank you."

Briar dutifully followed Agnes back to her room, but she had no intention of staying there. This was not the time for faint-heartedness. She would bide her time and go directly to the forbidden wing. Briar entered the room and closed the door softly behind her. Was Duncan having better luck? She had no way of knowing and wished they had discussed this further.

Briar sat on the armchair, afraid that if she lay on the bed, she would fall asleep and miss the opportunity. Thirty minutes passed in worried contemplation before she scowled. There could be no further delay, so she stood up and took a deep, steadying breath. Briar slowly opened the door and checked the hallway then furtively walked to where Agnes found her. She resumed her search, and the first few rooms yielded nothing interesting. There were a few paintings here and there, but none were the forgery Duncan described.

Was this a terrible mistake? Would they leave empty-handed? She cautiously approached the next room, opened the door, and peeked inside. The room was a blend

of shadows and light. As soon as she entered, she sensed there was something different about it. Almost instantly, she realized it was warmer than the others, and the lantern's glow fell on many paintings.

Her heart squeezed. Perhaps she had finally come to the right place. She closed the door behind her and crept further into the room. The large oak desk at the center of the room caught her attention, for it was quite imposing. Her eyes shifted to the easel in the far corner of the room, and she gave a soft gasp. Relief washed over her. Finally, she found it.

She placed the lantern on the table and stealthily crept forward until she stood before the easel and soundlessly removed the painting from its perch. It was hard to believe this one thing held such significance. She turned toward the door but only took a few steps when a man's voice boomed.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

Muffling a shriek, she whirled to the sound of the voice. Someone was in the shadowed corner. Briar was certain the tendons were standing out in her neck, and immediately, her shoulders were rigid with tension.

He moved so quickly that she did not have time to register his movements before he spoke. A gentleman emerged from the corner, his figure half-bathed in the room's soft light while the rest remained cloaked in shadow. Her heart pounded so fiercely and fast that she felt a wave of faintness wash over her.

Answer me,” the gentleman growled, staring at her like a lion eyeing his prey, waiting to move in for the final kill.

Their gazes locked, and her mouth formed a perfect ‘O’.



His stare was piercing yet inscrutable. His swift and fluid movement as he prowled closer radiated power and arrogance. There was no mistaking him. She had come face to face with the beastly duke.

### CHAPTER 3

Briar's hand flew to her chest, and she could feel her heart thudding with such force that she thought it would explode. She was rooted to the spot, even though she wanted nothing more than to retreat and flee. The room, warm just a moment ago, now felt cold, as if spring had vanished and they were in the dead of winter.

Instead of approaching her, the duke lowered himself onto a sofa and merely stared at her as if she were a specimen. An odd silence fell between them as they regarded each other, and amidst the fear, curiosity shimmered through her. Through the haze of her initial fright and shock, she realized the duke was not at all what she expected.

Even though he lounged on the sofa, she could tell he was much taller. His arm rested casually on the back as he appraised her. His sleeves were rolled up, revealing muscular forearms, and his white shirt, shockingly without a cravat, was parted enough to expose the strong column of his throat and Adam's apple. His hair was wild and windswept, as if he had been riding on a stormy night.

His eyes wandered the full length of her body, lingering on her décolletage for much longer than what would be considered proper. The intensity of his gaze was frightening. Even more bewildering, Briar found herself strangely, startlingly conscious of the duke's sensual appeal.

“Do you want me to ask you again?”

The harshness of his tone stole the protest from her throat, and her dry tongue was stuck to the roof of her mouth. He was clearly not accustomed to asking the same

question twice.

“I... I...” She opened her mouth to speak and then closed it again.

Words failed her. Briar hated that her hands shook. She did not want to appear weak and frightened. She hadn't thought this far ahead, unwilling to dwell on the consequences of being caught. She should have had an alternative plan, but there was none. Now, she had to face the humiliating truth of being discovered. If the duke decided to call in the law, it would lead to an unrecoverable scandal of enormous proportions. She could already envision the scandal sheets and a spasm of fear gripped her.

She just needed time to think as her mind frantically searched for avenues of escape. But the duke sat up straighter just then, the lantern casting a glow. It was then that she noticed the thick scar running along the right side of his face, from his hairline to his hard chin, which marred his handsome features. The scar spoke of a horrendous experience. She jerked her gaze to his eyes and quickly glanced away from the bold, intent scrutiny. Despite his scar, he displayed such arrogance.

It was clear that this particular wing was forbidden because it was the beast's lair. Like a bear, he had retired to his secluded and hidden place before she disturbed him.

“It is most curious that you are not answering my question.”

“You gave me a dreadful fright, Your Grace,” Briar heard the tremor in her voice, and she hated it.

A grunt of irritation left him, and he stood up from the sofa, taking a few steps closer. He towered over her; his broad chest and solid frame did nothing to calm her racing heart.

“I frightened you? Presumably, that is why you are staring so and not speaking.”

“Ye... yes.”

“I frightened you in my own house?”

His tone was soft mockery, and the smile that played across his lips was more of a grimace. It disappeared as quickly as it had materialized, replaced with pursed lips and an icy glare.

Briar felt a rising sense of panic. He was a strong man, and she was alone in his library. Uninvited. Duncan had no notion of where to find her. She was exposed, and her mind was scrambling. She must run away, but surely, he would be faster. Briar had no doubt he would catch her, so she had to think of another way. She couldn't fall apart. Unflappable and courageous was what she needed to be in the face of this debacle. Briar took a step forward and rested the painting against the wall.

“You are wearing my patience thin. Who are you, and why are you stealing my painting? You do not look like a common thief, yet evidently, you are.”

He had already categorized her and made an assumption about her character and integrity. And in doing so, he presented her with an ideal opportunity. From her experience of being confined to Walcot Hall, anyone in seclusion must suffer some degree of boredom and crave stimulation. She had to find a way to play on that and create a moment to escape. The two most stimulating things she knew were dancing and fencing. Briar glanced around the room for a weapon, then her eyes fell upon them. She did not hesitate. Briar raised her chin, removed her gloves, and threw them down in a challenge.

“You have wounded me, my lord.”

“I have wounded you,” he slowly repeated.

“I am not a common thief without dignity. I was merely righting a wrong. This is our field of honor. Right here, right now.”

Inside, she was crying at her bold gambit, but perhaps she would fascinate him enough to make him indulgent and less frightening.

Briar quickly moved toward the rapiers as the duke watched her every move, yet she did not waver under the intensity of his stare. She deftly removed one rapier from the sheath and threw it to the duke, who caught it with ease. Taking the other for herself, she squared her shoulders.

The duke arched a brow. “What manner of madness is this?”

There it was— that hint of curiosity and amazement in his tone. It was that which she needed to leverage. The duke gazed at her as if she were a rare specimen to be studied carefully, trying to understand her.

Despite the scar, the duke was unquestionably handsome, with his sensual mouth, prominent cheekbones, and thick, wild brown hair that curled softly at his nape. Briar almost shook her head to clear such thoughts. She was about to fight; she could not be distracted. Holding her blade pointed toward the floor but outstretched, she made her intentions clear. The challenge had been issued.

“I propose a challenge, Your Grace.”

She saw something flicker in his eyes but wasn’t sure if it was admiration or amusement.

“A challenge?” he mockingly drawled. “I’m listening.”

“We shall duel.” Briar swallowed tightly. “If you best me, I must answer your question and tell you whatever you want to know,” she confidently announced.

The duke chuckled. “If I beat you. Fencing is one of my passions, my lady. I will beat you.”

“Such arrogance when you do not know my skill,” Briar said through gritted teeth. “I am good.”

He lifted a brow. “And I am even better.”

A slow smile touched his mouth, and Briar hated to admit there was a strange but very becoming warmth unfurling somewhere low in her stomach.

She gave an exaggerated sigh. “Do not dismiss me so quickly, Your Grace. I am a most excellent opponent.”

The duke cocked his head to the side and shook it. “Bold, I must say. Excellent? That is yet to be determined.”

She raised a brow and gave him a steely stare. “So, you agree?”

“Agree to what exactly?”

There was something provocative in his tone. Briar clenched her jaw and silently counted to five. “To a duel.”

“Why do we need to duel?”

Her belly tightened. “Will you allow me to leave with the painting without any answers provided? I will repay the amount you paid for it, Your Grace. It will not be

theft.”

“Allow an intruder in my private sanctuary to simply leave? Have you lost your senses?”

Her chest squeezed with anxiety. She hoped his fascination would push him to agree to this madness. Though she was amazed at her own audacity, it was too late to retreat. While many rumors described the duke as a beast, just as many suggested, he was honorable. Perhaps she could bargain with him and leave unscathed. This was her best plan—her only plan. “Then accept my challenge. If I win, you will allow me to leave without question.”

A pained look entered his eyes. “I am not fond of duels.”

The duke raised his hand and ran it over the scar. Her heart tugged, and she ached for him. She quickly composed herself, not wanting him to think she pitied him. Duncan always said she wore her emotions on her sleeve, but not tonight. Not for the duke.

Briar shifted her stance. “I will not maim you.”

The duke chuckled. “How magnanimous of you. I wasn’t concerned you would harm me. It’s just that I have no appetite for duels. I learned long ago it is a foolish endeavor.”

“Oh.” Briar deflated, but she was not ready to give up.

“However, I am... considerably intrigued by you, and something tells me I would not be able to pry the information from you unless I employ wicked means.”

Her heart jerked. What wicked means does he refer to? The gleam in his gaze made a flush go through her body, and she did not want to find out. Briar quickly took two

steps forward and engaged the duke with a flash of steel, which he easily parried.

The clash of the rapiers echoed, and light reflected on the steel. The duke stepped back and was quite agile for a tall, broad man. Interesting. Briar waited, and then she understood he would not attack her, so she jumped forward, attacking in a flurry of movement that was so swift that the duke took a few steps backward as Briar pressed her advance.

“Bravo. I can see why you are so confident. Your skill is superior.” She heard the admiration in his voice.

Briar narrowed her eyes and appraised him. “I admit you are incredible as well. Your Grace.”

She did not wait for his reply. Briar attacked, and the duke parried with deftness. He flicked the rapier with such skill that she almost lost her own. She quickly retreated. She did not want to acknowledge his skill, but he was already anticipating and countering her move. Drat!

“What is it they say? Even the devil himself must have his due,” the duke said as he eyed her warily.

“You liken me to the devil?” Briar swiftly moved forward, slashed, and stabbed.

This time, the duke stood his ground and performed a feint, luring Briar to attack left. Then, the duke slipped under her flank in a counter-riposte.

He was so close that she could see his eyes, an icy blue reminiscent of a harsh, bitter winter, yet strikingly beautiful in their cold intensity.

They burned with suppressed emotions, and a shiver ran down her spine. She quickly



put some distance between them. The duke's maneuver was so flawlessly executed that she helplessly felt awe. He was an excellent fighter with a wide range of skills, but Briar was not about to give up. There was too much hanging in the balance.

Briar was already breathing a bit raggedly, but the duke appeared composed. She lunged forward, the duke parried, and a few moves later, his rapier was pointed at her neck. Oh, no !

"Do you concede?" The duke asked in a mocking drawl.

Briar would never concede. She did not want to admit defeat. Defeat meant she would never be able to flee, and she was now closer to her chance to escape because their positions had shifted, with her now being between him and the door. "I do not concede."

His eyes widened, and she quickly switched the rapier to her left hand, stepped back, lunged, and knocked the rapier from the duke's hand. Her heart was racing, and her skin tingled with excitement. It was a cheeky move, and it worked because the duke was not expecting it. He thought she would hand him her rapier and bow to his exceptional skills.

Her triumph was short-lived. He darted forward, snaked his arm around her waist and hauled her against him. Briar was so shocked the rapier dropped from her nerveless fingers. The duke exuded masculinity and strength, and it would only be a matter of time before he overpowered her and perhaps bore her to the ground.

Was this what he meant by wicked means?

Briar trembled, and her heart hammered when she remembered the last time she was alone with a purported gentleman who wanted to have his way with her. The memory caused her entire body to shiver and her palms to sweat. Briar recalled Lord

Fredrick's fetid breath when he whispered that he would have her as his wife so they could steal a kiss. She felt the sheen of perspiration beading on her forehead. "Release me!"

The duke complied immediately and stepped back, a frown touching his face. "Tell me your name."

Briar dazedly shook her head. There was only one thing left to do. A quick glance at his feet revealed they were bare, and he was unlikely to pursue her with bare feet. Briar whirled around, ran for the door, yanked it open, and charged down the hallway.

"Bloody hell!" The duke swore behind her.

Briar heard the threat in his voice, and it said ... wait until I catch up with you . He was scampering inside, and she dearly hoped he would not find his boots anytime soon. She darted along, thinking she just needed a bit more time to make her way outdoors, and then she would be free. Her hands grew clammy, and she could hear her breaths go in and out.

Briar could only think of her escape. Her pace accelerated as her eyes adjusted to the dimness. Her stocking feet slapped against the wooden floor as she propelled toward the stairs. Briar slowed her speed and hovered for a moment because she did not want to break her neck, tumbling down a flight of stairs. She quickly rallied and carefully bounded down the stairs until she made it to the landing. Exhilarated, she lunged forward, picked up pace as she ran through the hallway, yanked open the front door, and rushed into the darkness.

### CHAPTER 4

As Julius scrambled to find his boots, he could hardly believe what his quiet evening had morphed into. He finally found the damned boots under his desk where he had kicked them off. He sat in the nearest chair and quickly pulled them on.

Now, where the hell was his bloody mask?

Julius's eyes darted around the room until he located it on his desk. He jumped from the chair, donned the mask and hurled through the door. The woman was not in sight, but he could hear her swift feet plowing down the stairs, and he chased after her. He would be damned if he was going to let her escape after their agreement. This woman came to his home uninvited and invaded his library, and he would have an explanation whether she liked it or not.

The woman made him curious yet uneasy. Julius was alive and in good health, but much of his life was devoid of life's simple pleasures. She surprised him and made him chuckle in a relatively short time. When their gaze locked for the first time, he felt a tightness in his chest. Her boldness was certainly stimulating, and when she threw him the rapier, his pulse quickened, and his mouth went dry. Julius had never felt such fascination in all his years, especially one provoked by a woman. .

He charged down the stairs and through the open door before he saw the woman running down the driveway. Julius made a dash in her direction. His chest heaved as the gravel crunched under his boots. He was gaining on her, and she knew it, for she cast a glance over her shoulders. To her credit, she tried to speed up, but Julius doubled down. Soon, he would have her. Julius drew in line with her for a spell

before he overtook her, spun around, and she crashed into his chest.

Julius heard her soft gasp, and something hot and peculiar prickled low in his belly, disconcerting enough that he snapped his head back and was rendered motionless. He held her when she smashed into his chest. Her damnable feel stirred senses that had been dormant for years, and he stilled.

Bloody hell .

Julius dared not breathe, yet he yearned in a way he had not for a long time. It had been a while since he wanted more than the bare necessities, but desire coursed through his veins like a starving man in need of food and water. Her soft body and scent aroused him, and it was the most disconcerting awareness. She pushed her hands against his chest and twisted in his arms as she tried to flee, but she was not going anywhere.

Julius bent his knees, scooped her into his arms, and with one fell swoop, he effortlessly threw her over his shoulders. The woman squealed and immediately began pounding her fist against his back. Her tiny fist against his hard frame did not cause him any discomfort. Julius paid her no attention.

“Unhand me!” She demanded.

“Will you stop running? If you stop, I will set you down.”

She only cried out, “You beast!”

“I have been called worse.”

He spun around and headed toward the house, oblivious to the small fists on his back. He would get to the bottom of this affair soon enough. Julius entered the house

through the open door and closed it gently behind him before he entered the closest drawing room on the landing. The room was dimly lit by a few candles and the smoldering remains of the fire in the fireplace. He moved closer to the warmth and deposited the woman on the sofa. She shuffled across until she could not move any further, as though she wanted the greatest distance between them. Julius was amused that after creeping around his house alone, trying to steal his painting, and challenging him to a duel, she now decided to be cautious and apprehensive.

“Would you like a glass of wine?”

The words were out of his mouth before he thought about saying them. Why was he treating her like a guest? It was nonsensical that he was being sociable ... and with her.

“I do not. What I would like to be able to do is to leave,” was her defiant reply.

Her chin was held high; however, the slightest tremble was seen in her hands. Those were the very same hands that handled the rapier with remarkable skill even when he held his at her throat. Julius held her gaze, and although she called him the beastly duke, there was no revulsion in her eyes. He was surprised, shocked really, that she had not reacted in the same way as other ladies of the haut ton . No pity, no scorn, no revulsion. He detected curiosity as she crossed her arms across her chest and studied him.

Let her leave? He thought not. “I will not allow it. Not until I learn more about you and the real reason you are here. What brought you to Berkley Estate, my lady? Where were you going with my painting?” He assumed she was a lady because she spoke like one. He assumed she would disabuse him of the notion if she were not. Silence greeted him, and it was deafening.

Julius walked over to the table and poured himself a glass of wine. He was thirsty

from the exertion of the duel and chasing after the chit. He took his glass and sat on the armchair across from her, maintaining some distance between them. He did not want her to feel threatened. She had an oval face that was dark and rather delicate. Her beautiful brown hair, though tousled, cascaded over her shoulders and tumbled carelessly down her back. It framed a face with prominent cheekbones, a square chin and a temptingly curved mouth.

Her face was determined, and her lips were pressed shut as if to ensure no sound came forth. She lifted her chin and met his gaze straight on but remained silent. Stubborn and defiant.

“You know who I am, the Duke of Berkley. We have not had the pleasure. I am certain that if we had met, I would remember.”

Julius took a sip of wine and gazed at her over the rim of his glass. “Since you refuse to speak with me, I could always let the magistrate settle the matter.” Julius now had her full attention.

The woman took a deep breath and punctuated it with several even gasps. “There is no need for the sheriff, Your Grace. I am Miss Briar Walcot, sister of Baron Walcot.” A polite half-smile lit her lovely face, yet the fire did not leave her eyes.

Julius’s gaze was unwavering. “You are a long way from home, Miss Walcot. What brought you to my door?”

“A rather unfortunate set of circumstances, Your Grace. Something rather desperate and foolish,” she said, then hesitated before she closed her mouth.

Those lips . He felt the whispering sensation in the pit of his belly, and he knew for sure that he did not imagine it the first time. It was more than mere curiosity. She was intelligent, devious perhaps and definitely bold. He admired her sense of adventure

even though he was equally amused.

“I am all ears,” Julius said as he waited. “Get on with it. I do not suppose you want to be here until dawn.”

“I do not, Your Grace. We must return home to our family without delay.”

Julius’s brows furrowed. “We ?”

It was only then that she recounted the tale. He was initially skeptical, but he held her gaze. Their dazzling brown depths held the truth. She did not jest. They had broken into his house to steal a forgery. He had never heard of such a ridiculous notion. Julius knew Miss Walcot’s father, the late Baron Walcot, but he had no idea the family had been in such dire straits after the baron passed away. They managed to keep up the pretext, thinking they could maintain their status, but the world was cruel, and it was not to be. He had to admit Miss Walcot’s plan would probably have worked if he had not been sleeping in the library.

Smart and resourceful.

“So, you were the one who devised the plan to retrieve the painting?”

Miss Walcot’s color heightened, but she managed to meet his eyes before quickly lowering her gaze. “I was, but you see, we had no choice.”

He heard the plea in her voice. She was clearly past the point of hostility, and the look of defiance had slowly ebbed away. Julius wondered how long it had been since he had had such a long conversation with a clever and pretty woman. It had been some time, but he could not remember exactly. He knew it was stimulating, and he would be a liar if he said he did not miss this. She made his life seem even more dull. This brief encounter enlivened him particularly as she had not reacted to his scarred

face as he expected.

Am I so alone I would find this encounter ... enlivening ? It was damn absurd. Yet it was a painful truth.

“Permit me to know what you are thinking, Your Grace. This silence is wretched.”

Julius’s mouth quirked. “You have seen my face, yet you have not recoiled in horror. I noticed that when you first saw me in the library.”

Her eyes widened. “I am not discomfited by your appearance, Your Grace. I consider what I heard about you to be grossly exaggerated. You are hardly a beast. You are ...” A blotch of red stained her cheeks.

Julius was mildly intrigued. “You did not finish what you were going to say.”

“I have already said enough,” Miss Walcot replied.

He drummed his fingers against his leg. “I am pleased to hear you do not think me a beast. That is because I have decided how we could amicably resolve your breaking into my house to steal.” Her eyes widened in surprise before her shoulder slumped in relief. “You have? Of course, I understand we must make amends.”

He offered a bemused smile. “Indeed. I would like you to be my companion. I am sure you are up for the task.”

Miss Walcot’s delicate mouth dropped open. “A companion ?”

“Yes.”

“Your Grace ... I do not think this is possible.”



Julius knew he had the upper hand, and he pressed his advantage. “It is. You will be my companion until you have paid your debt. I am sure this is a more favorable alternative than those open to you if I called the magistrate.”

Her fingers rushed to her parted lips, and Julius’s gaze lingered on them for too long. Full and lush.

“Oh.” She sat up straighter and cocked her head to the side, no doubt thinking of the possibilities. Miss Walcot had enough of an incentive to do his bidding.

“If you accept my offer, we could forget about this little escapade,” Julius said, although he did not think he needed to state the obvious. “I am astonished you are reluctant.”

“It is most unusual for a gentleman, even if he is a rumored eccentric duke, to have a ... a paid companion!”

“I am an unusual man,” he drawled, almost smiling at how she narrowed her eyes.

Earlier, he had been thinking about a companion, although it was a thought for later in his life. Someone he could play chess with, perhaps engage in witty discussion about themes in certain books, and take long walks in the woodlands, even hunt together. He could tell she was well-educated and came from a reputable family. Her actions today went to the heart of her character. Earlier, she was not someone he would think could fill the role of his companion, but this opportunity fell into his lap, and he would take advantage of it.

“Although your offer is tempting, Your Grace, have you considered this unconventional arrangement would be highly improper? A young woman working alone with an attractive, eligible gentleman. It is highly ...”

His heart stuttered, and Miss Walcot met his gaze before she realized what she said. Her cheeks were stained red, and she quickly looked away. Julius studied her with intensity. Her gaze returned to him with unabashed curiosity. It has been years since anyone had described him as attractive. He liked it. Earlier, when he read Baxter's letter and said he was satisfied with the way things were, it was pure bravado. He wanted a lady's attention and liked how it made him feel.

Miss Walcot folded her hand across her chest and gave him a stony stare. Her gaze said she wished she had a rapier. "If we are in a close, intimate space, I am bound to lose my reputation."

Julius chuckled. "Miss Walcot, to which reputation do you refer? Is your reputation not at stake for breaking into my home in the dead of night to steal after your family has already collected a small fortune for fake art? There would be no need for a trial and conviction to ruin you. There would be worse fates than ruination after a trial."

The fire reignited in the depths of her eyes, and she took a deep breath. He heard the door open and looked up to see a gentleman he did not know.

"Come in." Julius beckoned. "I am the Duke of Berkley. I will leave you with your sister. I am sure there are things you wish to discuss in private."

Julius stood as the gentleman replied. "I am pleased to meet you, Your Grace."

Julius left them alone and climbed the stairs to his bedchamber. He wondered if Miss Walcot would decide that spending time with him would be the lesser of two evils.

### CHAPTER 5

Briar recounted the conversation to Duncan before they both retired to bed, for in a few hours, it would be daylight. Duncan decided they should discuss it further on the journey home in the morning. Briar was far too exhausted when she lay down to think about the matter any further; she fell into a deep slumber.

As soon as she opened her eyes this morning, she could think of nothing but the beastly duke's proposal. Briar and Duncan pretended there was a decision to make, but there was none. Not really.

The maid brought her breakfast, and Duncan ate with her. After breakfast, they departed the mansion without setting eyes on the duke. At least he allowed them to maintain some semblance of dignity by not appearing to lord it over them. Briar sat across from Duncan in the carriage as it rolled away. Unlike yesterday's journey, he was wide awake, and the worry lines creased his forehead.

Duncan let out a heavy sigh. "A fine mess. That is what I have gotten this family into. I am sorry, Briar ..." His voice trailed off to a whisper.

Briar reached over and squeezed his hand reassuringly. "Look at it this way, Duncan. It could be far worse. I am sure I can do what the duke requests, and by doing so, we would be out of dire straits."

The duke had more wealth and money than he could possibly spend in his lifetime, and he had offered them a way out of their predicament.

Duncan drummed his fingers against his knees. "I know we could be in a worse position, but that does not actually make me feel any better about it. I do not like the idea of you being there with him."

"Mama will not like it either, but she will like the alternative even less. It will not be difficult to convince her. She is always practical, if nothing else."

Duncan nodded. "That she is."

"I am sure I will be fine. The duke seems to want a companion to entertain and spend time with him. I am all too familiar with the arrangement, although I have never seen it between a man and a woman. I will manage." Briar said.

Duncan studied her before he asked. "Are you certain?"

No! Screamed in her head. She meant what she said about the duke being an attractive man, and she caught him staring at her. He was just as curious about her as she was about him. She must maintain the propriety that was expected of a lady of her station.

Briar had decided. "I will be discreet. The duke is a recluse, and it appears no one comes to visit him. Remember how hard it was for us to be admitted? Perhaps no one visits because they know they will not be welcomed."

She knew how quickly gossip spread faster than wildfire, and people were only too eager to believe it. Her idea to go to his estate and steal was not sensible, and neither was challenging him to fence or being alone with him in the drawing room. She realized that now, yet he never sought to take advantage of her.

The memory of Lord Fredrick resurfaced, causing Briar's heart to ache. One night, she felt restless and decided to haunt the halls of her home, where she should have

been perfectly safe. She was not. Lord Fredrick was a guest, and he had apparently studied her habits because he crept up behind her on that fateful night and covered her mouth. Before Briar understood what had happened, she was propelled into an unused bedroom; then the door closed firmly. She was barricaded between Lord Fredrick and the door, pinned by his lecherous gaze and roving hands.

Lord Fredrick had swiftly replaced his hands with his mouth; his hot, fetid breath caused her to gag, and he forced his tongue inside her mouth even more. She heard her nightdress being ripped as his saliva-filled mouth strained to cover more of hers. Briar was frightened, yet furious. She summoned all the strength she could muster to kick hard at Lord Fredrick's shin. He immediately released her then she bolted from the room and never stopped until she was safe in her bedchamber; the door bolted.

She found the episode so traumatic that she vowed she would never marry. His treatment of her made her sick to the stomach. Before that night, she never suspected that what happened between a man and a woman was revolting, and she wanted no part of it. She could not imagine having a husband, being with a man who would always want to share such intimacies. She found it repulsive and would much prefer to remain at her family home.

She did not need a home of her own, but that was not how she always felt. In the beginning, she was ready to take her place in society. It was what she was raised to do, and she had prepared for it her whole life. However, the attack she faced during her first and only season jarred her, so she withdrew from the season with her mother's support, which was easily forthcoming with her father's onset illness. Then, when Briar thought things could not possibly get worse, they faced financial ruin. Knowing the family's dire circumstances, she placed little thought into making a match because she knew her prospects were dim, and they would stay that way until their fortunes were reversed. No one wants to marry into an impoverished family.

The thought of being alone with a man had trepidation crawling up her spine. Her

logical mind told her she had nothing to fear from the duke for he conducted himself respectably when she had commanded him to release her though she was an interloper at his home. She would go to the duke and make it work, there was too much at stake. If it did not work out ... She did not want to think that far ahead.

Briar pulled the curtain and peered outside, watching the countryside roll by. She recalled seeing the duke for the first time in the library. He was not at all what she expected. For one, he looked much younger, not that she knew his age. The way the haut ton spoke of him made him sound old and rough, but he had boyish good looks. His blue eyes held such intensity as if he could see inside her soul, and he looked at her as if he found her interesting. His hair was a little wild, and she had seen his arms and a bit of his chest. After all, he was not expecting to find a lady in his library where he had fallen asleep.

The duke's demeanor had said he was highly annoyed and had every right to be. She was the one who invaded his privacy, yet it was not lost on her that he had given her family a way out. He was not without compassion. His eyes were icy in the library but softened when he discovered her family connections. Briar closed her eyes and leaned into the seat of the carriage. She woke up when the carriage pulled up to the house at Walcott Hall. As Briar and Duncan disembarked and walked up to the door, it was pulled open, and Victoria stood in the doorway.

"Where have you been? I was looking for you, Briar." Victoria said with her genial mouth and sparkling smile. Her dark hair was swinging about her slender shoulders.

"I had to run an errand." Briar patiently replied, and they entered the hallway.

"Has Mama come down to breakfast?" Duncan asked.

Victoria's gaze switched between Briar and Duncan. "She asked for breakfast to be brought to her in her room."

“I am going to see her,” Briar announced as she started up the stairs. Duncan followed.

“Briar, is something the matter?” Briar heard the slight tremor in Victoria’s voice.

“Do not worry, Victoria. I will speak to you once I have seen Mama.”

“Very well,” Victoria replied.

Briar arrived at her mother’s door but waited for Duncan to knock.

“Come in,” Mama answered. Her face lit up when she saw them.

“Good morning, Mama.” Duncan and Briar greeted.

They walked over to where she was sitting at her desk and kissed her on the cheek.

“I hope you rested well, Mama.”

“I did,” she replied as she gazed at each of them in turn. I sense something is amiss.”

Briar and Duncan took a seat on the sofa. “I will let Duncan explain, Mama.”

For the next few minutes, Duncan explained everything that had happened. To her credit, Mama listened without interrupting and was silent for a moment at the end.

“Is the duke the beast they say he is?” Mama asked.

“Mama!” Briar exclaimed.

“Well, I do want to know. After all, he is called the beastly duke.”

“It is all a gross exaggeration, Mama. His face is badly scarred, but I hardly consider him disfigured. I can see he was quite handsome before the incident and still retained his good looks.” Briar had the most odd feeling that she was rushing to the duke’s defense, which made even less sense than breaking into his home.

Mama gazed at her intently. “Well, there is no delicate way of putting it. You are damned if you do and damned if you do not. There is no use fretting about it, as what is done is done. You must go.”

Briar quickly glanced at Duncan before she replied. “Yes, Mama.”

She had always hoped that Duncan would find a wife who had means because Mama would be less inclined to focus on her if all their immediate needs were addressed. Perhaps later, she would be able to convince Duncan to let her remain at Walcot Hall, but there would be more time to think about that once he met someone.

Duncan stood up. “We are all agreed. It would be best if you got to packing, Briar. I will accompany you to Berkley Estate.”

“Duncan is right, Briar. Take your best dresses and gowns.”

“I will see to it, Mama.” Briar stood up to leave before her mother spoke.

“Please stay for a while, my dear.”

Briar sat down again. “As you wish, Mama.”

When Duncan closed the door behind him, her mother gave her a reassuring smile. “There is something else, my dear. Your being at Berkley Estate could be an opportunity.”



Briar raised a brow. “An opportunity? I do not understand.”

“I do not mind if you spend time alone with the duke if it results in marriage. It would be splendid if you captured the duke’s affection. Such a union would solve all our financial problems. Do remember, my dear, he is considerably wealthy and a duke, which elevates the family’s status.” Mama said.

Briar stared at her mother open-mouthed for a moment before she clamped her lips together in a thin line.

“Being with him in such close confines could work to your advantage because he will get to see what a fine young lady you are. You will show him you are the epitome of unselfish grace, gentleness, simplicity, and nobility. Though I must warn you to protect your virtue.”

“Yes, Mama.”

“All men are not like that brute who tried to take advantage of you, but your behavior should be above reproach under the circumstances. We are trying to avert a scandal, not create a bigger one.”

“I understand.”

Briar left her mother’s bedchamber and dismissed her remarks about the duke as a husband. Marriage was not for her, duke, or no duke.

Berkley Estate, Gloucester

Julius looked at the shelves which covered every inch of the wall, from floor to ceiling. His library was a place of work and a bit of a refuge. There was something about being among the volumes that comforted him. That was just how it was. He

could not explain it but was grateful to have such a place. He sat at his desk, ruminating. When he awoke and

dressed this morning, he came to the library and had breakfast. He ordered breakfast be sent to Miss Walcot and her brother, and he stood at the large sash window and watched them depart. He was certain Miss Walcot would return.

If anyone had told him a tale of his experience last night, he would have called them mad. It was simply too outrageous to be believed. A daring chit came to his house uninvited, challenged him to a duel and knocked his rapier from his hand. He could hardly believe they were in each other's company for such a short time, yet she made him feel so comfortable. He wanted more of that. Everyday. Julius kept abreast of all the politics. He did not bother to take up his seat in the House of Lords, although it was not that he lacked interest. He did not want the stares and the whispers. He wanted to know what was happening in politics but did not use his considerable influence. They pretended not to look, but behind his back, they had much to say. He refused to force himself to be around the lot of them. They tolerated him because he was one of the richest men in the country, swayed by his title and connections.

He was content to remain on his estate. That was what he told himself until Miss Walcot arrived and sent him reeling. She made him yearn for something that only the previous morning he thought he would only need in his dotage. Companionship. He was truly lonely and had been fighting it, never wanting to admit it to himself. Yet, deep down, he was aware of it, acknowledged or not. He was intrigued that her mere presence on this one occasion made him face it. She pierced the veil of the hovering loneliness he had hidden behind when he least expected it. Deep within his soul, he sensed there was something different, for the darkness was not suppressing his emotions. Through this tiny crack, a curious sort of anticipation enveloped his mind.

Miss Walcot, a woman who had upended the normal state of affairs, was soon to live under his roof. The mere thought of it stirred a strange excitement within him. The

conversation they had, though it may not have held much significance for her, was a rare and cherished moment for him. He couldn't recall the last time he had such a long, engaging conversation with a woman.

Who are you really, Miss Walcot ?

He recalled the flash in her eyes when he suggested she remain at Berkley Estate. She was angry, yet she controlled it well. He rather envied her. If he had shown the same level of restraint, he would not need to wear a mask. Thoughts of her caused an odd compunction to surface. He must get to know her to understand her drive and complexities.

He could remember the time when he was not detached and empty. It seemed like another lifetime when he fancied himself in love. In hindsight, his behavior was filled with bravado and recklessness. Isabelle's husband was the one who issued the challenge, so he chose the weapon, referee, and location and made the rules. Julius felt compelled to accept the challenge, although he was not experienced in using a sword. They were unevenly matched. Isabelle's husband was stronger and more skilled and immediately overwhelmed Julius. Once Julius was injured, the duel was over, and he hung his head in humiliation. He hated reliving the memory even now; he felt ashamed that he had done something foolish. He could have lost his life.

Julius's head dropped to the desk, his gaze shifting to the documents that demanded his attention. Tenant agreements, ledgers, and correspondence, all waiting for his usual routine to resume. But today, his mind refused to cooperate. It was a rare occurrence, for he was not accustomed to his mind wandering. Perhaps, when he was younger, but not since .... He touched his face, a reminder of the scar that was a constant companion, a reminder of a past he could never forget.

For once, he was not thinking about profit and loss, and Miss Walcot was the cause of it. To hell with it. Julius blew out a slow, audible breath before he rang for Otis, who

promptly appeared.

“Miss Walcot will be our guest for a while, Otis. Will you ensure the room is ready for her lengthy stay? Ensure that when she arrives, she has all that she needs,” Julius said.

“As you wish, Your Grace. Will there be anything else?”

“Let me know as soon as she arrives.”

“Certainly, Your Grace.”

Julius did not miss Otis’s smile. Otis seemed animated at the prospect of having a guest. It had been many years since anyone other than Baxter and his family visited the estate. Julius was sure there would be a flurry of activity and bustle below stairs. There would be no gossip. His staff knew he would not tolerate it, but he could not stop them from speculating about Miss Walcot’s stay at Berkley Estate.

“That will be all.”

Julius gathered all the documents on his desk and placed them aside. He opened the desk drawer and removed the paper and quill. He looked at all the letters Baxter had written to him, and he decided that today, he would reply. Baxter would be pleased to hear from him, but the last thing Julius wanted was for Baxter to do what he threatened in his letter. He did not want his brother’s entire family descending on Berkley Estate—not now.

### CHAPTER 6

Berkley Estate, Gloucester

Briar and Duncan had arrived, and the butler led them to the library. Briar looked around the familiar shelves, but the forgery was no longer there when she glanced at the easel. Her cheeks were heated when her eyes fell on the rapiers, and she could feel the duke's scrutiny. She would not let him see how much his gaze unnerved her.

"Good morning," The duke stood up from his chair and greeted them.

It was only then that Briar realized he was wearing a half mask. It would certainly be uncomfortable to wear the mask all day. Briar wondered why he felt the need to wear the mask when both she and Duncan had already seen his face. She did not like the mask and did not believe it was necessary. The mask made it difficult to ascertain his emotions and expressions. Although the mask was gold, it may as well have been black because it appeared ominous, cold, and dark.

"Good morning, Your Grace. I am returning the full amount for the painting." Duncan took a step forward before the duke held up his hand.

"You may keep it. Consider it a payment for the work that Miss Walcot will do. We will discuss any additional compensation when Miss Walcot fulfills her obligations."

"You are very generous, Your Grace. Thank you," Duncan replied with a nod.

Briar's eyes found his and held his gaze. "I will fulfill my obligations, Your Grace.

You have my word.”

“I will be on my way then. I have matters to attend to at Walcot Hall.” With that, Duncan left the library.

They were alone. The atmosphere in the room changed. It became charged with something she could not name. Briar and the duke regarded each other, yet neither of them spoke.

Finally, the duke stood up. “Did you have a pleasant journey?”

Briar smiled tentatively. “I did, thank you.”

“I was going for a walk. Would you care to join me?”

Briar immediately relaxed. She enjoyed walking even at night. It always calmed her nerves and lifted her spirits. By God, she needed her nerves to be calmed right now.

“I would like that, Your Grace. I enjoy the open, fresh air.”

The duke moved to the library door and opened it. “Shall we?” When he walked through the door, his powerful, well-built frame filled it. Briar could tell he was strong. He had effortlessly thrown her over his shoulders when she attempted to escape and carried her back to the house with such ease. She had a head start, but he still managed to catch up to her, and she wondered how a man so large could be agile. Briar followed the duke down the stairs and into the courtyard.

The duke led her down a cobbled pathway toward the rear of the house. As Briar walked by the well-manicured lawn with a colorful border of flowers, she felt a sense of serenity. The Monterey pine and mighty redwoods from the Americas cast a shadow with instant character and color. It was a lovely garden.

The duke turned to her, and Briar looked up to see the wind ruffling his hair. It made him appear a bit wild and fierce yet noble at the same time.

“Berkley Estate has beautiful grounds, and you will enjoy walks here. It is more than just my home. It is my peaceful place, though there is a bit of a contrast between the quiet and the natural sights and sounds.”

“We are of like mind, Your Grace. I do enjoy the wide-open space with peace and calm. Nature invites us to share its beauty. Do you walk here often?”

“I alternate between a morning ride or walk when the weather permits.”

Although they were discussing walks and the weather, Briar’s mind was consumed with thoughts of how this unconventional arrangement would work between them. She was hoping the duke would tell her soon. Broadly speaking, she understood what the duke wanted, but now that she was here, she wanted to understand the finer details.

A cool breeze touched her skin and caused her to shiver.

The duke abruptly stopped, and Briar turned to face him. “Are you cold, Miss Walcot?” He arched the brow not covered by the mask and waited.

“I am not. I will admit that I am a bit apprehensive about our arrangement.”

The duke chuckled. “I find it hard to believe that anyone so bold would be apprehensive.”

“Well, you could put my mind at rest by telling me exactly what you want, Your Grace.”

The duke resumed walking and Briar fell in step beside him.

“All will be revealed in due course, Miss Walcot. I quite enjoy what we are doing now, and I would like you to join me for dinner this evening. I often eat in the library, but now that you are here, I will revert to the dining room.”

“As you wish, Your Grace.”

Perhaps the duke is right. She should take it day by day and not worry too much about the future. Briar had only just arrived, and she had already missed her family. Surely, the duke must feel a pang of regret for not having a wife or children. She would need to ignore the loneliness that would creep up inside her when she longed to be with Duncan, Victoria, and Mama. It must be loneliness which drove the duke to want a companion. But she could not be his companion indefinitely. What would this truly mean for him?

The sun peeked out from behind the clouds, and Briar reveled in the warm feeling on her skin.

“I noted the uncanny resemblance between you and Duncan.”

“We are twins. Mama said I arrived first, so when we were children, I constantly reminded Duncan that I was older, and that held sway for a while.”

“I supposed that was only until he realized things were different for girls.”

“Exactly. I must say that we managed to maintain a close bond despite all conventions. Duncan and I have always been close and I suppose we always will be. You could say we share an irreplaceable, lifelong attachment.”

“And secrets?”



“Yes. We can always tell when something makes the other feel unsettled.”

“Interesting.”

“We understand each other better than anyone else could. I understand that Duncan did something foolish with the painting, but he has been under such immense pressure since Father died. The responsibility of our situation is great for one so young.”

“I am also close to my younger brother Baxter, although, with all the advice he gives, you could not tell he was younger.”

A smile lit the duke’s face when he spoke of his brother.

When they first met, the duke seemed gruff and intimidating, but today, he seemed more human, a gentler soul. Briar wondered what else lay beneath his stern, intractable, and tough exterior. A certain warmth radiated from him when he spoke about his brother, which made her forget that he relished solitude.

“If you do not mind me asking, where is your brother?”

He paused for a moment as if he was weighing up whether he should answer. “He is in Scotland with his wife and children. He tells me there is another on the way.”

“Oh, how delightful.”

They walked in silence for a moment, but it was hard for Briar to remain silent when so many questions swirled around in her head. She could not contain her curiosity, and this time, she halted the walk.

“Why do you wear the mask when I have already seen your scars?”

The duke spun around to face her. His eyes bore into her as if the answer to his question lay in the depths. His brows knitted together for a moment. “I can count on one hand the number of people that have seen my scars. I do not wish to bear the scarred flesh for all to see so that I will receive looks of distaste, disgust, and revulsion.”

Briar looked away from his piercing gaze. “I see you fear I will be repulsed by your face in the light of day, but I can assure you I will not. I feel the same way now as I did when I first saw you in the library.”

She watched the emotions play over his face. He seemed doubtful yet hopeful. He made no reply. For the first time, Briar wondered if he could ever abandon this life where he was cut off. They had come through the clearing to find a wide, gently flowing river. Sunlight broke through the clouds hanging in the sky, reflecting off the calm water.

Ripples radiated through the water where a small boat was secured.

“How delightful. Do you go rowing?”

The duke smiled, and Briar knew an answer was forthcoming. The conversation had returned to a topic that he was more comfortable talking about.

“I do. Would you like to try the boat?”

Briar gave a start. She wasn’t expecting the invitation, and her breath caught in her throat. They would be in close confines but clearly visible. She had not thought about taking her parasol, so she would have to make do without it.

“I would enjoy that.”

The duke held out his hand to Briar, and she took it. A jolt of awareness ran through her arm, and she found herself staring at his hand on hers for a moment too long. She looked up and met his penetrating gaze. A flush crept over her cheeks, and Briar dropped her gaze. Without a word, the duke guided her to the boat and assisted her to a seat. He loosed the rope needed to anchor it to the shore and jumped in, sitting across from her. Their knees did not touch, but they were mighty close.

The duke reached for the oars and began to row. Briar could not help but notice the ripple of his muscles under his white shirt. Suddenly, her mouth felt dry, and she swallowed. She was keenly aware of his strength and virility that shimmered under the surface. The corners of his mouth lifted in a smile as if he knew what she was thinking. She quickly looked at the scene gently going by.

There was a flutter of wings, and Briar saw the ripples spreading across the river. “I have not seen these geese before. They are beautiful.”

“They are Barnacle geese, and these ones are distinct in their black-and-white color. I will get closer,” the duke said as he rowed further across the river.

The geese did not remain close to the bank. They seemed just as interested in Briar and the duke, so they fanned out, and a few made their way toward the boat. Briar was all too familiar with the grey geese, but the Barnacle geese captured her attention. She wanted to touch one of them, but they remained out of reach. She stood up, believing she could reach over a tad bit more. She lost her train of thought when she fell head-first into the river. She made a desperate grab, but she could only feel air before she parted the surface.

Splash !

Briar’s reality suddenly changed; one moment, she was warm and safe in the boat, and in an instant, she was covered in cold water and trying to survive. She could not

swim! At first, she could not breathe, so it was difficult to understand what had happened to her, and she was in great fear for her life. In the rashness of the moment, she flung her arms and legs about, struggling to get to the surface. She was disoriented, unable to discern which way was even up. Powerfully built arms encircled her waist, and she was propelled to the surface.

She gasped for breath, inhaling the water-saturated air. She was ever so grateful to be snatched from the cold depths, but she was mortified too. It was only her first day, yet she managed to make a fool of herself. She brushed away the wet tendrils of hair that shielded her eyes only to find the duke's furrowed brows mere inches away. Beads of water ran down his face to his lips, and Briar's gaze followed the lazy trail. He licked his lips, and the simple movement caused Briar to forget that she was fighting for her life only a moment ago. She shivered in reaction to the duke's nearness, his strapping arms and warm breath.

"You do like to get yourself into scrapes, don't you, Miss Walcot?"

"Whatever do you mean, Your Grace? I was hardly trying to drown myself."

The duke grunted before he commanded her to remain still. He slowly moved behind Briar while keeping one hand around her waist. Briar could feel the full length of his muscular frame against her back. Thank goodness he could not see her face because she was sure it was bright red.

"Lean back against my chest and allow me to guide you."

Against his chest, more so than she was doing already ? The wet clothes clinging to his hardness were as close to naked as she had ever seen a man.

He sensed her hesitation. "The boat has drifted to the opposite side, Miss Walcot, so unless you have discovered you can swim, I suggest you lean back against my chest.

You will be perfectly safe.”

Briar did as she was told. The duke’s arm left her waist and moved to her underarm. His hand brushed against her bosom, stirring a strange sense in her belly. Another flush worked itself over her cheeks. She had never felt anything like it. What did it mean? The duke slowly started swimming toward the river bank, to safety, or was it?

### CHAPTER 7

Julius reached his hand up to her armpit and momentarily brushed her breast. The brief feel stirred senses that had been dormant for years, and he stilled. Damn it ! This was the last thing he wanted to be thinking about right now. Not with the chit wriggling in his arms. He had the sudden urge to spin her around, squeeze her to his chest and kiss her until she wilted from pleasure. He did not anticipate this emerging awareness and he pushed it from his mind. Concentrate .

“Your Grace—”

“Are you trying to drown us both? Stop wriggling.”

Julius was only too pleased when his feet were solidly planted on the river bed. Yet, he did not let her go. Once the water was just above his waist, he lifted Miss Walcot against his chest. She rested her head on his shoulder and placed both arms around his neck.

Why did she feel so good in his arms?

As he walked forward, temptation tugged at him, but he would not give in. He would not give her cause to believe he was the beast they made him out to be. His rational mind was right, but it did naught for the temptation singing in his blood.

He cleared the water and stood with his feet ajar, firmly planted on the ground, before he slowly lowered Miss Walcot to her feet. He could feel how close he was to her.

“Are you feeling well?”

“I am fine, and I must thank you, Your Grace. I have only ever visited the seaside on the odd occasion, and Mama was more interested in the afternoon promenade than entering the water. I used the bathing machine several times, but Mama did not believe I should learn to swim.”

“You are never too old to learn to swim, Miss Walcot.”

“You saved me.” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

Julius raised his hand and moved, feathering lightly over her jaw down to her chin to rest at the hollow of her throat. He could feel the rapid beat of her pulse, which reflected his excitement. His gaze found her lips, which beckoned to him, soft, lush and inviting. Hunger curled low in his belly and made him burn to taste her, yet this would be a temptation he would certainly ignore. Her delicate hand was pressed against his chest as if to push him away, but her eyes were calling him even closer.

“Perhaps you should be less concerned about the danger of the river and more concerned about me.”

A delicate gasp escaped her lips, and its sweet sound caused him to groan inside. He so badly wanted to taste her, capture the next gasp in his mouth, inhale her every moan and ragged whimper. His heart hammered in a way it had never done before. How could she possibly have such an effect on him when he barely knew her? This was madness. Miss Walcot stared at him with innocence, open curiosity, and something else he could not quite decipher.

“I can feel your heart beating fast.” Her kissable mouth said.

She was so unpretentious and demure. He could see it in the soft, luminous stare and

the gentle parting of her lips. How could she know why his heart struggled to break free from his chest? Miss Walcot's shiver snapped him into consciousness.

"We should return to the house. I will take you."

"I am—"

"I will not allow you to walk. We need to go now so you do not catch your death of cold."

Julius immediately scooped her into his arms. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath before setting off toward the house. At first, he thought he was merely intrigued by her, but now it had crossed over into something more. Miss Walcot glanced up at his side profile, and he tried very hard to keep his face passive. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end when he felt her hot breath grace his skin. The feel of it ... just when he was trying to forget that he cradled her in his arms. His thoughts were jumbled, and he did not think it was possible to explain the feelings to himself. He concluded the strange feeling and reaction was because he had not been this close to a woman in a very long time. Too long.

The sun peeked from behind the clouds. Julius was grateful it would provide some warmth for Miss Walcot. He did not need it. His blood was already running hot, and he reflected on how alive he felt. He did not know what possessed him. His hand firmly around her waist should reassure her, but it was more comforting to him.

"You must be tiring, Your Grace. You could set me down now."

"I am not tiring, Miss Walcot, and we are almost at the house."

He looked down at her impudent smile and almost reached down to brush her lips lightly. He shook his head as if that would dispel him from thinking such notions. It



was just that being so close to her, holding her in his arms, made him ... Julius saw Otis hurriedly approaching them. As Otis neared, brows furrowed, Julius detected his concern.

“Have a hot bath prepared for Miss Walcot, and Nellie is to prepare some broth.”

“I will see to it straight away, Your Grace.” Otis immediately spun around and all but ran toward the house.

“I did not mean to cause such a stir in your household, Your Grace.”

If only she knew about the stir she was causing elsewhere. Could she feel the yearning and tension she had created?

“It is no bother.”

“At least there is one silver lining from this entire episode.”

“And what might that be?”

“You lost your mask in the river and did not notice you were not wearing it.”

Julius had felt the mask slip from his face, but he was so intent on saving her that he did not seek to retrieve it. Miss Walcot made him feel that wearing it when he was with her was unnecessary. She did not find his scars ugly and accepted him as he was. It was rather refreshing.

Julius grunted, but he did not reply.

“I would like you to stop wearing the mask at home.”

“You what?”

“You heard me the first time, Your Grace. I insist you go without it whenever we are together.”

Julius chuckled. The gall. Only she would have the impudence to insist that he do anything. The audacity. To chuckle was the only thing that he could do, to break the moment, to break the tension and forget how she breathed on his neck. He was a duke. He should not need to remind himself that he wanted to be alone only days ago and was not thinking about kissing her full, plump lips. Whatever this connection was that he was feeling for Miss Walcot, should he not sever it?

“Very well.” He heard himself reply. There it was. He agreed to it.

He quickly glanced down and caught her sunny smile. What the hell was she doing to him ?

“Thank you.”

“What for?”

“For rescuing me and bringing me quickly to the house.”

“It was my pleasure.”

Otis held the door open, and Julius stepped through. He deposited Miss Walcot on the floor as Polly, a lady’s maid, rushed forward to assist her.

“I will see you at dinner this evening, Miss Walcot,” Julius said before he ascended the stairs to his bedchamber.

She was like a breath of fresh air. Her skill and clever maneuvers in fencing, for one. Then she fell into the river, and he had to jump in after her. It had been a long time since he felt needed by a woman. It felt good coming to her rescue and protecting her. He wielded power and influence. He gained a measure of satisfaction from being heir to the estate, and he managed it well, increasing the family's holdings. He had not thought much about being a protector, however small the task, because he had not been in a position to come to anyone's rescue lately. When she thanked him, it made him feel valued, which truly warmed him. He hummed a tune as he walked down the hallway, nursing a feeling of gratification and accomplishment.

She had only just come into his life and was already changing it. After all, he agreed not to wear his mask. How remarkable. Miss Walcot made him feel hopeful. Hopeful for exactly what? What were his expectations, and what did his heart desire? These were questions he had not considered for a while. Now, they reared in his head, and they were worth considering. Living under the same roof with this spirited woman would be interesting indeed. His conversations with her were somehow free and easy. She was bold, intelligent, and beautiful enough to tempt a good man. He considered himself to be one, and it was not his intent to ravish her. He would not risk her reputation, so he had no business thinking about her kissable lips.

Briar had the strangest feeling when the duke set her down. She had watched the curve of his neck, jawline, and lips to her leisure as she lay there in his arms. The moment he moved away, she yearned for him to take her in his arms again, to feel his muscular energy and warmth. She had not been cold when the gentle breeze washed over her, but now, she was freezing. The maid must have seen her shiver.

"I am Polly, my lady. I will assist you," Polly said as she led Briar up the stairs.

The staff had placed her in the same bedroom as before, and she was pleased with the familiar surroundings. A large tub of steaming water awaited her in the far corner, and Polly patiently undressed her. Her wet garments fell into a pile on the floor

before she walked over to the tub and submerged herself. Hot water had never felt so good. Bliss .

Polly seemed to sense that Briar wanted to languish, so she busied herself arranging gowns in the armoire. Her spectacular splash in the river could have been the dark cloud that ruined an otherwise lovely morning, but she would not let it. Briar felt not an ounce of indignity for the duke rescuing her twice. Briar slid further down in the tub and closed her eyes. She quite enjoyed the stroll with the duke. She recalled his amazing eyes gazing deeply into hers. Lost in the depths of his gaze, her chest tightened, and she looked away from his steady regard. When her gaze returned to him, he was staring at her lips, and her breath lodged in her throat. Briar knew that the duke wanted to kiss her. She was afraid he would see the longing in her gaze, a longing she hardly understood.

She must pull herself together and not lose perspective. She was not at Berkley Estate to become fascinated with the duke. She had a task to complete and her family was relying on her. That should be her focus. Further, her mother cautioned her to protect her virtue, and she was threading a very thin line. Once her task was completed, she would return to Walcot Hall. Despite her mother's encouragement to gain the duke's favor, as far as Briar was concerned, she did not need to marry. When Duncan received the payment from the duke, he could settle the family's debts and be well placed to find an heiress. If he secured such a marriage, it would make all the difference to their circumstance. She never wanted her family to ever be in this position again. Briar hated the vulnerability, and it was fortunate they were indebted to the duke and not someone odious.

Briar had a dim view of marriage. It was not only the thought of intimacy that frightened her. She had overheard the cooks in the kitchen gossiping about a poor girl whose husband beat her. The poor thing. Apparently, it was quite commonplace for husbands to beat their wives. Briar could not imagine such a thing. She had never been beaten, and her father never beat her mother. How could she surrender her

independence and be at a gentleman's mercy?

Briar was not one to sell herself short. She deserved happiness, which was synonymous with being at her childhood home with her family. Her faith in men was shaken by Lord Fredrick's treatment of her and the wife beating she heard whispers of. Even if her husband did not beat her, she would be expected to be obedient to him. A wife was not encouraged to have her own interests or hobbies. It was considered inappropriate for a wife to challenge her husband's authority or to be too independent. She was fiercely independent and would hold on to that with all her being.

Briar paused and took a deep breath. Dropping her head into her hands, she contemplated the sheer foolishness of her actions at the river. After all, it was her fault that she fell in. When they set off in the boat, she could never have imagined that she would end up in the duke's arms again. Since this was not the first time, she would do well to ensure it does not happen again. The duke's spur-of-the-moment reasoning had been that it would be better to carry her to the house. He was concerned she would become ill and likely had not thought of the servant's gossiping about her disheveled state.

How could she have known he would rob her of her breath and make her heart beat faster? No other man had ignited these feelings inside her and she wondered what it meant. She was ever so conscious that he looked at her lips. Lord Fredrick had looked at her lips several times before he attempted to kiss her. Briar deduced that the duke wanted to kiss her, too. Inexplicably, she was not repulsed at the idea of the duke stealing a kiss.

Goodness gracious !

She was perplexed by it. Having always behaved with such decorum, why had these thoughts entered her head? She could not understand it. What she did know was that she could not allow herself to unravel.

### CHAPTER 8

Polly had finished arranging her gowns and she assisted Briar with her bath. Once dressed Briar decided to pass the time by reading a volume she brought from her home library. Polly left Briar to her own devices after she stroked the fire; sparks and embers danced in the fireplace. The flames flickered and gently swayed to the wind. Briar curled up on the sofa and resumed reading the chapter where she had left off. Shortly thereafter, her eyelids grew heavy. It could only be the fire's magnetic pull, like a hypnotizing dance it lured her in, and she embraced the warmth. It was so cozy and comforting. Briar came awake with a start when there was a knock on her door.

"Come in." She beckoned groggily.

"I am here to dress you, my lady," Polly announced.

Briar could hardly believe it was time for dinner. How long had she slept? She quickly secured the book she was reading and stood up from the sofa. Polly had selected two gowns and carefully laid them on the bed, but she wanted a more flattering dress for her willowy figure. She decided on a lightweight chiffon dinner dress with a fitted bodice and an open neckline, which complimented her shapely cleavage. The sleeves had minimum ruffles and lace, and the skirt swept the floor. She looked at herself in the oval mirror as Polly pinned her hair. Why did she want to look beautiful for the duke? She was being silly.

Once satisfied with her appearance, she went to the dining room. The door opened to the warm enclave, which she welcomed after the cold draft in the hall. The duke stood up to greet her and she noticed he was not wearing a mask. He was handsomely

dressed in a black dress coat, white vest, and wing collar with a white bow. His black breeches were well-tailored to his strong thighs.

“I trust you rested well.”

“Thank you, Your Grace. I did not realize how much time had passed.”

The duke pulled her chair out, and Briar sat down.

“I busied myself with correspondence this afternoon and was surprised at how quickly the time had passed.”

Otis announced dinner was ready, and the footmen served the first course. The duke turned to Otis, “You may leave us until the next course.”

“Certainly, Your Grace,” Otis replied.

They were alone. Briar was suddenly keenly aware of the duke, even more so than before. She could not explain why, but her nerves were suddenly on edge. They sat, gazing at each other, and the candle's light played over his face. The silence had gone on for far too long, so she rushed to fill it.

“Do you not find the day-to-day task of running the estate tedious?” She directed her attention to her food, and they both began to eat.

“I suppose some aspects are quite repetitive. I often indulge in my pastimes, so I do not pretend to always be at work, which brings me to my question. Where did you learn to fence? You are almost as good as me.”

“I believe you are mistaken, Your Grace. It was me that bested you .” The cheeky sod . The scars had done little to dampen his confidence in this regard.

Julius chuckled. “Was it?”

“You lost your rapier, did you not?”

“I am happy it is you who raised the point. In keeping with the etiquette of the sport, should you not have followed the rules? The fencer who is still armed should pick up the rapier and rearm his adversary ... courteously.”

“I can hardly argue that point, Your Grace.” Briar heard her rich laughter before she realized it had burst from her. Looking back on the situation it was all now quite humorous. “I needed to make a hasty retreat, so I did not think it was the best time to arm my opponent.”

“I see.”

“I actually learned to play by watching Duncan. I suppose his tutor humored me because he realized Duncan and I were very close. Neither of them thought that I would study the sport and understand it. So, one day, I challenged Duncan to a match before the tutor arrived. Of course, he refused until I asked if he was afraid I would beat him.”

Briar had the duke’s full attention, and it warmed her. She enjoyed recounting her childhood memories.

“Do not keep me in suspense. Did you beat him?”

“Not on that day. However, what I did was to prove that I had skills that could be developed. Duncan was so engrossed in fighting that we did not know when his tutor entered the room. From then on, I had lessons with Duncan and soon beat him.”

“Why am I not surprised? You are quite tenacious.”



“Thank you, Your Grace. I suppose your experience was quite different.”

“Somewhat. I did have a tutor until I decided that I wanted to spar more often and with young men of different abilities.”

“Having a tutor was not challenging enough for you?”

“I wanted more unpredictability. I found that much more stimulating and exciting.”

Exciting . Briar caught her breath at the rushing sensation she felt when she heard the word. A rush of something indescribable fluttered in her belly. The thought of excitement made her heart race with anticipation of an experience she had yet to discover. She had a heightened sense of energy, and she was eager to release it. Briar put a delicate morsel in her mouth and slowly chewed. How could this be happening to her? Her mother would be mortified if she knew what Briar was thinking. She mustn't. Yet, she could not help herself.

“In addition to having a tutor, I went to a fencing school and it had its advantages. In the beginning, I was pleasantly surprised by the strict set of rules, but I understood they were for the safety of all of us, as well as the visitors. The rules provided a suitable environment for the students' pursuit of learning the art.”

Otis appeared before the footmen cleared the table and served another course. Otis left and closed the door softly behind him.

Briar took a sip of red wine, and it must have been what emboldened her. “And did you obey them? These rules.”

“I was fined a time or two for breaking them.”

“Hmm,” Briar replied.

“Students were prohibited from swearing, discussions of an indecent nature, drinking, smoking, and fooling around or mocking other students while they practiced. I can assure you there were many fines.”

“I can only imagine.”

“I would like to spar with you tomorrow.”

Briar chuckled. “I thought you had enough, considering what happened the last time.”

His gaze gleamed. “Enough? I can never have enough.” His eyes wandered over her face and slowly down to her neck and ... Oh .

There was a long moment of silence as Briar wondered if he implied, he could never get enough of ... anything. She was as still as a statue except for biting her lips as she imagined his hand taking the same path his eyes took and then his lips. Her meal was long forgotten.

Briar nodded. “Very well. I will spar with you tomorrow. It is not as if I have much of a choice, but let's sweeten the deal. If I win, I can ask you anything I want, and you must provide an answer.” She wanted to know more about him, personal things, but she couldn't just ask based on the nature of their connection; other wise she risked appearing too familiar, or impertinent. This deal negates that.

“I will agree if I have the same proviso.”

Interesting . He was just as curious about her as she was about him. She would do whatever it took to win.

He was being reasonable, so she could hardly refuse. “That is fair enough?”

“Then it is settled.”

The corners of her mouth lifted in a smile, and her eyes issued him the challenge. “I am sure I shall enjoy the game.”

“You have somewhat of a competitive nature.”

“I suppose it comes from having a twin brother who got all the attention.”

“What is it like having a twin?”

“Mama said we had always been close. The nursemaid tried to put us in separate cots, but I would not have it. Mama said I wailed until I was put in the same cot with Duncan.”

The duke chuckled. “You did not fight? I can remember Baxter, and I went a few rounds.”

“We did not fight. For the first few years, Duncan and I did not know what it was like to be apart. That was how it was until I was taught that he was a boy, and what a difference that made.”

The footmen came in and cleared the table, signaling the end of the meal, but Briar did not want it to be over. She was enjoying the duke’s company ... immensely. She had a strong desire to understand this complex man who would be aloof in a moment yet kind and considerate in the next. She needed nothing more than to remain close to him to maintain this overpowering connection that she felt.

“Shall we retire to the drawing room?” The duke asked, gaze longing, expression wistful. He did not wait for an answer as he pulled out her chair.

She should end the evening now. She should leave and go to her room, firmly closing the door behind her. Her reasoned mind said that, but her emotions dictated something else entirely. Suddenly, self-conscious, she tucked a few tendrils of loose hair behind her ear, and her eyes darted to the door.

Briar followed the duke into the adjoining room. He moved to the table and held up a flask.

“Red wine?”

“Thank you, Your Grace.” He had been charming all evening.

The duke handed her the glass, and his long fingers brushed hers, lingering. Her breathing grew rapid, and she felt a flutter in the pit of her belly. Briar stared at her hand before she moved it away and quickly took a sip of her wine. She detected a slight tremor, and she hoped he hadn’t noticed. He made no effort to sit, so Briar remained standing. In an instant, the duke took a step toward her. He was getting close.

“It is me that should thank you. I enjoyed your company at dinner. I was surprised to find that I was not self-conscious without the mask in a social setting.”

She could see the tiny lines around his eyes. “That is why I am here, Your Grace.”

His voice grew softer, and he cocked his head to the side. “It may seem inconsequential to you—”

Briar felt the overwhelming need to reassure him. She placed her glass on the table, and took a step forward, yet maintaining some distance between them. “Not at all ...”

He inhaled, low and shallow.

“Briar,” he whispered, and there was a hint of something in her name ... something she could not place because no one else had ever said her name in this way. His words were more breath than sound, like a light breeze that kissed her skin on a summer day. Briar was commanding her mind to think of these things, but it would not listen.

She opened her mouth to speak and could not think of what she wanted to say, and at that precise moment, he took two steps forward. The duke was far too close, yet somehow not close enough. He smelled of wine and spices. His hand moved, gently brushing her cheek. The fleeting touch was an undelivered promise of what was to come. He took another step forward, and Briar’s breath caught in her chest. Their bodies almost touched. She resisted the urge to step back, but she held his gaze. It was there in the depths of his eyes. He wanted to kiss her. She saw it, and there was a flicker of recognition in the depths of his gaze. He knew she was aware of it ... aware of what he wanted. There was no mistaking it, the raw need. His lips tempted but did not touch, and she imagined they were soft and fiery, leaving a trail of heat where they almost were.

The duke raised his hand once more, but this time, Briar lurched away from him and took a step back. She could not, would not. At first, she thought she might welcome his kiss, but now that he was this close, she could feel panic rising inside her. She clenched her fist, and her nails dug into her palms. She felt unsteady on her feet, and a bead of perspiration appeared on her brow. There was nothing in his demeanor that suggested he meant her any harm. The duke was calm and stoic.

The duke’s hand fell away, and his eyes were resigned as if he knew this was the way the encounter would end. He touched his scar and the core of his vulnerability for a moment, and she got a peek inside, but not for long because he was proficient at hiding the hurt. His jaw tightened, and he lowered his gaze. A veil quickly shrouded the depths of his eyes. Wordlessly, he turned and walked away. He thought she was repelled because of his scar, but nothing could be further from the truth. He ought not

to leave believing this. Briar took a step forward, but the duke could not see her. She wanted to call him back, yet nerves stole her words, and they were strangled in her throat.

The room was quiet except for the sound of his receding steps. She watched his retreating frame until his hand reached for the doorknob. She thought she would be relieved to see him leave, but she was not. Briar struggled with her feelings. The duke did not paw her, rip her garments or force himself on her. He was nothing like Lord Fredrick; there was no reason to fear him. Yet, she was apprehensive. She had never felt such conflicting emotions. In this moment, she had to make a choice and she did not wish to ruin everything between them. But what if she made the wrong choice? She would certainly regret the decision later. The thought was unsettling.

Tears pricked her eyes, although they were not quite welling up. She drew in a deep breath and took another step forward before she stumbled. "Wait."

He froze, hands hovering on the doorknob as he decided whether he should leave. Slowly, his hand fell away from the doorknob, and he pivoted to face her. Briar took a few steps and stopped before he hesitantly moved forward to meet her. Once again, they were close. She gazed deeply into his eyes as she reached up and gently touched his scar, mirroring how he touched her cheek. He closed his eyes and leaned his head against her hand. Neither of them spoke or moved then he took her hand and gently kissed her palm. The tender touch of his lips sent shivers down her spine.

She would surrender to him and show him she was not repulsed. Briar closed her eyes and waited; her senses heightened. Finally , she felt it ... right there. A featherlight brush on her neck where her pulse pounded as much as her heart. His breathing was even more ragged than hers; eyes closed, she listened and felt. Her skin was hot and flushed, and it was not from the pressing heat of the room. She was not afraid and did not need to convince herself that she was safe with him. She desired his touch and needed his hand to linger. Briar leaned into his caress, wanting more. His touch was

tender yet sensual, and it sent her senses reeling. This feeling was nothing she could ever have imagined, and she craved it more and more. She considered reaching for him once more in a moment of madness, just for a fleeting moment. It would be just a gentle stroke so he could feel the heat she felt when he touched her body.

How enticing .

Suddenly, the duke's hand fell away, and Briar's eyes flew open. No , her mind screamed, but she had the good sense to take a deep breath and step back. The duke's gaze pinned her with its intensity.

“When we are alone, I would like you to call me Julius. When we are together, I will call you Briar. I am sure you will agree that we have passed the formalities.”

A small gasp left her. Briar loved the way her name sounded when it rolled off his lips. He said it as if he wanted to keep her ... close.

“Julius,” she said tentatively. Why did she find him so fascinating? What was it about the duke that inspired this madness within her? Was this the result of two lonely souls finding each other? She had no answer but for a tightness in her chest.

“I think you should retire for the evening before I do something we will both regret.” As he spoke, he ran his finger along the curve of her lip.

Briar never thought she would long to be kissed with her first experience being such a horrid one. How had it gotten to this and how could he have such an effect on her? The sensation was strange and not quite decipherable.

“Good night, Julius.” Briar spun around and left the drawing room.

He radiated strength, power and virility, yet he had his fears and exposed his

vulnerability. As she ascended the stairs, she could not help but think that she and Julius were in a horribly unequal position. He had the wealth and power and could easily dictate the terms. Perhaps she ought not to encourage his touch. No good would come of it.



### CHAPTER 9

Julius watched Briar disappear from the drawing room, willing her to return. The room seemed colder without her presence. The warmth not only evaporated from the enclosure, but it also left his body. He shivered as he picked up his unfinished wine and sat on the sofa. Bloody hell ! He fought the urge, although he so badly wanted to kiss her; it was like an ache in his gut. Never before had he wanted to lick and nibble at anyone's lips as much as he wanted hers. He was consumed with thoughts of touching her, yet afraid she would find it abhorrent. She had not. Instead, need flashed in the depths of her eyes even though she did not know what she wanted. Such unspoiled innocence. Temptation flared, and Julius imagined that when she touched his cheek, it set other things in motion.

He closed his eyes and imagined her caressing him all over. The vision was enough to cause his cock to twitch when he tasted her lush lips. How creamy and white would her skin be under her dress? He wanted to ... he must stop. He shot up from his seat and paced the length of the room, suddenly restless.

Briar was not a worldly woman. She was nothing like the ladies he met at the French court, and it would be unconscionable for him to treat her that way. There would be no frolicking in the bedchamber or the back staircase for Briar. She would not be familiar with the muffled groans and grunts leaking through the walls. Julius recalled the days of perfume and heated skin, seduction and fulfillment. The look of innocence meant Briar had not had more than a stolen kiss. A surprisingly lush mouth, which assuredly had not been kissed enough. She most certainly had not had a lover. She was a virgin. He was sure of it. While she stepped back from his touch, she should have run and kept her feelings in proper order. She should have escaped him.

He sighed heavily and poured himself another drink. He must remain pragmatic to ensure they both got what they wanted from the arrangement. She had stormed into his life and was still here long after she should have disappeared, long after she saw his ill-favored face. Although Briar and Duncan had been foolish, he did not want to be the one to orchestrate her family's downfall. He could have handed her over to the law; instead, he seized the opportunity that presented itself. She practically fell into his lap, so he kept her. He much preferred her company.

She stirred something inside him and made him think of what he was missing from his life. A part of him was afraid that he could not have what he truly desired. A few weeks ago, he would not have thought about it, but now it seemed like a possibility. Who knew he would focus on the opportunities rather than the obstacles?

Julius took a sip of wine, sat in an armchair, and stared into the fireplace. Now that he had hope, he would stop hiding away. Perhaps there would be a lady or two who would be willing to look at him the way Briar did. She did not care a damn about his scar, so much so that she even made him forget about it for a few hours. So, yes, he wanted a lady with her compassion, beauty, and wit. There was a woman out there for him. He just needed to find her. A reentry into society would provide him with the option of finding a suitable match. All the titillating gossip about how he became scarred should have died down, superseded by more sensational gossip.

Since he found Briar so alluring, mayhap ... No. He only had to think about the circumstances of how they met to know. She would not do. The lady he chose connections and reputation must be suitable for his duchess, and sadly, Briar's were not. She did not have the high standing and impeccable pedigree of the previous duchesses, and the situation her father left her in was absolutely appalling. It was evident how truly desperate they had become.

He must put his feelings toward her aside. He felt a deep ache in his chest just thinking about it. With a groan, Julius took another swig from his glass. He stood up

and began pacing again. She had just arrived at Berkley Estate, but he already wanted to exorcise her from his memory. Her interesting face and dimpled smile were features he had always found irresistible. She was taking up much of his consideration. As much as he tried to push it away, he was drawn to the way that she made him feel. He had stepped into another world, and he liked it.

Raking his fingers through his hair, Julius left the drawing room and climbed the stairs to his chambers. He stripped from his clothes and lowered himself on the cool sheets, determined to dismiss Miss Walcot from his awareness. With that, he closed his eyes and slept, a smile on his face.

Julius awoke the following morning thinking of Briar. By God . Would he ever be able to get her out of his head? The last thing before he slept last night and as soon as he opened his eyes. He regretted not kissing her last night. It was one of the hardest things he had ever done when her hot, needy eyes had lingered on him. Without uttering a word, she was asking him to. It had taken a great deal of self-restraint not to call her back when she walked away. Thoughts of quietly going to her room after everyone had retired to give her what she wanted were swiftly dismissed. Instead, he awoke with an aching need; somehow, it was more intense than the night before.

Julius placed a pillow over his head and sighed heavily. He finally got up from bed, dressed, had breakfast and went to the library. He had left instructions that Briar should amuse herself until it was time for him to join her for the game. He sat at his desk and reached for the tenant contracts that were waiting to be reviewed. He applied himself to the task, but an hour later, he found himself staring at the first contract he selected from the pile. He read it several times, but if he had been called upon to explain the terms, he could not.

“Oh! I beg your pardon, Julius.” Briar’s voice intruded on his dilemma. He was so distracted that he did not hear the door open.

She brought sunshine. “Good morning, Briar. I hope you rested well.”

“Good morning. I did not know anyone was here.”

Briar was dressed in a simple blue day dress that molded itself to her breast, and they looked lovely. He had to rip his gaze away from her chest.

“That is perfectly fine. What is it that you are after?”

“Something to read, a novel perhaps.”

Julius waved his hand toward the amply stocked bookshelves. “Please, help yourself whenever you need.”

“Thank you,” Briar said, although she moved toward him rather than the bookshelves. “What are you doing?”

Julius did not mind that she was disturbing him. He could not concentrate anyway. “I am reviewing tenant contracts. It is not one of my favorite tasks. It is rather boring and thankless.”

“I do not envy you spending so much time on something you would prefer not to do.”

Briar had no idea how her words resonated. He would much rather be spending his time with her ... in bed. With that, Briar started wandering around the room, perusing the shelves. She cocked her head to the side as she read the spine of a few volumes. His throat constricted with how unbelievably attractive he found that. He quickly looked down at the contract to hide this effect but barely saw the words. Julius took a deep breath and willed himself to concentrate. Finally, he completed reviewing the contract and put it aside before snatching another.

As much as he wanted to, he could not pretend she was not there. She was there, hovering in his periphery, elegant and graceful. Her hair was pulled back in a simple chignon, leaving the graceful arch of her neck exposed. He wanted to get up from his chair, walk over and place soft kisses there ... from behind. He would loosen the pins on the chignon and watch it fall away as he ran his hands through her hair. His fingers would stroke her tresses and bury themselves in the shiny mass. He would kiss her neck and shoulder while he cupped her full ... He was quite relieved when she chose a volume, and the door closed behind her with a soft snick.

Briar's heart was racing when she left the library. It was past six this morning when she awakened, having spent a wretched night tossing and turning before giving up completely. She decided to continue reading while she lay in bed waiting for sunlight to peek through her window, but she had read most of the novel she brought from home. She needed to go to the library to fetch something interesting that would make her forget about last night. Mama wanted her to snag the duke, but this was not what Mama had in mind!

Briar had gotten up from her bed and dressed. She supposed her restlessness was due to the combination of sleeping in a strange bed and her nervous thoughts about what transpired with the duke ... Julius. She was, of course, grateful to Julius because the opportunity to assist him shielded her from some of the harsher realities of life. She was certain she was not suited for a life of poverty, and Mama would never recover from it.

Briar returned to her bedchamber and sat in the armchair by the window, the novel firmly clutched in her hand. She made no effort to turn the page as she recalled standing ever so close to Julius in the drawing room last night. He was handsome despite the scar although he did not believe so. Some would argue the scar gave him a sinister look, particularly when he quirked his lips in a smile, but there was nothing malevolent about him. He was a gentle soul. Julius had dressed impeccably for dinner and he was affable right up until the point when he lay his hand on her. The fleeting

touch that barely grazed her skin had stirred something deep inside her. She could not have imagined how his touch would make her ache for more. She was stunned by the feelings he evoked. Would she never stop thinking about this man?

She had seen the way he just looked at her in the library. How could a fleeting, sensual touch bring this shattering sense of awareness whenever she was in his presence? She had to turn her head away from him while reviewing the books so she could hide the rising red flush creeping up her cheeks. She was hot under his scrutiny. How could lovers possibly mingle in a ballroom while they hid their illicit affair? She dismissed the errant thought of lovers.

Briar went downstairs for breakfast. Apparently, Julius had already broken his fast, so she ate alone. She was amused by how much Otis and the footmen fussed over her, perhaps only too pleased to have someone else to serve. There was bacon, eggs, kippers and braised kidneys. Briar was ravenous and ensured she complimented the loaves, cake, and marmalade. Otis was tasked with relaying her compliments to the kitchen staff.

She felt an intense spark, an electric attraction whenever she was around him, and she could not pretend it was not there. The flush, butterflies in her stomach, and the feeling that her knees would buckle at the sound of his voice. Somewhere deep down, she wanted to know if he felt it, too. Was it as intense as to make him forget about all else or constantly think about the next time he would see her again? Did he feel like he could not focus on matters at hand? Did he have a deep ache in his chest?

She had best try to mask her feelings because his feelings may not be the same. Yet, they had such smooth conversations, and he was interested in getting to know her. Now that she had experienced it, she must forget his undeniable touch and his attentiveness. Perhaps she had been going about this all wrong. Instead of wondering what he felt for her, she should find out.

### CHAPTER 10

It was time for the game. Briar and Julius took up their positions and stared at each other. Julius was straight, while Briar's body was turned sideways. Her head was upright, and she gazed into his eyes as if she was trying to decipher something—anything—in their depth. His eyes were hooded, so he found comfort in knowing she would not find anything there. Her beauty was captivating, even with her furrowed brows.

Julius was well aware that they needed to get on with it, but neither of them made a play. Finally, Briar pointed her foot toward him and then bent her right arm, lifted her rapier to the height of her shoulder, making a circle over her head before lifting her left arm to the back and readying herself for whatever Julius would send toward her. The display amused him, and there was none when they fought in the library. Julius admired her confidence in her ability to best him and wanted to throw her off her game.

He did not mirror her moves but rather raised his rapier and lunged toward her. She was caught off-guard, but she quickly recovered. Admirable. She kept her composure, but her eyes narrowed.

“Have you forgotten the etiquette they taught you at fencing school, Julius? Is that how you square up to your opponents? Or is it that you don't care.”

“The rules of fair play do not apply in love and war,” Julius replied.

He was taken aback when she lowered her rapier and laughed heartily. She raised a

brow. "We are at war then," she said.

"Only as far as the overwhelming need to protect my interests. I may employ a bit of sabotage if necessary."

"I see."

The corner of his mouth lifted in a smile. "It is all fair game."

"As your opponent, I have no reason to comply with your moral standards."

"War, you said. I would have you remember that not all wars are won. Sometimes, one side just suffers greater losses."

"Well said—"

Briar lunged forward, but instead of one attack, she made a series of movements, trying to get the better of him. Julius was expecting, and he was parried, but she was much quicker than he anticipated. She countered him when he feigned inside and then attacked from the outside. She thrust, and he parried until he heard her ragged breathing. Back and forth they went as the heat rose through his body. Briar was playing to win, and she remained focused, but Julius's mind wandered. Her agility made him curious about what it would be like to ... Briar moved forward, and Julius stepped back, almost losing his footing.

She was, without question, a formidable adversary. Her grace and poise did not go unnoticed. Briar had more skill, speed and power than most of the others he had fenced with. He came into this game thinking he would win, and it was a foregone conclusion. He was wrong. She was determined, knew what she wanted, and she was going after it. It was refreshing ... and alluring.



He really liked her. Damn. Such a pity she was not—

“I am far more than you expected. Am I not?”

Julius grinned. “In more ways than one.” He needed to focus on the game, but she kept intruding on his thoughts. This was not a usual occurrence when he played.

Enthusiasm settled in his stomach and he was enjoying the movement. The game was exhilarating, and it lifted his mood. Briar quickly thrust with three motions of the wrist, her arms straight, reaching toward Julius’s chest as she stepped forward. She lifted the rapier in line with her temple to prevent a counter thrust before she recovered to the guard, the rapier in a straight line toward him. It was a strong move that was well executed, and Julius could not have done it better himself.

He made no move and patiently waited. Briar attacked, and Julius parried. She thrust again, this time from inside to the outside of his rapier, but he effortlessly flicked it away.

A thin glow of perspiration misted her forehead. Julius could imagine its salty taste. Her breath came in short gasps.

“Are you tired?”

A smile flashed, and her eyes twinkled. “Perhaps I should ask you. Do you wish to concede?”

“I pay homage to your skills, Briar, but I am not ready to concede defeat.”

Julius attacked, and their rapiers tangled again. They engaged with carte, the points downward. Briar lunged backward, and Julius plunged his rapier under her elbow to her flank, turning his wrist upward to create an angle from the wrist to the point of his

sword. He dropped his left hand under his right to avoid being hit as he thrust, although Briar parried him again.

Bloody hell !

Brows furrowed, he wondered why his signature maneuver did not have the desired effect. It served him well in the past, and he never imagined it would not work. It was time for him to bring the game to a close, so he decided to step up the intensity. They went back and forth until he found the opening he needed to attack and counter in quick, strong movements, yet so did she. Unlike their first game in the library, now they were both aggressors, and he seemed to be getting the short end of it.

They were both sweating and panting hard. He was enlivened in a way that he had never experienced while fencing. There was a tightening in his breeches. He was aroused. Briar took advantage of his distractions, and with a few quick moves, she stepped forward and had the rapier at his chest. When she lowered the weapon, he retrieved it and placed them both in the sheath.

She stood in the same position, waiting for her breathing to recover. Julius closed the gap between them. He leaned in and kissed her forehead, hot and salty yet sweet. He took a step back and gazed at her, certain her lips trembled. He could feel the tension between them. Unmistakable. He wanted this woman who looked at him as if he was the only man in the world. Her breathing was shallow, her eyes bright, her cheeks flushed, and her round breasts were straining against the fabric of her yellow dress. He wanted to ravish her lips, but for a moment, he remained transfixed.

Briar reached up and gently stroked his scar, her eyes never leaving his. Her soft hands made him forget that he had ever felt pain when cold steel sliced into his flesh. Her fingers were soft and silky, and they gently threaded the full length of the damaged flesh. She did not pull away from him, and there was no look of disgust. He looked into her eyes, dark and cloudy. He recognized it instantly. Desire. She wanted

him to kiss her just as much as he wanted to do it. The realization caused his heart to skip, then beat far too rapidly, falling out of its usual rhythm. He need not have been concerned she would turn away from him if he tried to kiss her.

He should not, must not. He was powerless.

Julius's head moved toward her, and Briar instinctively tilted her chin to meet him. He stopped breathing when his lips touched hers, a supple, tender caress. She did not open to let him in, and he licked her lips, immediately thrusting his tongue inside when she made a small gasp at the sensation. He ached for her. A low growl rumbled in his chest, echoing his hunger. He just could not be gentle any longer. Deep inside, something powerful was pulling him along, and when he heard her soft mewl, he lost the last fragment of restraint, the last thing holding him together. Julius pulled her into his arms and crushed her against him as he drank in her taste.

He was leading, but by God, did she follow .

Her hand moved from his face to the back of his neck, gliding through his hair, drawing him close. Julius traced her lips with his tongue before he sucked on her bottom lip, sighing his pleasure. Everything in his world collapsed around him. It all fell away, and there was only Briar. He moved his mouth along her cheekbone, down to her jaw, before he nuzzled her neck.

“You taste so damned good.” He hoarsely whispered.

A soft gasp escaped her as her hand tangled and pulled his hair. He took a deep breath ... pure pleasure, and he found her mouth again, unable to get enough. His hunger drove him, a hunger he did not know he possessed. He must stop lest it devour him.

Briar was in a daze as his hot tongue explored her mouth in what could only be described as a carnal kiss. She liked the taste and feel of him. Hot, wet, and urgent.

She could never have imagined that kissing could be so ... Oh . Heat spread from her lower belly to between her thighs as his tongue ran havoc against hers. Should she be afraid of this heat that she was feeling? She did not know. Julius molded her against him, and they fit together ... perfectly, her breast crushed against his chest, arms on her back.

Briar felt the cool air on her skin when he moved away. She raised her hand to her swollen lips. "Kiss me again." She wanted to be sure the sensations that wrecked her equanimity were real and she could feel them again. Julius stilled, and she wondered if he was holding his breath.

Julius sighed heavily. "I shall not. You do not know what you ask of me." He leaned in and kissed her forehead. "We agreed that the winner could ask a question which would be answered."

Briar inclined her head to the side and studied him. "I would like to know how you got your scar."

There was a subtle shift in his expression which she only caught because she was watching him closely. His jaw tightened for the briefest moment, and a faint twitch of his brow hinted that the question had landed harder than he'd let on. He looked at her as though he knew this was the question she would ask. A small, almost imperceptible nod followed. He briefly seemed contemplative.

When he finally spoke, his voice was smooth, but there was a hardness beneath it, like someone who had been preparing for this moment yet still found it unsettling, "I was a young, hot-blooded pup on a grand tour of Europe. I spent a few months in France, where I met Véronique. She was older, a beauty, sophisticated and married. Within weeks, I was completely enamored with her."

"Married, you say?"

“Yes. How innocent you are. Véronique’s husband was a high-ranking courtier when we met. He was often busy and the King sent him abroad for one errand after the other. Véronique was lonely, and she wanted to amuse herself. The idea that one would be faithful to their spouse was laughable at court. Women had just as many affairs as men.”

“I see.”

“It was not as much of a scandal as it is in England. Although affairs were accepted, She did not flaunt it, sneaking away to see me and exercising some discretion. Eventually, Pierre, her husband, caught wind of it and reacted unexpectedly.”

“He challenged you to a duel.”

“In spectacular fashion and in public. Being the young fool that I was, full of pride and stupidity, I did not seek to call it off.” Julius paused, a far-away look in his eyes. “I named my friend, François, as my second. He did not think I should go anywhere near it, but I was unmoved by his reasoning.”

When Julius paused again, Briar understood that even after all this time, he found it difficult to speak of the incident. He was sharing something very personal with her, which was not half-hearted. He also trusted her to keep his confidence.

“On that morning when we met in the clearing, I was a self-absorbed young man with very little self-control. Pierre trounced me, of course. He was a much more experienced and skilled fighter than I was. It could have been much worse; I could have been killed. So that is the story. I left France and returned to England.”

“And you shut yourself away ever since.”

“Well, not quite. I had a period of self-reflection while I healed. I learned to control

myself, to be humble, and to be more outwardly focused. My father gave me more responsibility in running the estate. I learned to respect the boundaries of marriage and understood compromise.”

Briar was sympathetic. “It must have been difficult for you.”

“What I have just described to you was easier than facing the haut ton . The rumors, whispers and innuendo were difficult to ignore. I accepted it was a price to pay, but eventually, it would all die down. Sadly, it did not. I soon learned the ladies in society were not prepared to look at my ugly face.”

“You are not ugly, Julius.”

“I stand corrected. You are a woman with a good heart who can see the man behind the mask. You can look beyond my appearance, and I am grateful that we met.”

“The way I see you is how you should be seen, Julius. I am sure the haut ton has found more titillating gossip.”

“We will see soon enough. I have decided to go to London for the season.”

“To London?” She asked as if she had never heard of it.

“Yes, and you will accompany me, along with your family, of course.”

“I do not—”

“Hear me out. I understand this is not a part of our agreement, but you need a dowery should you wish to marry so that I will provide a generous one.”

“That is very kind of you, Julius. I need to write to Mama and Duncan.”

“Let me know when you have heard back from them. Will I see you at dinner?”

“You shall.” Briar turned around toward the door, but she did not take a step to leave. Instead, she spun around to face Julius. “Did you love her? Véronique?” Briar could hardly believe her audacity in asking him such a question, but she wanted to know. This was as good a time as any since he just told the story.

Their gazes locked. Julius’s response was almost immediate. This question was one he may have considered in the past himself.

“Back then, I believed that I was, but maturity made me realize it was infatuation. Véronique never loved me, I am certain of that. She never came to see me before I left France, and I never heard from her again.”

“I am sorry,” Briar calmly replied, although, for some reason, she was pleased that Julius never loved Véronique. She turned and left the library so that Julius would not see the little smile on her face. Briar did not understand why that bit of news made her happy; it just did.

As Briar walked to her bedchamber, she reflected on the conversation. Julius had been honest about his shortcomings and weaknesses even though it hurt to speak about the circumstances that led to his introspection. He did not pretend his imperfections did not exist or wait for them to come tumbling down. Instead, he examined his character and sought to improve himself and become a better person. There are not many men who would be willing to admit they have weaknesses, as they would be considered failures. He said he learned humility, and Briar would agree. Humility was not denying his strengths; it was being forthright about what he needed to change. Julius was human and more than a lofty duke.

She admired him, and that was harmless enough. He need not know about it. On the other hand, kissing was the thing she needed to be wary of. Mama suggested she gain

the duke's affection. She would not approve of Briar behaving recklessly and causing a scandal. They were already in a difficult position with Duncan's shenanigans and only narrowly escaped a scandal. The trouble was that she liked kissing him. It felt good.

She entered her bedchamber and instructed staff to prepare her bath. Briar realized she would need to work harder at keeping her desire in check and not give in to temptation. This trip to London was significant. Julius wanted to participate in the season for the first time in several years. He would attend endless social events and meet many debutantes. London was a marriage market during the season. There would be beautiful young ladies looking for a spouse. Did the trip to London mean he had no feelings for her?



### CHAPTER 11

Julius had a bath, but it was not a warm one. He needed a cold bath to temper his cock's twitch. A curse left his lips when he sank into the tub, and it was a sobering moment. He was surprised at how much he revealed to Briar. He had never discussed his feelings for Véronique. Julius put it down to the fact that he could not help but be comfortable with her. Bearing his soul to her was easy. It was the only explanation. He felt safe and at home with Briar.

Confiding in her was one thing, and kissing her was something else entirely, even if she was offering her sweet lips to be kissed. She wanted it, and he needed it. It had been years since he had such an urge to kiss a woman, and he enjoyed the feeling that was awakened. He never wanted it to go away; he had to bask in it. Yet, at the same, he knew he was a bit fragile, not having opened himself up to companionship for some time. What he felt today was more than a spark. It was a hot flash in his consciousness, and it took all his strength not to kiss her a second time, even though she asked for it. She was truly bold, this one. Had she stolen a kiss with a suitor during her first season?

Even if Briar had a clandestine kiss, Julius was certain she was otherwise untouched. This was not the French court, and it would do him good to remember that. He would be expected to make an offer if he crossed the line with a lady of noble blood. Julius already knew the reason he was not inclined to think of Briar as a potential duchess. He should be careful in his choice. Julius drummed his fingers against the side of the tub. He would not sit there for much longer. The water was getting colder. None of his rational thoughts had eclipsed his desire to kiss her soft lips and explore her eager mouth. There was no denying it. He wanted her.

Julius completed his bath and dressed. He was looking forward to sitting down to dinner with Briar this evening. The anticipation was different from before. He was even more curious about her now and understood he would only have her company for a short time before they would depart for London. He was sure her family would agree because they would see the advantage. It was a generous offer. He would enjoy her company, but it would be best to refrain from further intimacy. Briar was far too tempting for her own good. It was going to be damned hard to keep his lips off her, if not impossible, but what choice did he have? He must try.

Julius made his way to the drawing room and entered. Briar had not arrived, so he poured himself a brandy and stood by the fireplace, staring into the flames. The flames burned bright and provided much comfort after his cold bath. The door opened, and he spun around to find Briar looking exquisite in a green dress. She had left her hair loose tonight, tresses tumbling over her shoulders. He wanted to bury his face in her hair and inhale deeply, capturing the essence of her. She gave him a wide smile which he returned.

“Would you like a glass of wine?”

“Thank you.”

“I must say that I am curious about something.”

“And what might that be, Julius?”

“Have you ever stolen a kiss?”

A soft gasp from her pink lips. “That is none of your business.”

Julius regarded her, and he did not miss the flicker in her eyes before she quickly lowered her lashes. He had gone too far.

“I am sorry if I—”

“There is no need to apologize, Julius. I have been kissed, but it is not in the way that you think.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“A purported gentleman, who will remain unnamed, took liberties when I did not even like him. He was interested in me, but I would not court him. I gave him no indication that I wished to be kissed, and we were only alone for a brief moment before he pounced. I was shaken by the incident, and I dared not speak of it for fear I would be forced to marry him. I do not know if my fear was rational or not. I was disgusted by his kiss and pawing hands, and I vowed never to marry.” Briar’s voice had trailed off to a whisper by the time she got to the end of the story.

The tale riled Julius, and he would love to have a word or two with this gentleman who overstepped the mark with his unwanted advance. It was churlish, to say the least. Briar’s eyes remained downcast. A part of him wondered if she was sanitizing the entire episode, and it was worse than she wanted to let on. He was angry that someone had hurt her, even though it was long before they met. The episode was unpleasant enough for her to be mistrustful of men. Women in society were reared to wed and raised a family. Briar’s duty was to run her household and produce an heir.

“I am sorry to learn that you had that experience. Are you sure you do not wish to tell me his name? I could pay him a visit.”

Briar's laughter tinkled. “I shall not, as much as I would like to. Before the incident, I dreamed of a grand courtship, an engagement, and a wedding. I wanted a grand love story, but it was not meant to be.”

Compassion swelled in his chest, for she had taken him as a confidante. It was likely

Briar had never shared this intimate detail before, and now that he knew, Julius somehow wished he could have protected her. He wanted no one else to kiss her. Only him.

Briar gave him a bold stare. "I would rather put it out of my mind and think of more pleasant experiences."

Damn .

She was thinking of the kiss they shared, and immediately, Julius felt the tension fill the room. His eyes dropped to her lips, but he was saved from doing exactly what he promised not to do. Otis entered the drawing room to announce that dinner was ready. Julius led Briar into the dining room, where they had a pleasant meal. Well, the morsel that they had. All the tension from the drawing room had accompanied him into the dining room and settled in the pit of his stomach. He was hungry, but he could not eat. Briar had not fared better, for she placed bits from each dish on her plate and then pushed it around. She had the occasional piece here and there but most of her meal went back to the kitchen. That was when he knew that she was feeling it, too.

Briar drank her wine and was attentive during dinner. Julius realized he had not thought about his mask all evening. The meal ended, but Julius did not want her to go. He wanted her close just for a while longer.

"I have not danced for some time and will be expected to when we arrive in London. We should practice the waltz so that I can feel comfortable holding a lady in my arms again."

"You wish to dance now?"

"Yes. We could go to the drawing room and practice the waltz there."

“As you wish.”

Julius led Briar into the drawing room. They stood facing each other.

Julius held out his hand to her. “Shall we? If I remember correctly, the gentleman starts with the left and the lady with the right.”

Briar accepted his hand and her long, elegant fingers gripped his lightly. “That is correct, Julius. I am sure you recall the essence of waltzing is keeping the beat.”

Julius placed his right hand on the small of Briar's back and kept his left hand out. Briar grasped it and placed her left hand lightly on his shoulder. Their bodies did not touch, but they may as well have. Julius swallowed, and the sound seemed loud in his ear. His fingers at her back ached with the need to touch her even more.

They were in position, and it felt so good. He lowered his voice. “We will pretend that we are dancing to On the Beautiful Blue Danube. I will lead.”

Julius brought his right foot next to his left and then stepped in place with his left. Then, starting with his right, he did the same in reverse. Briar counted the beat ... one, two, three. Even without the music, they were in sync, so fluid that he almost felt like he was flowing like a liquid around the room. Julius and Briar swayed in perfect harmony. They had no audience, so he could openly gaze at her beauty. Instantly, he forgot everything else. Briar's dancing was just like everything else about her. Perfect. She had such poise and elegance that they could have been in the ballroom of a prominent family home in London.

Their eyes locked as they held each other and moved to the beat. Her eyes were shining, glossing over and softening. The dance was so tender ... they could have been lovers. A burning fire held the depths of her gaze, threatening to engulf him. Julius pulled Briar close to him in a rush as they crashed into each other, chest to

chest. He tilted her chin and covered her mouth, unleashing all the pent-up tension he felt all evening. He was hungry for her, and his lips devoured her. To hell with everything else. He traced his tongue along her jawline, down to her neck, and she sucked in a deep breath of pleasure.

A warning bell rang in Briar's head. It told her what she desired was bad, but he tasted so, so good. She wanted him to kiss her until she was breathless. She ached for him to kiss her all night. Julius put his lips to her neck, and a shiver ran down her spine. He finally broke the kiss with a lick of her lips and looked at her hair.

"I have wanted to touch your hair all evening."

"Then touch it."

Julius gave a soft groan as he placed both hands on the side of her neck and combed through her hair. Briar wondered how such a small action could be so soothing and sensual. Julius swiftly crushed her mouth, pulling her even closer. His tongue in her mouth and hands in her hair prevented Briar from having any further thoughts. Briar reached for Julius's hair, and his breath quickened.

Julius raised his head, and his thumb brushed her lips. "This is what I wanted from the moment you sat down for dinner." His lips brushed hers tenderly.

He stopped kissing her but only to secure the door before he led her closer to the fireplace. Julius stood behind her and kissed the nape and side of her neck while he slowly undressed her.

"I want to see you, all of you." He whispered between kisses.

Soon, Briar stood naked before him, yet she was not cold. The fire that burned within her made her skin hot and flushed. Julius's gaze lingered on her breasts and curves,

and when his eyes shot up to meet hers, the raw need caused her lips to tremble.

“You are beautiful.” He ran his hand lightly over her shoulders.

“I want to see you.” Briar swallowed as Julius sucked in his breath.

He removed his shirt, and Briar saw the scar that ran across his chest. A question haunted his eyes, and she gave him the answer he needed. Briar ran her hand along the length of the scarred flesh before gently kissing it. She could feel his heart thumping in his chest. Julius stepped back and quickly removed the rest of his garment, which fell into a crumpled pile on the floor. He swooped her in his arms and gently placed her on the rug before the fireplace. He lay beside her, propped up on his elbow, gazing at her, his eyes dark with need.

“What do you want me to do, Briar? Tell me what you want?”

“Kiss me.” She pleaded in a breathy whisper.

Julius swiftly crushed her mouth with a kiss that echoed her hunger. He gave her what she wanted. Briar gripped his shoulders, pulling him closer, and caught the little growl that left his throat. She yearned for him to kiss her neck again, and as if on cue, his lips were there, and she savored it. His lips found her breast and suckled on a nipple. Oh God . The sound that left her was somewhere between a gasp and a moan. Briar turned herself over to the sensation that was wreaking havoc inside her, hot and heavy. Julius nipped her nipple, and it sent a jolt through her core. Briar experienced a new sensation of moisture between her thighs and a yearning for something she needed there. Julius continued to suckle and nip each nipple until Briar bit her lip so she would not scream.

She wanted to give him pleasure like he was giving her. Briar felt for Julius’s nipple, her hand grazing his scar, and he moaned against her breast. She pinched his nipple,

and a low, rumbling growl left his throat. Julius moved out of her reach to trail kisses down her belly, and she sucked in her breath when he parted her thighs. His fingers lightly skimmed over her thighs, something dark and wicked that set liquid heat pooling through her. His finger slipped inside her hot desire, and she gasped at the pleasure of it. He removed his finger, but she did not want him to stop ... that was until he stroked her nob, the strokes gentle, lingering then demanding.

Briar gave a small mewl when Julius's tongue replaced his finger, sucking slowly and rhythmically. Her hands swept through his hair as she moved beneath him. His tongue licked her, and his finger found her hot core, slipping deep inside her. She slowly exhaled, her legs trembling.

"Julius." She breathed a raspy breath.

He raised his head. "Do you want me to stop?"

Without hesitation, "No." She wanted him to taste her more than she could ever say. She felt his hot breath before his lips found her and pressed a kiss to her soft skin, sucking and nibbling, wreaking havoc on her senses. Her fingers tightened in his hair, and when his teeth gently grazed her, she cried out her pleasure. Julius groaned as she felt the wetness of her thighs on his finger as he slid all the way inside her. Julius trailed kisses up her belly before he positioned himself over her. She felt the length of his pressed against her before he took a nipple in his mouth, gently squeezing the other. Briar was pure desire.

His hard length nudged at her entrance, and instinctively, Briar clutched him to her as he pressed inside her. Julius stopped as he moved to kiss the other nipple, and when his teeth nibbled, she groaned, and with a strong stroke, he was inside her. There was an ache in the center of her, but it was soon forgotten when he claimed her lips. Their tongues met in heat and fury as he licked, sucked, and stroked. He slowly moved inside her, stroking her heat as he kissed her again and again. Briar was losing herself



with every stroke, her breath coming faster and faster when he delved deep within. She rocked against him, gripping his shoulders, wanting to find that pleasure again when his tongue made her scream out.

She felt his hot breath on her neck, then her ears, before he buried all of himself in her. He pulled back to gaze at her, his eyes hot and dark. He was inside her but not moving. Briar moved her hip against him, and he groaned. Julius slipped in and out of her wet heat, slowly at first, then increased the rhythm until she felt herself tightening around him. Briar gripped his hair and closed her eyes as pleasure washed over her, and she screamed her release. He stroked her deeply until she felt him stiffen before he withdrew from her and spilled his seed.

They were both breathing heavily when he collapsed beside her, cradling her head on his chest. In the aftermath of her raging desire, reality set in. She had wanted him, probably too much, and she did not exercise any caution when she gave herself to him. Her raging need had blocked any thought of restraint, and she could not resist him. Briar wondered what would happen now that she had given him a part of her.

### CHAPTER 12

Julius cradled her across his chest and stroked her hair. He did not know how long they lay there, but his heart had finally stopped racing. His breathing returned to normal. They had shared something that he needed, but it would only be for tonight. Tonight. Not forever. He would cherish it, and perhaps that would be enough. The words hung hollow even as he grappled with the significance of what they just shared. He knew what would be expected and the reason he hesitated.

Julius kissed her forehead. "We should get dressed."

"You are right." She slowly sat up.

"I shall take you to your bedchamber."

"There is no need, Julius. I—"

Julius sat up and kissed her. Their foreheads rested against each other. "I shall."

Briar stood and Julius helped her to dress before he dressed himself. He opened the door, and Briar started to walk by him; he scooped her up in his arms.

Briar gasped. "We could be seen."

"The servants are below stairs having their meal and preparing for tomorrow. It is a risk I am willing to take."

Briar rested her head against his shoulders as he climbed the stairs to her bed chamber. "I am not afraid, Julius."

"Afraid of what?"

"Taking risks."

Julius chuckled. "Don't I know it? We would not have met if you had not taken a risk."

"True."

When they arrived, he opened the door and closed it with his heel behind them. He laid Briar down, and they stood facing each other. He meant to give her a kiss goodnight, but when their lips touched, something carnal took over. Soon, between hungry kisses, they were shedding their clothes in a frenzy, hurling them over the room as they slowly drifted toward the bed. They fell onto the bed in a tumble of arms and legs, yet his mouth did not leave her. They had tonight and it would be memorable. Julius gave Briar all the pleasure she wanted until they were both sated.

In the early hours of the following morning, he extricated himself from the warm bed beside her and returned to his bedchamber. It would soon be the time he would normally awaken to start his day, but there would be no prospect of that this morning. He was exhausted. Julius crawled under the covers and promptly fell asleep. Julius awoke feeling refreshed the next morning and thinking of Briar. He rang for his valet, who came in with warm water for him to wash and dress.

"Good morning, Your Grace."

"Good morning, Neil."

“Your brother and his family arrived mid-morning, and he would like to join you for lunch.”

Julius jerked up, and water splashed on the floor. “What the devil do you mean? Baxter is here?”

“Yes, Your Grace, along with his family.”

“Damn it!” Julius wondered if Baxter had not received his letter or if he did and wanted to be hard-headed anyway. Baxter could not possibly have come at a worse time. Julius hurriedly dressed and went downstairs to find Baxter in the drawing room.

“Baxter, what are you doing here? Did you not receive my letter?”

Baxter stood up and hugged Julius, slapping him on the back. “It is good to see you, brother. You do remember how to say that, don’t you?”

“Of course, I am happy to see you. I was not expecting you, is all.”

“I received your letter, and I must say, I was intrigued by it. I decided to come and see you since I am traveling to London, and Emmeline insisted on coming along.”

“Where is Emmeline and the boys?”

“They had an early lunch, and they are having a rest.”

“I see. I suppose that means you have been here for a while.”

“Indeed. Are you well?”

“I am. Do I not look well?”

“Absolutely, and I noticed you are not wearing your mask. It has been years since I have seen you without it.”

“I no longer wear it at home, thanks to Miss Walcot. I will still wear it whenever I venture out in public.”

Baxter’s brows shot up, but Julius ignored his stunned and questioning expression.

“You are not one to lay abed, and you missed breakfast.”

“I was feeling rather tired this morning.”

“Hmm. You should be famished.”

“I am, so let us talk over lunch,” Julius replied as he walked toward the dining room. They sat at the dining table, and Julius waited for the servants to leave before he spoke. “Why were you intrigued by my letter?”

“Come on, brother. I have been trying my darndest to get you to crawl out of this cave, and you refused. I was beginning to think you would hide away forever, and you rarely answered my letters. So, imagine my surprise when you replied to the last one and said you would be going to town. That is an about-turn, wouldn’t you say?” Baxter pinned him with a gaze, but Julius was so hungry he was wolfing down his breakfast.

“Yes, it is.”

“I am curious. What brought this about.”

Now that Baxter was here, Julius knew he had to explain Briar's presence. "The most unusual circumstance." He paused.

Baxter arched a brow. "I am all ears."

Julius explained the circumstances of Briar's arrival at Berkley Estate but did not mention the night of passion he knew he would never forget. Baxter gazed at him raptly. Still, he did not interrupt.

"That is the measure of it," Julius concluded.

"I can see that Miss Walcot's presence has had an effect on you. You have perked up, and you are regaining your confidence."

"Indeed."

"That is fantastic news, and I could not be more pleased to hear it."

"I can hear a 'but' coming."

"Well, I am sure you have thought about it, but I feel compelled to mention it. Being unchaperoned and alone with you risks Miss Walcot's reputation."

Julius sighed heavily, "I know that Baxter."

"Are you forming an attachment to her?"

Julius was indignant. "Of course not." He did not want to seem as foolish and reckless as he was in France. He did not know Briar well enough, so he could hardly say he was forming an attachment. Nevertheless, he could not deny her effect on him and how alive she made him feel.

“I wonder if you have thought carefully about the circumstances under which she came to be at Berkley Estate in the first place. She was prepared to break in and steal the painting. I have not met her, but this does give me cause for concern ... regarding her character. If we consider our family line, she does not appear to be a lady who could be your duchess.”

“I understand that. I have committed to providing Miss Walcot with a dowery so when we go to London, she will be able to find a husband.”

“That seems perfectly reasonable. I have just had a thought. Emmeline can remain here, act as a chaperone, and travel with you to London.”

“You are not reassured by what I have told you?”

“I understand you have the best intentions, but a rumor is enough to cause a scandal that would ruin Miss Walcot’s reputation, and I know you would not want that for her. You have never been selfish, Julius.”

Anyone listening to their conversation would think Baxter was the older brother. Baxter had always been bossy, yet Julius knew there was some truth in his words. When she had just arrived at Berkley Estate, his resolve was much stronger than it is now. After what they shared last night, he knew it would be difficult to refrain from touching her, even though he knew it was the right thing to do. He did not want to hurt Briar.

Julius nodded. “I suppose you are right. The season is only a few weeks away.”

“Excellent. While I am in London, I will attend a few of the social gatherings.”

“Now that you have heard the intricate details of my life, perhaps you can tell me what business you have in London,” Julius said.

Baxter began to speak, but Julius only listened with half an ear. His thoughts went to Briar, and he wondered how she felt about last night.

Briar was making her way down to the dining room. The maid told her Julius had gone down for lunch, and she was starving. She could not tell the last time she missed breakfast. She awoke quite late, feeling hungry and sore. She flushed when she looked at the crumpled sheets. She first gave herself to Julius in the drawing room and immediately thought of the implications. Still, somehow, she seemed powerless to resist his touch when they arrived in her bedchamber. She was certain that her mother would be appalled if she knew Briar had given herself to Julius when they were not married. Young ladies should be chaste until the wedding night. Worse yet, there had been no talk of marriage after he took her. Nothing had happened in the correct sequence and with her relative inexperience, Briar did not know what should happen next.

She had just arrived at the dining room door when she heard an unfamiliar voice mention her name and the risk to her reputation. Who would speak to Julius with such candidness? She stood rooted to the spot and listened to the gentleman cast aspersions on her character and implied she could not be suitable for Julius's wife. Briar quickly realized it was his brother, Baxter. She staggered before she held out a hand to steady herself. She understood that she had done wrong, but to hear Julius agree with Baxter astounded her. She hoped that he thought more of her after what they shared last night. She wanted him to defend her and she was hurt that he was not more supportive of her. The shock faded, and fury surged through her chest.

How could he?

Briar wondered if she was being foolish and if she should temper her unrealistic expectations. It was clear that she did not know Julius very well. She could not believe he had already decided she did not meet his standards for a wife. The euphoric haze she awoke with suddenly cleared, replaced with a mixture of anger and



sadness. There was no mistaking what she heard. Julius was not becoming enamored with her, and he did not think she was good enough to be his duchess. He wanted a lady from the right line of descent. She was a fool to think they had shared anything more than a night of steamy passion. Caught off guard by the sudden turn of events, she must accept their dalliance would never be anything else. She stood tall, her back straight and took a deep breath, then knocked on the door and waited to be admitted.

“Come in,” Julius replied.

She entered the room and glanced from Julius to his brother, who bore a remarkable resemblance to him. They both stood up from their chairs. “Good afternoon, Your Grace.”

“Good afternoon, Miss Walcot. May I introduce my brother, Lord Fenton.”

“I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Lord Fenton.”

Julius hurried to pull out a chair for Briar. Julius was at the head of the table, Baxter seated to his left and Briar to the right. She was right across from Lord Fenton. Otis served Briar and she immediately tucked into her lunch.

“Lord Fenton is on his way to London and decided to pay me a visit. His wife and the children are resting.”

“How delightful. Did you have an uneventful journey?”

“We did. I hope you are enjoying your stay at Berkley Estate.”

“It is a beautiful and quite large estate. There is much that I have yet to explore.”

“Lady Fenton will remain here until we depart for London. I am sure she would be

only too happy to show you more.”

“That is kind of you, Your Grace. Thank you.”

Julius was being quite polite about the fact she would be chaperoned from now on. It was back to propriety and restraint, which was definitely for the best. Then why did she feel such a sense of helplessness, hurt and loss? Her emotions were in turmoil. She swung from anger and hurt to sadness within a very short time, yet she would not show it. Briar flashed a small smile and continued eating the salmon. She could feel Julius’s stare and she shifted slightly in her chair. She peered at Julius from beneath her lashes as she took a bite, but she could not decipher what she saw in his eyes this time. She raised her head and glanced at Lord Fenton who took a sip of wine.

“Will you be joining the festivities in London?”

“We will at least attend a few of the balls before we return. Lady Fenton is looking forward to it. Are you?”

“I have not been to London for a while. After Father passed away, we were in mourning —”

“I understand, Miss Walcot. There is no need to explain further,” Lord Fenton said. Although his comment regarding her suitability hurt her, Lord Fenton seemed kind.

“We certainly had a period of adjustment when our father passed,” Julius said.

“What of your family? Will they join you?”

Lord Fenton’s question gave Briar a jolt. The mention of her family being in London reminded her that they did not have access to the townhouse because they had to lease it. They had leased it for a year, unfurnished because they sold the furniture

long before. The dearest season was from Christmas to June, when families were in town and parliament was sitting; the cheapest was when families were out of town and the parliament prorogued. Duncan managed to negotiate a favorable rate to cover the taxes and repairs. The rent was due half-yearly but the tenant paid for a full year. Perhaps Duncan had not given much thought to where they would reside. She would send him a letter so arrangements could be made before they arrived in London.

“My brother and mother will, but my sister is still too young.”

“Then I will have the chance to meet them.”

“Indeed.”

“If you will excuse me, now that I am fed, I will rest before the boys are up.” Lord Fenton stood up from the table and excused himself. They had all finished eating, so the servants cleared the table. Only the flask of wine and their glasses remained.

They were alone, so Briar regarded Julius more openly.

“Briar, I noticed that you hesitated when my brother asked about your family joining us in town. Why?”

She was reluctant to mention it, but then he knew so much already. What would be the point in hiding this? “I was merely thinking about where we should stay in town. You see, our townhouse has been leased.”

“I have more than one property in town sitting empty. I will make one available to you and your family.”

“I could not possibly accept—.”

“Nonsense. You can hardly have a season without a house in London. Where would I call upon you?”

He was planning to call on her?

“Leave it with me, and I will write to your brother. We can always negotiate what will be deducted from the final payment. I will arrange for a modiste to attend you. You need new gowns for the season, and that is just as important as having a dowery.”

Briar wanted to remain angry with him, yet she could not. Not when he was being so thoughtful and generous. He offered to help her family without much of a reward and did not place any additional burden on them. How could he be both? The gentleman who did not defend her from his brother when she thought he understood more of her character versus the one who was always prepared to give of himself freely. She would not have known his true intentions if she had not overheard the conversation.

“Briar, about last night—.”

“You need not say more, Julius. It was a lapse in judgment on both our parts. I am sure you would agree that it is best not to repeat it.”

Again, his eyes caught hers, and she could not look away. Time stood still, and neither of them spoke. The silence was deafening. Julius’s gaze fell to her lips, and her heart banged in her chest. She must not think about his lips on her, of her feelings, wants and desires. She cannot. Briar had always been bold and opinionated. She did not take issue with speaking her mind, but somehow, Julius being this close was affecting her. For a moment, he rendered her speechless.

Briar quickly stood up from her chair. “I will take a walk in the garden. I need to get some fresh air.”

“I will see you at dinner.”

Briar left the dining room wondering how she would navigate the intensity of her different emotions. Julius conjured feelings within her that she did not know existed, and now they flowed through her. How had she let this happen? Perhaps it was for the best that Lord Fenton and his family arrived. Their presence would save Briar from herself; they had to.

### CHAPTER 13

Briar walked around the garden, admiring the flowers and the fountain. The sky was overcast and it was cool, but at least it was not raining. During the walk she thought more about the season and the prospects that would be opened up to her. Julius would not choose her, but at least now she knew that she could share intimacy without being repulsed. Now that she was certain, there was no need to avoid marriage. Since she found pleasure with Julius, perhaps she could find it with another gentleman who would be prepared to marry her. She should open her mind to the possibility.

She continued on the path across the lawn until she heard children shouting. Briar spun around to find three little boys barreling toward her in a race. The smallest child was shouting with glee when he tripped and fell into the grass, arms sprawled. Briar took a step forward, but then the other boys quickly stopped to help him up before they all started running again. They were breathless by the time they reached Briar.

“My name is Warren; this is Sidney and Patrick,” Warren said as he pointed.

Briar immediately saw the resemblance. “It is lovely to meet you. I am Miss Walcot. Are you all friends?” She asked with a grin.

The boys giggled. “No, silly. We are brothers.” Warren replied.

“Warren!” Briar had hardly noticed the elegant lady following the boys across the lawn. She was shorter than Briar and more plump, yet she moved with grace and elegance. Her curly brown hair tumbled over her shoulders. She stopped short and turned to Briar, “I must apologize for Warren. I have told him not to use that word.

What should you do, Warren?"

"I am sorry I used the word silly, Miss Walcot."

"Apology accepted, Warren."

"Now run along and play by the trees." Lady Fenton said.

And off the boys went, arguing about who won the first race.

"Miss Walcot, Julius had just told me about you."

"I am pleased to meet you, Lady Fe – ."

"Nonsense. Call me Emmeline. I insist. I would like for us to be friends."

"Very well, Emmeline."

"He also told me that you are the reason he decided to have a season."

"Perhaps he is giving me too much credit."

"You are as beautiful as you are modest. Lord Fenton and I have been trying to get him to socialize for years and he would not have it. You must have made quite an impression on him."

"How did you two meet?"

Briar was sure Emmeline would hear the story from her husband if she did not tell her, so she did.

“So, you thought to steal the painting?”

“I have never stolen anything in my life. It was our dire circumstances that led me to take such action.”

“And you challenged Julius to a duel?”

“He had no choice. I am quite skilled and I started fighting.”

“This has been quite an adventure. You are a resourceful woman. I will give you that.”

Briar’s mouth curved into a smile. “You only know what you are capable of when you are faced with poor choices.”

“Hmm,” Emmeline murmured thoughtfully.

“His Grace has been quite generous and forgiving. He has allowed me to work to cover my family’s debt, and I will have a dowery. I may find a husband in London and have my own home.”

Emmeline cleared her throat. “You speak of him with such admiration.” There was no mockery in her voice, but she held a curious stare.

“I was the one who put myself in harm’s way, and His Grace did what he could to protect me. He could have left me alone to deal with the consequences. I will always be grateful because it could have been much worse.”

“According to what my husband told me, you have helped Julius too. His life has been a series of twists and turns. We never thought we would hear him say he would go to London for the season or consider marriage. It is quite phenomenal. I believe he



will have the confidence to charm society. He needs to believe it, and he is well on the way to arriving at that conclusion.”

To hear Emmeline speak of Julius getting married filled her with a pang of regret. If only they had not shared the night of all-consuming passion. If only he thought she was good enough to be his duchess. Briar pressed her lips together because she did not want to think of Julius sharing his bed with someone else. There was so much that she wished she could have said at lunch. There was a part of her that wanted to say everything that she felt, but she held back, afraid to reveal too much of herself. Something unspoken was unfurling inside her, and she had never experienced it before. It was almost as if her feelings were at odds with logical thinking. Worse yet, her feelings appeared to be at odds with themselves. There was a part of her that accepted what she heard. Julius would not marry her, but another part of her hoped something would change and it would be alright in the end. She had to trust logic because she certainly could not trust her feelings.

Briar swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat. “Before I had my season, I thought I would marry, have a family and take my place in society. Sadly, after my father died, my prospects were reduced as I would not find a suitable match with a dowery. I accepted my fate and decided I would have been happy to maintain my independence.”

“Truly?”

Briar nodded in confirmation. “Yes. It is my brother Duncan who must be concerned with securing my family line.”

“Yet, when you marry, you will provide your husband with children and possibly an heir.”

“Did you know from the start that you wanted to marry Lord Fenton?”

“When I came out, I had a few suitors, and my father was quite pleased about that. He was kind enough to allow me to make my own choice. I spent time with all the gentlemen who pursued me, but as the summer wore on, I realized that I cared for my husband. He was patient, kind and compassionate. I never regretted my choice.”

Briar had already lost her chance for a happy ending, damned because of her circumstances. Was there even the tiniest bit of hope?

Emmeline gave a satisfied sigh. “I am happy in my marriage, and I love having children. The boys are a light in my life. Warren is a handful, and he is the spitting image of his father.”

Briar chuckled. “He is. I have only just met them, but they seem like lovely children.”

The children started running toward Emmeline. “I will return to the house and see about the children having a bath. It was lovely to chat with you, and I think we will be fast friends, Briar.”

“I am sure we will. See you at dinner, Emmeline.”

“Come along, boys,” Emmeline said as she turned and walked toward the house.

Briar watched her fade into the distance. She raised her head to the sky and sighed. She must put her feelings aside because if she continued to hope, her guard would slip, and she would let Julius into her heart, which would be her undoing.

One month later

Julius sat at the large Mahogany desk in the library. His chair was pushed back, his feet were popped on the desk, and his hands behind his head. He stared up at the ceiling. The last few weeks had been great in some respects and torturous in others.

He had settled into a familiar routine with Briar and Emmeline and even found time to spend with his nephews. His confidence had grown tremendously, dinner conversation came easily, and he enjoyed every dance with her, all under Emmeline's watchful eyes.

Julius kept his promise to himself and did not seek out Briar for a rendezvous. By God, he did not know it would be so bloody hard. Last night at dinner, he was sure Emmeline saw him staring at the elegant curve of Briar's neck. He wanted nothing more than to lean down and press his lips to her neck before gently gliding over her shoulders down to her full breasts. She was wearing one of the new dresses he commissioned from the modiste. It was low cut, exposing her creamy skin, and when she laughed, her breast strained against the fabric. They tasted like cherries the night he took her, so sweet. Julius groaned. He wanted to quell his appetite and carnal desires, but he could not.

Yes, he wanted to bury his cock inside her, but there was more than sensual pleasure to consider. He could not deny he was drawn to Briar. It was like a magnetic pull, and no matter how much time he spent with her, it did not seem to be enough. As promised, he wanted to protect her and made all the arrangements for her family to use his townhouse in London. He enjoyed her being in his home, by his side, but now he faced the reality that they were running out of time. Everything was about to change because Julius would enter society seeking a duchess, and Briar would choose a husband. They would set off for London shortly, and they would no longer be under the same roof. He would not be able to see her every day. It would not be the same. He never wanted to let her out of his sight and for another man to pay her attention.

He had not worn his mask at Berkley Estate in weeks and did not miss it, although he would wear it in London. Briar made him forget he was unsightly, and she brought a certain energy to the room. She was lively and upbeat, and Emmeline seemed to like her a great deal. There was a knock on the door and he bid them enter.

“Good afternoon, Julius. I came to check on you. You have been quiet these last few days and did not join us for lunch.”

“Do not worry, Emmeline. Perhaps I am a bit nervous about reentering society.”

“From what I observe, Miss Walcot has prepared you well.”

“Effortlessly. She made it seem easy, and I am comfortable with her. What will happen if I do not feel that way about anyone else? The ladies of the ton may not accept me in the same way that she has.”

“She has accepted you for who you are. You do not know what is going to happen when we arrive in London. You need to wait and see.”

Not only did Briar accept him, but she also understood him. She accepted the entirety of his being, his personality, quirks, and individuality. She appreciated his unique essence beyond just his external or observable characteristics. She was performing a task, one for which she would be handsomely rewarded. Yet, she was not pretending; she never cared about his appearance. Her feelings toward him were unconditional, and at this point, he knew he was not prepared to accept anything less. His duchess must do the same.

“What I will say is that I am pleased you recognize her qualities. I came upon her playing with the children in the garden and observed her for a while. She is patient and compassionate. She will be a good mother and make someone a good wife.”

“I agree.”

“I met with the modiste when the gowns and dresses were delivered as you asked. Miss Walcot has everything that she needs for the season.”

“I will open the townhouse in Berkeley Square for her family. Will you visit with her?”

“Absolutely, and I will make some introductions to ensure she is well received.”

“That would be helpful.”

“Julius, you are a bit apprehensive about how you will be received, but it appears you are more concerned about Miss Walcot’s welfare.”

Julius was silent for a moment. “Do you really think so?”

“I see the way you look at her, and it is obvious that you care for her. Perhaps you should reflect on that while you are in London.”

Whenever he saw Briar, his feelings were immediate and loud inside him, and he had not managed to quieten them. This did not escape Emmeline’s notice.

“I did not mean to be so transparent or to put my feelings on show. It was not my intention because I need to decipher these feelings myself.”

“I am sure you will understand what they mean in time. I hope you will join us for dinner.”

“I will.”

Emmeline stood up and regarded him for a minute. It appeared she wanted to say something else, but she thought better of it. After she left, Julius mulled over the conversation. Julius was never an open book, so it said something if Emmeline could see that he cared for Briar. Now, the question is what he was going to do about it.

### CHAPTER 14

Emmeline and the children were a welcome distraction, but Briar wanted to be alone. She had to escape them for a while. She had been subject to emotional twists and turns for the past few weeks. Julius had a strange animal magnetism that drew her to him. Why? She did not know. It was just there. She felt more relaxed and serene today, but that was only because she was sitting by the river. She had not been back there since Julius plucked her from the water and carried her home, and so much had happened since then. There was a gentle breeze, the birds were singing, and the water was calm. The geese were going about their business with not a care in the world, and for a moment, she wished she too had no troubles.

She had truly tried to put her feelings for Julius aside, but it was incredibly difficult. They had settled into a routine that made her yearn for a life she dismissed only a few months ago as meaningless. Domesticated bliss was no longer unappealing, and she had Julius to thank. She dreamt of him at night and even daydreamed about what it would be like to remain at his side forever. The dreams always ended the same. When she peered at him under her lashes last night, she wondered if he ever had that fantasy, if only for a fleeting moment.

What was worse was that she knew what it was like to have his eyes caress her with lusting, invisible fingers. No other man had ever looked at her like that. That look made the blood throb in her veins with a scarlet web of desire. Every inch of her lit up with the burning, urgent need to possess him. At night, when she lay in bed and thought of him moving inside her, she hungered for him. She could only toss, turn and plump her pillows for the hundredth time. Amidst the pain and longing, there was a strange sense of comfort because she had the memory of their night of passion, and

she could relive it when she closed her eyes.

Briar walked along the river banks where lower downstream, it babbled, gentle and soothing. It hurt to think that he was not forming the same attachment, so she did what she could to avoid encounters and conversation. Would it not be better to express herself to him? No. What good would that do? He does not want her and will not choose her, so she must protect herself from the pain of his rejection. He must never know how she truly feels. Since he wants to be happy with a darling from the haut ton, she will accept it and do whatever she can to support his endeavor. If he finds a lady of the right lineage and he is happy, she will be delighted for him.

They were leaving for London tomorrow, and she was expected to find a husband. How could she? Her feelings were not reciprocated, and she was doing her damndest to control them, but how could she turn toward seeking romantic connections elsewhere? She could not imagine it. She was not interested. Her heart was not into it. This was rather foolish, she knew. She should not let her affection for Julius fill her heart because she would never let anyone else in if she did.

“I am sorry. I did not mean to intrude.”

Briar gave a start and spun around. She was face to face with Julius. She would have heard him if she was not so engrossed in her musing.

“You are not intruding. I was looking at the geese and envying them for their simple existence.”

“Animals have to hunt for their food, and that is not always easy.”

She paused and held his gaze. He was staring at her, and it was that look . The warmth of her body traveled all over and ended between her legs. At this moment, they were the animals, hungry savages, primitive in their desire.

“True. Yet, they survive and adapt. They feel grief, anger and fear just like us.”

Julius took a tentative step forward. “Is that what you are feeling? Grief, anger and fear?”

How could she reveal it? She must not. He could not know how much she grieved when she questioned why he didn’t choose her. Why did she ached so much inside as if a part of her was missing? He could not know that she wondered how it would be when they were in London, and he was not by her side like in her dreams. A part of her was angry ... angry that she was not born into a more prestigious lineage. She feared he would find his duchess, and she would never be able to give another man a place in her heart. Yes, she felt grief, anger and fear, but it would be her secret.

“Don’t we all feel these emotions at some point?”

His gaze was boring into her, and it had not shifted. “Is that all? I get the distinct impression there is more to it.”

Briar bit her lip and said nothing. He took another step and closed the gap between them, and he was close. Too close. She inhaled his scent, sandalwood and coffee. She wanted to take a step back, but there was a powerful force between them that kept her rooted in the spot. His eyes dropped to her lips and unfurled a fire in her loins and desire in her belly. Her breasts strained against her dress, aching for him to release them.

Animal hunger took over; raw, wild need engulfed between them. His lips were a crush of desire, and she matched his hunger, her tongue desperate to taste more of him. The kiss was so intense that she could hardly breathe, stroked by the carnal ferocity and pent-up need. Her hands moved wildly through his hair, and his hand dropped to her derriere, pulling her against the hard length of him.



Julius groaned. His heart pounded but not as loudly as the overwhelming need to be inside her. His finger yearned to touch the wet spot between her legs and to trail kisses along her folds. As soon as he had seen her, a lusty feeling washed over him and his cock twitched. His mouth ravished hers with a wet heat that left him breathy.

By God. He missed her taste.

He caught her lower lip, something between a nibble and a kiss. As she savored him, her soft gasp made his cock quicken. His teeth and tongue were in a savage frenzy when they raked her neck. One hand clutched at his hair while the other dug into his shoulder.

Suddenly, she wrenched herself away and took a few steps back. His breathing was erratic and he waited for it to recede into the usual slow and steady pace. Julius started to groan in protest, but the look in her eye arrested him. The sound died softly in his throat. Instantly, her desire was replaced by a trembling chin, a dull expression, and wet and dull eyes. She quickly shifted her gaze upward, then downward, anywhere, just away from his. He opened his mouth, but she spun around and ran toward the house before he could utter a word. It was not before he saw a tear trickle down her cheek. The last thing he wanted to do was to make her sad.

“Briar, wait!” he called after her. Still, she ran without a backward glance.

Julius had always been confident until he was scarred. Over the last few weeks, he felt his confidence returning. Yet, he hesitated to go after her. It was all his fault. After all, he was the one who decided not to pursue her; even so, he felt powerless against his emotions. He should have returned to the house when he saw that she was alone. He ought not to have approached her, yet he could not walk away. He was defenseless with her, making promises to stay away that he was unable to keep. Turmoil raged in his gut. Should he chase after her or leave her be? He was uncertain of his own mind. In the space of a minute, he made the decision, yet he discarded it.

He ran his hand through his disheveled hair. "Damn it!"

She had captured his attention from the first day he saw her, and now she had captured much more. These feelings, a combination of euphoria and disquiet, had never existed before. Why did she have such an effect on him? She possessed him in a way that he could not forget. Every day, he had to reaffirm the decision he made to stay away from her when all he wanted to do was sneak into her room and burrow in the sheets next to her warm body. He had gone as far as getting up one night and padding to his door. When his hand was on the doorknob, he hesitated before he returned to his bed and fell back onto it. He could not have her. Still, that did not stop him from wanting her. Bloody hell ! He needed her.

The irony was that in the beginning, he thought he was rescuing her, but she was the one who restored him to his former self. She redeemed him. He trusted her and confided in her more than anyone else in his life. It had been so easy for him to open up to her, and he felt like he could share any secret with her, and it would be safe. She was special in that she made him lower the barriers he had put up for years, blotting out the rest of the world. If she had not come along, he would not have given a second thought to going to London for the season or even taking a wife. She was well suited, except for ... what was the point? Thinking like this would not change anything.

He was afraid to admit it to himself, yet he knew it to be true. He cared for her but could not say where she would fit into his life. Knowing how he felt, wouldn't it be odd for him to stand aside while gentlemen danced with her at the balls? They would admire her beauty and wit. Julius clenched his jaw until it ached. He did not want other men to pay attention to her or gain her favor so that they could take her away from him. He felt a stab of jealousy. He was being totally irrational in the way that only she could make him. Briar was free to dance with and see whomever she wanted, and he could not interfere.

### CHAPTER 15

Berkeley Square, London

Three weeks later

Lord and Lady Phillips were having their annual ball, which was well attended. Lady Phillips moved with grace and confidence, an easy smile on her face. A tasteful collar of diamonds set in gold glittered at her throat, with a matching bracelet encircling her gloved wrist. She dressed with the extravagance of a seasoned lady of privilege. The ball was filled with young, unmarried, demure ladies, hoping they would catch the eye of an eligible bachelor. They were no different from Briar except for the wealth that befits their station.

The ball was like all the others Briar had attended over the past two weeks. The novelty had worn off, and she was bored with it all. She constantly felt she was putting herself on display at an auction in hopes of snagging the highest bid. Lord Carter, an earl, had danced with her at each ball, called upon her at the townhouse and took her for a stroll in Hyde Park. He seemed interested in courting her, but she hoped someone else would come along because the earl was so dull. He wanted a meek and powerless wife who would be a caretaker to her family. She could not imagine fencing with him, for he would not allow it. Would he jump into the river to save her? She did not know him well enough to feel confident he would.

Since she arrived in London, she had not seen the man who made her heart race with excitement. A business matter had delayed Julius, but Emmeline told her he had arrived in town a week ago. Briar wondered if Julius was getting cold feet; if he had

come to see her, she would have asked him. When she was at Berkley Estate, he said he would call upon her, but she should not read too much into it. Perhaps he was being polite.

A hush fell over the crowd before the next announcement.

“His Grace, the Duke of Berkley.”

Briar quickly glanced up, and then she saw him. He was truly here. Julius stood tall, impeccably dressed, and he radiated confidence. Briar gave a small gasp as the ballroom erupted in whispers. Julius was not wearing his mask, and the chatter moved through the spectators as they stared and judged. The crowd parted as Julius moved further into the room, and Lady Phillips went to greet him. Briar released the breath she had been holding. Julius flashed Lady Phillips a smile and one could never tell that he had been missing from the social circles. He seemed relaxed and affable.

Whispers floated toward her, and the gossips did not care if they were overheard.

“Well, I never! Isn’t that the beastly duke?”

“Indeed. He has not graced the ballroom for years.”

“Not since he received that disfiguring scar.”

The lady unfurled her fan and pretended to whisper behind it. “He returned from France with his tail between his legs and was never seen without his mask. No one wanted to see his ugly face.”

“I wonder why he has graced us with his presence and without his mask at that.”

“I would love to know. Perhaps he got tired of his solitary life.”

“Or he is looking for a wife.”

The lady scoffed and paused before she asked. “Do you think so?”

“I do. He is a duke, after all, so he must think of the dukedom, but the question is, who will have him?”

“I would not! Just look at his face.”

“Hideous.”

Julius towered over Lady Phillips and most men there. It was easy for him to search through the crowd, and finally, he spotted Briar. It was as if her gaze drew him, and she was happy that he searched for her. Briar dearly hoped that she would manage to keep her expression neutral as there were enough murmurs going around. She did not doubt that he felt the attraction between them. His gaze held hers for a moment too long, and the smile faded from her lips. An awareness of him pulled at her even across the great distance between them. Briar glanced away and quickly scanned the crowd, but her eyes drifted back to him.

Briar tore her gaze away to see Lord Fenton, Emmeline, and Mama approaching her. Julius arrived shortly thereafter, and introductions were made. Emmeline greeted Briar with a peck on the cheek. Julius wasted no time with pleasantries.

“May I have this dance, Miss Walcot?”

“Certainly, Your Grace.”

Julius held out his hand, and Briar took it as they moved to the dance floor. There were several couples around them, and the orchestra started to play a quadrille. It was the perfect dance that would allow Julius to complete some of the moves with other

ladies. Constantly changing partners lessened the need for intimacy and lengthy conversation, but at least he would dance with other partners, albeit briefly. Unlike the waltz, couples were not close and barely touched. Julius was graceful in his movements, and then he moved along. Briar's next partner was Lord Carter, who was no match for Julius. The earl's movements were practiced and lacked natural grace. He kept stealing glances at her, which reminded her that she needed to flirt. Like all the other young ladies seeking a husband, she had a purpose here. She lifted the corners of her mouth in a smile, and the earl responded in kind.

Briar was guided by the melody, and as the sound reached her through the skilled orchestra, she found that she was quite enjoying the dance. Partners moved along, and Julius was in front of her again. He cast a sideways glance at the earl. The couples moved across the dance floor, never losing their rhythm.

"You look exquisite this evening, Miss Walcot."

"Thank you, Your Grace. I see you are not wearing your mask."

"I met a certain young lady, and she said I did not need it. I was skeptical at first, but later, I realized she was right. This is who I am."

Warmth radiated through Briar. "I am pleased that you feel confident without it. A smart young lady, wouldn't you say?"

Julius chuckled. "And cocky?"

"I much prefer self-assured, Your Grace."

She whirled one last time to the fading notes of the song, smiling at Julius. The dance came to an end, although Briar did not want it to, and the couples left the dance floor. Julius escorted her to her mother and just as quickly claimed the hand of Lady

Fenton, who whisked him off into the crowd.

“Well, well. You were the first lady that the duke asked to dance, my dear.”

“I would not make too much of it, Mama. I am one of the few ladies the duke knows, and he did not need to fear that I would refuse to dance with him.”

“I suppose you are right, but you did not see the way that he was looking at you.”

“How was he looking?”

“Like he thoroughly enjoyed dancing with you and has taken a fancy.”

“I am sure you imagined it, Mama.”

If only that were true, but Briar knew that it wasn't. He was attracted to her, but there did not seem to be anything more than physical attraction—lust. Julius did not travel all the way to London to show her attention. He had the opportunity to do that when she was at Berkley Estate and he did not seize it. The orchestra started up and signaled the next dance. Julius walked onto the floor with an attractive, curvy brunette, and they began to twirl and swirl.

“You see what I mean, Mama. The duke is not singling me out. He will surely dance with several ladies before the evening is out.”

As the evening wore on, Briar tried not to think about him. She was asked to dance a few times and it appeared that Julius was never without a partner. She wondered if these entitled ladies genuinely wanted to be with him or if his fortune and title swayed any. His return to the fold was a resounding success, judging by all the attention he received. She could not begrudge him the experience because she knew how much it meant to him. How unlucky that the man she found most appealing was

the one who would not commit to her. None of the other gentlemen had managed to arouse her interest in the way Julius had.

Julius could not be more pleased with the turn of events. He stood in the shadow on the first-floor landing, observing the crowd below. It had all gone much better than expected. He heard the hushed tones but chose to ignore them; it did not stop the ladies from enjoying his company. As he peered at the laughing crowd, filled with excitement and merriment, he could not help but seek out the woman who made it possible. The pale blue gown clung to her delightful curves. When Julius first saw her this evening, he felt a sudden hot longing for her as awareness flooded his entire body. He wanted to strip her of the beautiful gown, run his hand over every inch of her and taste her all over. He imagined she would respond to his touch with the same heated passion that threatened to consume him. She would be hot and ready for him.

He noticed that several gentlemen had admired her throughout the course of the evening. Lord Carter was standing with Briar right now, stealing glances before they moved to twirl and swirl across the dance floor. Julius may not have been in London since the start of the season, but he knew what was going on. Emmeline let it slip that Lord Carter seemed smitten with Briar. Emmeline had given him a pointed look when she departed with this bit of information. A look that said he should do something about it.

Bloody hell!

The melody flowed, and it was a waltz, a truly romantic dance. He had to suffer Lord Carter's arms on Briar's back as they made the soft, round, flowing movements across the floor. He felt a stab of jealousy because they looked damned good together. The earl leaned close to Briar's ear and whispered something that made her laugh. The notes reached him even more than the orchestra, and at that moment, he knew he wanted her laughter for himself. The strong emotional reaction surprised him, and he clenched his fists at his side. He had had the privilege of spending quality time with



her and he felt that he understood her and she, him. No matter how much he tried to stay away from her, he was invariably drawn to her. Her pull was powerful.

While he had danced with other beautiful ladies, they were nothing like her. The conversation and dance seemed perfunctory. He did not feel the same spark; he did not desire them, and he was not even tempted to see any of them again. A few of the ladies had given him warm smiles and batted their eyelids, and it reminded him of how unpretentious Briar was. She did not seek to beguile him nor, from what he could see, any of the other gentlemen. She was not afraid to say what she desired, so there was no need for her to be coquettish.

His gaze followed their every move. Briar smiled up at the earl, but the smile did not touch her eyes. Julius smirked in satisfaction. The earl would probably mistake Briar's politeness for enthusiasm.

He must dance with her again—tonight. The buzz would be inevitable, but he wanted every man in this room to know that he fancied her. Her waltz with the earl would not be the only story to make the rounds tomorrow. It would be more significant if he danced with her twice, and it would be his way of telling her that there would be more to come. Briar and the earl danced for several minutes, and when it ended, the earl escorted her to her mother, who watched them with evident approval. An earl would be considered a good match.

Julius moved from the shadows and descended the stairs. A hush fell over the throng as he approached Briar. He stood in front of her; the air was heavy between them. Julius swallowed.

“Will you dance with me?”

She did not hesitate. “Yes.”

He held out his hand silently, and she placed hers in his, allowing him to escort her to the dance floor. The orchestra started another waltz, and other couples joined them on the floor. Julius could feel the gaze of the haut ton boring into them, but he would forget about them. Briar lifted her chin and met his gaze; he did not care about anything else. Her hand rested on his shoulder, and heat traveled through him. They were inches apart, and he was holding her, gliding and twirling to the sensual notes of the music. It felt right. They swayed and swirled in unison with the tempo. Julius's heart was pounding with passion.

Briar broke the spell. "You seem to be enjoying the ball, Julius."

"A bit more than I expected, and it is thanks to you." She deserved some credit, and he wanted her to know he appreciated her.

"I am happy you were pleased with my efforts."

She licked her lips, and his gaze was fixed on their lush fullness. A blush crept up her cheeks. He wanted so badly to taste those lips. He lifted his gaze to hers, and recognition flashed in their depths. She knew that he desired her, and a stab of lust shot through him. He sensed a turmoil before the storm.

"I wish the sea of strangers did not surround us with their curious eyes." Oh, how he wished they would all disappear.

"Why do you want to be alone with me?" She feigned innocence.

"So that I can be wicked."

Julius heard the sharp intake of her breath, and her lips trembled.

"You are distracting me from the dance with wicked thoughts."

His cock stirred, signaling an end to the direction of the conversation.

“The earl seems particularly interested in you.” Julius could not help himself.

“Mama seems to think that he will ask to speak with Duncan soon,” Briar said matter-of-factly.

“Isn’t that a bit premature?”

“The earl seems charming and very attentive. I am trying to find a husband, so I am making an effort to get to know him.”

Julius fought the irritation that was rising to the surface. He hoped Briar would say how unsuitable the earl was and she would not have him. It was not the earl’s fault that Julius had acted foolishly, so he should not be the butt of Julius’s frustration. He was vexed anyway. Unlike Julius, the earl was not wasting any time; he appeared decisive. Julius hoped that an offer of marriage would not be imminent since a period of courting would be expected. He needed to act. He did not want Briar to spend any more time with the earl. None whatsoever.

Julius cleared his throat. “I will call upon you.”

“I look forward to it.”

The rest of the dance passed in silence, and at the end, he left her in the care of her mother. They would only be apart for a short time. He needed to speak to her privately, and it must be tonight. He knew just how to go about it. It was a bit drastic, but he was willing to take the risk. He wondered if Briar was willing to take a risk on him.

### CHAPTER 16

Briar came awake with a start. She was tired after the ball, so she had gone straight to bed. She sensed someone was in the room before she saw the familiar silhouette. She sat bolt upright, and the covers fell to her waist.

“You?”

Julius arched a brow. “Don’t tell me you were expecting someone else.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. How the hell did you get in here?”

“I climbed the tree outside and came up the balcony through the window.”

Briar wondered if he knew how damned attractive he was. The strong jawline, the confident curve of his lips, and high cheekbones. A bead of sweat dripped down the side of his face, over the scar, and she imagined the salty taste. The sight of his broad shoulders bunched with tension was not helping her. She needed to focus her thoughts, and it was damned near impossible with him standing so close to her bed.

“Have you gone raving mad?”

“I’m mad with the need to speak with you. I had to ... it had to be me tonight.”

Her mouth went dry. She had hoped for this moment so many times since the first time he set her on fire. Finally, they were alone and all the reasons they should not be went out the window. The implacable lust churning in her stomach made her weak

and vulnerable to her desires. Her skin tingled with anticipation as she imagined his hands all over her. She should ask him to leave immediately but she did not want him to go. A bad decision? Mayhap, but just for tonight, she would push the thoughts of the consequences aside. Nothing else mattered other than this moment.

He stepped forward, his gaze never wavering, and she could see the turmoil in his eyes. Julius sat on her bed, and she froze in place, painfully aware of how wrong it was for him to be here, but she knew the truth. She was happy he was here. It was Julius and the effect he had on her—handsome and desirable, and he knew it.

“There has always been something between us and I –.”

Briar reached out and grabbed him, pulling him toward her. His eyes, hazed with desire, held hers. She cupped the back of his head, his thick hair sliding through her fingers as she pulled him down onto the pillow. If this was a dream, she did not want to awaken.

Her lips found his in a crush. It was not gentle and sweet, for all the feelings of her pent-up desire drove her to a passionate fury. Julius matched her urge and longing. His mouth knew how to devastate her. Her entire body yearned for him, but her singular focus was his mouth. Their tongues clashed and dueled until Briar was breathless. She needed everything he had to offer, and badly. Her nipples were tender and aching for his touch. She felt his thick, hard cock pressing against her sensitive flesh, and she moved her hips against him. Julius groaned as he caught her lips between his teeth. She was somewhere between pleasure and frustration, and she knew he felt the same. She felt the urgency as he ran his hands all over the thin nightdress that was the only barrier between them.

Julius raised his head, and without a word, he gripped the flimsy fabric in two and tore it from her body. She gasped at the sound, knowing he could touch her freely and set her on fire. His hands immediately roamed over her shoulders and found her

breasts. His fingers on her nipple an exquisite ache. Julius took a nipple in his mouth and sucked greedily as her fingers twisted in her hair. She almost became undone when his teeth grazed her nipple.

Oh God!

His greedy hands went straight to her thighs, slick and wet. She opened and welcomed him, pressing and gyrating against his hand when his fingers slipped inside her with a quick thrust. Briar groaned when he withdrew and immediately thrust two fingers deep inside her heat. As he sucked her nipple and increased the tempo with his fingers, she nibbled his earlobe to prevent herself from moaning aloud. His fingers held the promise of pleasure, but it would be nothing compared to his rigid manhood, hot and ready, straining against his breaches.

Julius lifted his head from her breasts and trailed kisses to her neck. Briar found the front of his shirt and rented the garment, the buttons flying all over the bed. She was rewarded with his intoxicating groan that washed over her. He stood up and quickly shed the remainder of his clothes while Briar gripped the remnants of her nightgown and threw it to the floor. Finally, they were gloriously naked. Briar drank in the sight of him, his manhood firm and proud. She wanted him back in bed, lying over her, but he denied her. Instead, he lifted her in his arms, and she instinctively wrapped her legs around his waist. He made a slight movement, and she felt his cock against her wet slit. Briar moaned. Her hips ground down, the head of him rubbing against her nob. She was drunk with need, but still, he did not enter her. It was sweet torture. Unbearable.

“I need you,” she pleaded.

“Where?” he whispered.

She dug her fingers into his shoulder before she reached down with one hand, and her

fingers trailed his manhood. "Inside me."

He groaned, grabbed her bottom and entered her with one long, thick thrust and her tightness gave way to his hard cock. She relished the feel of him stretching her and he paused, but all the built-up tension inside her would not allow her to. She gripped his shoulder and slid up and down his cock. There was nothing slow and teasing as she moved on hardness. Her movements were raw and urgent. He grasped her waist, and she no longer had control. It was Julius that was thrusting in and out of her with a frenzied rhythm that she could not match. Her hot wetness took him deeper and deeper inside her as his urgency overtook her.

She closed her eyes and surrendered to the sensation that was building inside her. His strokes came harder and faster still. When she did not think it was possible, he went deeper still, and the sensation building inside her threatened to erupt. Briar sobbed. The tautness building inside her was like nothing she had ever felt before. Their lips came together in a crush, and she abandoned herself to the waves as he captured her scream in his mouth. Briar collapsed against him, and he steadied her before he sat on the bed. She was straddling him when he laid back, still hard inside her. He was yet to find his release.

Julius gazed up at her with raw lust, and it made her tighten around him. He moved his hands to her hips, and Briar reached for them, placing both on her breasts. He squeezed both nipples between his finger and thumb, and she gasped. She began to move her hips, this time slowly and deliberately. Again, she took over, and she opened her legs wider to take him fully. He bucked his hip, straining to be deeper inside. Briar leaned back and placed both hands behind her on his thighs to control the movements. It wasn't time for him to move ... not yet ... she wanted to be in control of giving him pleasure. She lengthened her strokes, a tight and slow rhythm on his manhood.

"Briar," he uttered, her name a plea.

“What do you want?” She whispered.

Briar gasped as he rolled her over onto her back, still inside her. He thrust his cock deep, and there was no more tenderness. She met his frenzied strokes, tilting her hips to receive more of him.

“I wanted to claim you, to bury myself in your tight heat. Do you want that?” He asked between strokes.

She made a sound between a moan and a gasp.

“Say it.” He demanded in a husky whisper.

“Yes,” a breathy mewl. She could feel the tension building in her sex, yet she was hungry for more of him. She did not want to surrender ... not yet. She met him stroke for stroke with an unimaginable wildness. His relentless thrusts brought her to the edge as she dug her fingers into his shoulder. She raised her hip, and he thrust deep even when she thought there was no further to go, sending her over the edge and tearing a moan from her throat. Her sex tightened around his cock in tiny spasms as he drove into her, finding his release with a loud groan. He collapsed beside her, his leg across her thighs.

Briar had enjoyed her first time with him, but she did not know it could get better. Tonight had been earth-shattering, and she was completely spent. She closed her eyes, and although she was in a haze, she recalled what he said. He wanted to claim her.

Julius was slick with perspiration, and his cock was drenched with her silky wet heat. He reached over and kissed her tenderly. He needed to rest for a moment. He closed his eyes for what seemed like a short time, but he knew it was much longer when his eyes flew open. Briar slept soundly; this time, it was her legs across his thigh. He was



trying not to wake her as he stood up to dress, but her eyes flickered open when he pulled his breeches on. She stood up, went to her trunk, and put on another flimsy nightgown. His cock stirred at the memory of ripping the other one off her.

He pulled on his shirt, which he could no longer button. Briar padded over to him on her bare feet and ran her hands over his exposed chest.

“You did not ravish me like this at Berkley Estate.” Briar's eyes twinkled.

Julius gave a soft chuckle. “Minx.”

“I want you to do it again right now. Don't you?”

“Woman. I need time to recover.”

Their banter was interrupted by the sound of footsteps outside the door. Briar's wide eyes brought him back to reality.

“Go,” the one word an urgent whisper.

Julius grabbed his shoes and quickly moved toward the window. He leaned over and put one foot over the window's edge before the door burst open.

“I thought I heard laughter and voices—a male voice, Briar,” Duncan said. “What the hell is going on? Who goes there?”

Julius heard no more. He lost his footing and fell to the street below, landing with a thud that knocked the breath from him when pain jarred his limbs. He shouted in surprise on his descent and heard his knee crunch before it turned at an odd angle. He was sprawled on his backside in the muck of the street.

“Bloody hell!”

The pain ripped through him as he glanced up to see Briar and Duncan staring down at him. Duncan’s expression was stern, and Briar’s terrified.

He heard a door open and a voice shout.

“What is going on here?”

Julius looked up and saw Lord Blackstock. He could not say that he was happy to see him. Lady Blackstock, a notorious gossip, was hovering in the doorway behind him.” Lord Blackstock rushed toward the street and bent down to examine his knee.

“Let me help you inside.”

“Thank you for your kind offer, but I will decline. If I may have the use of your carriage to my townhouse in St James’s Square, it will be returned to you forthwith.”

“Certainly,” Lord Blackstock replied.

Julius heard another carriage rumble down the cobbled street before it came into view. As it drew abreast, Julius recognized the color and emblem. The carriage stopped, and the door opened.

“Can I be of assistance, Your Grace?” Lord Archer enquired.

“No. It is all in hand. Thank you for asking.” Julius replied between clenched teeth.

“As you wish.”

Lord Blackstock helped Julius to his feet as he watched the Archer carriage fade into

the distance. Julius placed all his weight on the sound knee.

Lord Blackstock turned to his wife. "The carriage."

Lady Blackstock understood and disappeared into the townhouse. The carriage rolled down the street shortly thereafter, and Lord Blackstock assisted Julius inside.

"Thank you," Julius said and gave the driver instructions. Lord Blackstock closed the door before the carriage rolled down the cobbled streets. Julius wanted to look at Briar's window, but he decided not to as he rested his head against the squabs and closed his eyes. He knew what he needed to do. He would summon his physician, and as soon as his knee was sorted, he would go to her. In the interim, he would send her a letter and ask for her forgiveness. There was so much that he wanted to say tonight, but when she kissed him, he forgot himself, and nothing else seemed to matter. It was foolish and reckless; by tomorrow, there would be a full-blown scandal. Lady Blackstock would see to it.

The carriage rolled over a bump, and it jolted his knee. He gritted his teeth against the pain. He wasn't just hurting physically; he was hurting inside for what he was about to put her through. If only Duncan had arrived a bit later, Julius would have had the chance to tell her how he felt. He was wealthy enough to use his influence to try and squash the rumors and shield Briar as much as he could. He never set out to harm her, but that was exactly what he did. For the first time, he began to worry that she would not forgive him.

What the hell would he do then?

### CHAPTER 17

Briar was absolutely miserable. It had been two days since she caused the uproar, and she felt worse by the minute. Her heart had fallen to the pit of her stomach when she saw Julius sprawled in the street below. He was clearly hurt; surely, she should have gone to render aid. She had desperately wanted to, but Duncan forbade it. He was incensed that she would allow Julius into her room at night and that she had not protected her virtue.

Neither had she protected her heart.

She did not go down for any of her meals yesterday and refused to see anyone, even Mama. She lay in bed and wallowed in self-pity. She did not feel hungry, although she had a few spoonfuls of soup when the maid brought it up to her room. Last night, she lay in bed, and sleep refused to come to her. She could not help but blame herself for what happened. If only she had allowed Julius to say what he had come to say instead of making lust take over. It may be that he changed his mind about courting her, and he would consider her on the same footing as any of the other ladies he danced with.

She felt exhausted physically and mentally. When she could not sleep, she replayed her days at Berkley Estate, reflecting on how happy she was the night she spent in Julius's arms. At first, she was hurt and even angry when she heard him say he wanted a lady of good standing and pedigree. She had put up a barrier that day, and once Emmeline arrived, it was easier not to be alone with him. That seemed to keep the barrier in place for a while, but the more time she spent with Julius, the more it eroded. They did not need to share intimacy to become closer, and Briar looked

forward to any bit of time they spent together. Her heart ached as the carriage rolled away from Berkley Estate, and she knew she loved him.

The maid entered her room and pulled the curtains. The rain was gently hitting the window pane, and dark clouds filled the sky, which did nothing to lighten her mood.

“Good morning, Miss Walcot.”

“Good morning, Lucy,” Briar replied, although it was anything but.

“Lord Walcott would like you to know he is coming to see you,” Lucy said.

Briar scoffed. Duncan was the last person she wanted to see. Perhaps if she spoke to him, she could get news of Julius. Briar stood up from her bed and Lucy helped her to dress. Lucy was on her way out when Duncan appeared in the doorway.

“Good morning, Briar. I hope you got some rest.”

“It is not much of a good morning from me, Duncan.”

“I am afraid it is about to get worse.”

Briar stilled. “Worse, how could that be possible?”

Duncan held out the paper, and Briar reluctantly accepted it. She opened it and slowly began to read before she sat down on her bed. Duncan gazed at her but did not say anything until she was finished. Tears burned her eyes. Ruination.

“Has Mama seen it?”

Duncan walked over and sat beside her. “Not as yet, but we will have to tell her.”

“Good Lord.”

“It is not all bad news. Lord Carter sent a letter to say he would like to call on you for afternoon tea. Apparently, he is not fazed by the gossip rags.”

“Perhaps he does not know.”

“All of London knows, Briar.”

“But what about the duke? Should we at least hear what he has to say?”

“No. He had ruined and humiliated you, and I forbid you to see him. Whatever his reason, it was never his intention to marry you, Briar. If he thought you could be the duchess of Berkley Estate, he would have come to see me rather than climbing through your window.”

Briar knew there would be no arguing with Duncan. He had already made up his mind. “You believe that Lord Carter knows of the unfortunate incident and is still prepared to court me?”

“I believe so. I do not need to tell you what an opportunity this is. You will learn that society is unforgiving, and the scandal means you will be treated like an outcast. Fortunately, the earl is wealthy enough and will use his means to shield you from the worst of it.”

“I see.”

“Do not be pigheaded about it, Briar. We do not have many options.”

“I agree to see Lord Carter. I will at least hear what he has to say, but I do not know him. We will see if he is sincere.”

“Very well. I will speak to Mama before she finds out from someone else.”

“I am worried she will not take this well, and she will confine herself again.”

“She will be disappointed, but Lord Carter’s continued interest will soothe her.”

With the matter settled, Duncan stood up and walked toward the door. He turned and said, “Do not worry, Briar. We will get through it.”

Briar did not see how. How was she going to court and marry Lord Carter when she was in love with Julius?

Julius returned to the townhouse in the early hours and spent most of the first day taking laudanum. He did not want to take it, but after a few hours, the pain became unbearable. He felt much better this morning after the physician had seen him. Julius sat propped in bed, his feet elevated on several pillows. The physician instructed him to stay in bed if he wanted his knee to heal without leaving him with a limp. He wore a hard bandage to allow his bones to heal. He desperately wanted to go to Briar, yet he needed to follow the doctor’s advice. He already had one impediment and was not about to add a limp to create a list. He sent her a letter instead, but sadly, it was returned to him unopened.

Damn it!

He clenched his teeth and pummeled the pillow. For the love of ... why couldn’t he get it right? Julius was convinced that Briar had not seen the letter. He did not doubt that Duncan had intercepted it because he was angry. Duncan’s duty was to protect Briar; the ensuing scandal would make him feel like a failure. Julius’s actions would tarnish the family name and affect Duncan’s prospect of finding a wife. Briar’s prospects were also greatly reduced, but eventually, they would weather the storm. Duncan should know that it made perfect sense for Julius to speak with Briar, so why

was he being stubborn about it? At least if he opened the letter and read its contents, he would see that Julius was declaring his true feelings, albeit late. Nonetheless, he was sincere. Julius sighed and tapped his finger against his thigh. He was to blame for the mess he found himself in, and he had to figure out how to get out of it.

It had taken him a couple of days to see this new reality. Of Briar being entirely out of his life. How did he get here? There were unspoken rules that said what he was supposed to do with his life, including who he should marry. He should have ignored them. The only person who should define and determine his destiny was Julius. He was responsible for how fruitful his life would be. Why should he choose to live on someone else's terms rather than his own? Once he realized that Briar was special, he should have made his mind up to forgo the traditional expectations of happiness. There was no need to hold himself hostage to family traditions or the norms of society. He would live his life on his terms. He loved his brother, and Julius knew he meant well. Baxter would eventually accept Julius's decision because he had grown to love Emmeline.

A knock on the door interrupted his musing.

"Come in," Julius said.

Baxter entered the room and sat in the armchair, which had been positioned to face his bed.

"I saw Dr. Martin on his way out, and he gave me the prognosis. I am sure you are not pleased."

"Frustrated in what I am, I have no choice but to take his advice. That is why I sent for you."

"Is that all?"



“And to tell you how I ended up in this predicament.” Julius recounted the tale to Baxter.

“I know all about it.”

“How did you find out so quickly?”

Baxter stood up and handed Julius the paper he had in his hand. Julius had been so distracted that he failed to notice it.

Hello, my dear readers; I have the most salacious event to apprise you of. This one goes to the highest echelons of society. For those that may be miffed, I do not want to hear your tut-tutting. If you do not want to read my news, you should not buy the paper!

According to my sources, the Beastly Duke, who has only just returned to society, has compromised a certain Miss B. Some say he has acted like a beast in true fashion, crawling up trees and terraces in the dead of night to enter Miss B.'s bedroom. Yes! Bedroom. You heard it here first ... It seems the Beastly Duke is quite smitten with Miss B, which leads me to wonder why he did not court her in the usual fashion. Could it be that he had no intention of making her his duchess, and will he discard her so quickly?

It is truly remarkable that the beast would be so bold as to use a window rather than the front door. No, dearest reader, I did not make this up. Merde! (I must polish my French). The life of a beast must be so difficult! Apparently, on his descent, the beast fell and injured himself, to the delight of his nosy fellow men. That is right, you heard me correctly ... He now lies abed, and Miss B lies in ruin. What this writer wants to know is what the beast and Miss B will do now.

Check back soon, and I will tell you what I find out.

Julius raised his head from the scandal sheet and cursed under his breath.

“I love Briar, and she is the only one I want. I am grateful for the change that Briar brought about in my life, yet I know that what I feel is more than gratitude.”

“I know that you care for her. Emmeline told me it was clear to see that there was something between you two. When did you know it was something more?”

He would not lie to himself. He was attracted to Briar from the first day they met, and when she came to Berkley Estate, they started to build a friendship. Eventually, he recognized it was not only lust because he yearned to be close to her even if he could not touch her.

“We became friends shortly after she arrived. Berkley Estate was not the same after Briar left for London. I found myself thinking about her when I entered every room. The house seemed so quiet without her laughter. She truly became intertwined in my life in the months we were together.”

“I know I spoke about tradition when I visited you there, but it is clear to me that you want Briar in your life. You have chosen her, and she makes you happy. I will welcome her into this family. Emmeline and the boys are already fond of her.”

Julius smiled in amusement when he recalled Otis’s reaction to her departure.

“You know Otis is my most trusted butler but he had never been so forward. He asked after Briar, wanting to know if she would return to Berkley Estate.”

“Apparently, the servants were quite taken with her, too.”

“Yes.”

“What are you going to do.”

“I have a plan, Baxter. That is why I sent for you. This is what I need you to do ... ”

An hour later, Baxter came to see Julius, who tried to read his expression, but it was to no avail. Baxter seemed guarded. Julius had made it his business to find out who was going to the townhouse on Grosvenor Square.

“I got word from the servants. I’m afraid that it may be too late.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“Apparently, Lord Carter has been very busy trying to put out the fire. He has already called on the family twice in as many days.”

“The nerve of the man! At any rate, there is only one way that he could ... are you telling me that Lord Carter has made an offer for Briar?”

“He has proposed engagement to her to quell the rumors.”

“I’m about to lose her.”

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news. Still, it appears so.”

Julius slumped against the pillows. He had never felt so helpless. “I would like to be alone.”

“I am sorry, Julius.”

Julius realized that he had gone about it in the wrong way. Rather than choosing a wife with the right ancestry and heritage to fulfill a duty, he should choose the

woman who breathed life back into him. It was not that he did not have feelings for her. They were there, lurking in the recess of his mind, and when he saw her, he could not deny that he wanted her. This daring, confident and supportive woman made him feel anything was possible. She was perfect, perfect for him. Now, he had lost her. She was forever lost to another man.

### CHAPTER 18

Julius had lost his appetite. He did not care about food, and he didn't want to see anyone. He was propped up in bed, defeat etched across his face. The warm sunshine streaming in through his window did little to lift the dark gloom that settled inside him. He felt like he was drowning, and there was no one there to help. He had the presence of mind to know that he was wallowing in self-pity. So many regrets. If only he had not decided their connection was impossible.

In the beginning, he was in lust, unable to ignore the powerful attraction he felt for her. Then, it morphed into so much more. If he needed any affirmation about how empty his life would be without her ... he had it now. As time went on, the hollowness became even more profound. Only Briar could fill his need, and he did not want to contemplate life without her. She was the only woman for him and she must be his. He was a fool. He had been dancing around the words for a long time. No more. He felt it radiating through his entire being ... he loves her. He should have offered for her before she even left his estate to journey to London for the season.

There was a commotion downstairs, and the sounds reverberated down the hall. Julius wondered what the devil was going on, but he did not have to wait long to find out. There was a knock on the door before Otis entered.

"I am sorry to disturb you, Your Grace. There is a Lord Carter here to see you."

"Lord Carter? Here?" The man had the nerve to show up without sending Julius a note and while he was convalescing. They were not friends.

“Yes, Your Grace. I told him you did not wish to be disturbed, but he insisted.”

Lord Carter was the last person he wanted to see. “What the hell does he want? You may show him in Otis.”

Otis spun around and left the room. Shortly thereafter, he returned with Lord Carter.”

“Your Grace.”

“Carter, as you can see, I am indisposed and not accepting visitors.”

“This is a matter that could not wait, Fenton.”

“State your business.”

“I do not know if you are aware, but I am fond of Miss Walcot and have made an offer to her family. Your treatment of her has caused great offense, and I challenge you to a duel.”

“What nonsense, Carter. You know as well as I do that duels are outlawed.”

“That has never stopped you before.”

“You expect me to repeat the same mistakes as I did in my youth?”

“I expect you to defend yourself. I am defending Miss Walcot’s honor.”

“I will not fight you. Do you not see the state I am in? Even so, I would refuse.”

“I am sure you do not want to be known as a coward as well as a beast.”

“Carter, I was under no obligation to receive you, and you are insulting me in my home. You should leave.”

“Gladly.” Carter went through the door and slammed it.

Julius raised his hands to his temple. He felt there was an ice grip squeezing his skull, which caused a throbbing and pounding sensation. He did not think things could get worse ... until they did. It was all completely out of control, and his injury contributed to his feeling of powerlessness. There would be no duel.

He closed his eyes and leaned back onto the pillows. There was another knock on his door. What now?

“Come in.” Julius was relieved to see it was Baxter.

“I cannot tell you how happy I am to see you. Carter was just here.”

“What did he want?”

“To challenge me to a duel of all things.”

“Utterly reckless.”

“I did not entertain him, but he made an offer for Briar.”

“Well, I have better news for you. Lord Duncan Palmer.”

“What about him?”

“He is downstairs.”

“That is the first thing you should have told me, Baxter.”

“How did you convince him to come here?”

“I ran up to his carriage just before it pulled out and literally barred the door. He was forced to listen to me. He agreed that the least he could do was to hear you out.”

“I owe you, brother. Send him up.”

Baxter left, and Julius knew that this was the time. Everything that he wanted rested on this moment, and he could not cock it up. There would be no second chance.

Otis let Palmer into the room and he stood silent.

“I know you have cause to be angry with me, Palmer, but hear me out. Please have a seat.”

Duncan hesitated and then sat in the armchair. “I am short of time, Fenton.”

“I will get straight to it. I owe Briar and your family an apology. I never intended to cause her pain, and I know she would have been upset by the gossip rags. That night, when I came to see Briar, I was actually going to ask her if she would have me.”

“And you thought that would be the best way to go about it?”

“It was impulsive and foolish. I am not proud of it. I truly love Briar, and I want her to be my wife. I started falling in love with her at Berkely Estate, and I closed my mind to it to fulfill some useless tradition that would not make me happy. Briar makes me happy, and I want her in my life. Lord Carter has made an offer for her, and all that I am suggesting is that you ask Briar who she will have. I was the one who caused this scandal, but she will be under my protection when she becomes my



wife.”

Duncan’s eyes bored into him. “Are you certain that Briar shares your affection?”

“We have not had a chance to discuss it. I believe she is fond of me, and if she does not love me, she will grow to.”

“I cannot make any promises. I will discuss it with Briar and my mother and let you know the outcome.”

“Thank you.”

Lord Carter would not need to continue with a duel if Briar accepted his proposal. What was he to do if she did not?

Briar walked around the townhouse garden, wishing she could return to Walcot Hall. Lord Carter sent her roses this morning, but she did not care for them. With a sigh of resignation, she sat on a bench in the shade of the tall hedge. She would have been quite happy if the roses had come from Julius. She heard the footsteps on the pathway before Duncan appeared and sat on the bench opposite her.

“Good morning, Briar. We missed you at breakfast.”

“Good morning, Duncan. I was not hungry.”

“I have some news.”

“I hope it will be good news for a change.”

“I have had a change of heart about allowing you to see the duke. He has been persistent, and Mama and I agreed we should pay him a visit.”

Briar jumped up from the bench and kissed Duncan on his cheeks. "Thank you, brother."

"We will be accompanying you and have dinner there."

"Well, in that case, I need to prepare myself." Briar stood, and they both returned to the house.

She never got the chance to tell Julius what he meant to her and Briar knew this would be her chance. As she climbed the stairs to her bedchamber, she felt a bit of fear and anxiety. What if she was wrong about what Julius meant to talk to her about that night? Did he still believe she was not good enough to be his duchess? What if he truly did not want to marry her, but the scandal forced his hand?

Marrying for family advantage was the norm in society. Julius's family had always had duchesses from the right families with the right connections. It was fair to say that marrying for love was considered frivolous, selfish, and outright dangerous. Aristocratic families did not believe that mere physical attraction or infatuation was a strong foundation for a successful marriage. No. It was better to marry first and come to love one another afterward. And if love did not come, then a man could find it elsewhere, with a mistress or a lover. Love was not something she had ever heard her parents speak about.

Briar was shocked to learn Lord Carter was still interested in marrying her when she had given herself to Julius, yet he was earnest in his devotion. Men did not choose to be with women whose affection was diverted elsewhere. She was in the hallway approaching her door when the maid called after her.

"You have a visitor, Miss Walcot."

"A visitor? I was not expecting anyone."

“It is Lord Carter, Miss Walcot.”

Good heavens! Why was he here today of all the days? Briar searched her memory and she did not recall any plans to see Lord Carter today.

“Very well.” Briar descended the stairs and followed the maid into the drawing room. The maid took a seat in the far corner of the room.

“Lord Carter, what a surprise. I was not expecting to see you today. Please have a seat.” Briar sat in an armchair opposite Lord Carter.

“Miss Walcot, I know you have not been to any social gatherings since the scandal erupted. It is such a lovely day; I wondered if you would like to accompany me for a stroll in Hyde Park.”

“I am afraid I cannot.”

“You will not be able to hide away from the wagging tongues forever, Miss Walcot. We should face this scandal head-on.”

“We?”

“Well, it is our marriage that will restore your standing –”

“I am afraid you are mistaken, Lord Carter. I have not agreed to your proposal, and I merely said that I would consider it.”

“Perhaps it is you that does not understand, Miss Walcot. Your reputation is in tatters.”

“I do not mean to cause offense. I am well aware of the predicament that I am in.”

“Yet, you refuse my proposal. Who do you think will have you now?”

“That is my family’s concern. If you will excuse me, I have another engagement.”

“Miss Walcot, as far as I know, no one else has offered for you. No one else has defended your honor.”

“Defended my honor? Whatever do you mean?”

“I stood up to that beast of a duke for you, and I challenged him to a duel.”

Briar’s heart was bounding as if it would leave her chest. “Good God!”

“You see, I am invested in you and in us.”

“There is no us , Lord Carter.”

“We will see what your brother has to say about that. He seemed quite willing to discuss our betrothal and understood the ramifications. I appreciate he is not here so I shall return when he is available. I did you good day, Miss Walcot.” Lord Carter abruptly stood and left the room.

Briar remained seated for a minute, fighting the creeping, sinking sensation that threatened to overcome her. Julius had no business fighting a duel with Lord Carter because he was not her intended. His words infuriated her as he had no right to approach Julius in her defense. She paled to think what Julius must be contemplating, and the thought prompted her to get to her feet. She hurried to her room to prepare for dinner this evening. She pushed Lord Carter from her mind. She wanted to look her best the next time she saw Julius.

Otis managed to procure the bath chair that Julius wanted. The contraption looked

quite odd, with two large wheels and a small one, but he was determined to get out of bed to check all the preparations. He was taking a huge gamble when he was averse to risks, but he had to. It must pay off. He had arranged an engagement party when he had not even asked Briar if she would be his wife. Talk about balls.

The party would be an intimate affair with Baxter, Emmeline, and Briar's family. Etiquette dictates he ought to propose to her in private as it should be a matter between the couple, but after everything that had transpired, he decided to take a different approach. They had long broken the strict bonds of convention. He only wanted the people closest to him and Briar, who understood the journey they had taken to be together. He wanted them to be here when he proposed to her to share in their happiness. At this point, he could not contemplate Briar saying no. Julius's heart became a hammer in his chest. She had to say yes. She must.

He looked around at the well-decorated drawing room and dining room. The door between them had been opened to allow free movement. He wondered if he had gone too far with all the flowers, as there were so many. The staff had been busy cleaning, polishing, and setting everything in its rightful place. Everything was perfect, yet he felt a sudden agitation surge through him, and he could not pace. He was left to wheel the bath chair from one end of the room to the other.

Baxter and Emmeline walked into the dining room. Emmeline gasped.

"This is beautiful, Julius. I am sure Briar will feel special."

"I sure hope so."

"You should relax, Julius. All will be well."

Otis appeared at the door. "Your guests are here, Your Grace."

“Show them in.”

There is no more favorable opportunity than this. He had already secured a marriage license; formal notice would be secured accordingly. He needed to make her see that he had come to his senses about their time together. He would not tuck his feelings away any longer.

Briar and her family entered the drawing room, and Julius greeted them. “Welcome to my home. I invited you here this evening to witness what I hope will be a special moment for both our families.”

The knot in Julius’s chest rose to his throat, and he gave Briar all his attention.

“After the reception I received when I returned from France, I pulled within myself. I told myself that I did not need anyone. I could be self-sufficient. It was only when you came into my life that I realized that I needed more than self-sufficiency. I slept like a baby before you crashed into my world and upended it. Once you were at Berkley Estate, there was a part of me – a part rooted in my chest and decidedly independent of reason – that carried a soreness. In the small hours of the night, that soreness became an ache that throbbed and made my chest heavy with an unresolved need. If I had not behaved like a coward, I would have handled things differently ... better.”

Julius’s heart wanted to break free and proclaim itself. Every muscle in his body clenched to contain it ... patience. Briar’s gaze had not left him, and a kind smile formed on her mouth.

“My life has had a few layers; I went to France, being there, when I returned and when I met you.”

“Oh, Julius,” Briar whispered.

“I need to get it all out, Briar.” Julius wheeled the bath chair over to Briar and reached for her hand. “I held on to the malignant belief for years that no woman would want the beastly duke. You showed me that this was no longer true. I shoved the part of me away that made me hope to find someone that would love me and that I could share my life with.”

Julius cleared the lump that was forming in his throat.

“It was difficult for me to know what was even in my own heart because I was afraid of opening it. I cannot deny that what we share is a special occurrence, like a lightning strike. I feel it deep within my soul. It is not a passing fancy. For the first time, I really wanted to let go of my past so that I could have a future with you ... the future my heart desires.”

“I love you, Briar. I am ready to take that leap toward happiness, and I am asking if you would take that leap with me. Will you be my duchess?”

Emotion flickered in Briar’s eyes, and he could feel the slight tremor in her hands.

“You were never the beastly duke to me, Julius, except perhaps when we first met.” Her light laughter, which he loved, tinkled and warmed the room. Briar gave his hand a comforting squeeze. “Over the past few months, I have learned that you are a kind and compassionate man, and your scars do not define you. I love you dearly ... yes. I will be your duchess.”

Julius reached into his pocket and produced a ring. “This ring has been in my family for generations. All the duchesses have worn it, and now it is yours.” Julius slipped the ring on Briar’s finger, and she bent down to kiss his forehead.

“I am looking forward to my life with you.”

### EPILOGUE

#### SIX MONTHS LATER

##### Berkley Estate

Briar sat in the reading room attached to her bedchamber, reading her book or at least pretending to. She daydreamed about Julius just as much now as she did before they wed. She could not be happier. Now that she had found love, her life had a renewed sense of purpose. Julius loved her, and she was letting herself be loved. What was the purpose of life without love? The door opened, and her husband appeared.

“There you are, my darling,” Julius said as he walked over to Briar and kissed her on the cheek. “Our guests have started to arrive.”

Julius had sent out invitations for a hunting party at Berkley Estate. He was convinced that enough time had passed for their scandal to be upstaged by another. Apparently, Lady Randolph had been having a torrid affair with Lord Winston behind her husband’s back. Her child was born with an affliction and did not speak, which understandably caused Lady Randolph regret. The lady was convinced the child’s affliction was retribution for her sin of adultery, and in contrition, she confessed all to her husband, who promptly filed for a divorce. Briar’s scandal seemed minute in comparison.

“Who has arrived so far?”



“The Duke of Devonshire, Duke of Mandeville, the Earl of Lonsdale and their respective families.”

“Lovely.”

“They are resting, so we will see them at dinner this evening.”

“Indeed.”

Julius reached over and took the book from Briar’s hand. “We have some time before dinner.”

“You are insatiable.”

“Perhaps,” Julius said as he ensured the door was locked.

He returned to Briar and fell on his knees in front of her. He loosened the bow on her slippers and removed them from her feet. Julius slowly trailed his hands up her hosiery, his hands dangerously close to her hot flesh. She gave a soft gasp, and their gaze locked as he slowly peeled each hosiery away. He gently raised her to her feet and brushed his lips to hers before he deepened the kiss, long and leisurely. He broke the kiss, and Briar cupped his face and pulled him close. Her kiss was hard, then soft and then hard again. Julius’s lips set off a wild need in her, and they quickly undressed between kisses.

Julius lifted her and sat on the sofa with Briar straddling him. She reached down and wrapped one slender arm around his cock, and he grew even harder in her hand as she stroked him. He found the apex of her thighs, then her slippery, throbbing nub and matched her strokes. She writhed against his hands, lost in pleasure until she could bear it no more. She was bold and insistent, guiding his rigid shaft into the heated core of her body. She eased herself down, taking him in before she arched her hips and thrust as their bodies joined as one.

“I love you dearly.” She whispered in a breathy cry.

“You’re my everything.” He groaned.

He swallowed her helpless cry with a kiss as they both found release. She collapsed against him, and he cradled her. All was right with the world.