



Her Devoted Rogue (Noble Pursuits #4)

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Category: Historical

Description: He thought he'd found the love of his life—but now he's fighting for a second chance.

Lord Michael prided himself on being the carefree, rakish second son, indulging in drink, gambling, and fleeting romances. But everything changed the moment he met Adelaide. She wasn't meant to matter beyond a single night—but one night turned into so much more. Now, she's had his child and holds his heart, but winning her trust? That's a battle he never expected to fight.

Adelaide had built her life on a plan to save her earnings and escape to a quiet town where she could live on her own terms. She dodged the propositions of countless tavern patrons—until Michael. One moment of weakness changed everything, but the life of a nobleman's wife isn't one she can accept for herself or her daughter.

When her brother's criminal entanglements drag her into a dangerous mystery, Adelaide finds herself at a crossroads. Relying on Michael's protection might be the only way out—but can their stubborn hearts overcome the suspense-filled trials pulling them apart? With love, trust, and a family at stake, the only way forward may be together.

This is a second chance accidental pregnancy Regency romance.

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Page 1

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PROLOGUE

“What must a man do to get a drink around here?”

Adelaide didn't bother to turn around toward the demand as she weaved gracefully through the thickening crowd at her brother's tavern, balancing a tray of drinks in one hand.

“Be patient, like everyone else,” she called over her shoulder, smiling as she did so, knowing that her answer would not be accepted with a great deal of geniality.

Patience. She snorted. It was the last thing these noblemen possessed.

She knew the type – far better than she would wish. She had seen these men around the tavern far too many times, here to forget their responsibilities for the evening, having their fun with cards and drink and women.

Not that she ever engaged as one of those women. She was here to do her job. Make her money – as much as she could with the paltry wage her brother provided – and then leave to follow her dreams in the place of her heart.

A place that was nothing like this.

“You're a cheeky one, aren't you?”

Adelaide whirled around, surprised to find that the man had followed her. She shifted the tray to hold it between both hands as her back pressed against the plaster behind

her. He leaned over her, his hand against the wooden beam above her head, shielding her from the press of the tavern patrons beyond.

She waited for the usual aversion to shudder through her, surprised when it didn't come.

Instead, she felt... a strange sense of awareness wash through her, heating her from the top of her head down to her toes, like a bucket of warm water poured over her.

Even with the air thick with the usual scents of ale, roasted meats, and pipe smoke, a sweet yet spicy scent of bay rum and citrus wafted toward her, filling her senses.

It must have been him. Why did he have to smell so good?

"This doesn't look like patience," she said, staring up at him, refusing to back down from meeting his gaze, shocked when the light blue-gray eyes seemed to stare right through to her soul. They crinkled in the corners as though he was laughing at her, dimples appearing in each of his cheeks.

He was altogether too handsome for his own good, and Adelaide knew she best get as far from him as she could before she did something she might regret.

"Patience is overrated," he said, leaning closer over her, making his voice even better heard above the clamor of conversation and the fiddles which had taken up in the corner.

She would have said that he had trapped her in this position, yet she had a feeling that if she pushed him away, he would offer no resistance. He did not seem to hold any ill intent but instead was enjoying teasing her.

"It's a busy night," she said. "I'm doing what I can to see you all served."

“You require assistance,” he observed, lifting those teasing eyes from hers to peruse the room. “This is too much for one person.”

He wasn’t wrong. But her brother was cheap and had no interest in hiring more barmaids. He told her he believed that she was capable of doing it all.

Adelaide nearly rolled her eyes again, just thinking about his condescending explanation once more.

“I can manage,” she said, “when I am not waylaid by errant men who insist on getting in my way.”

He clutched his chest. “You wound me.”

“I never said I was referring to you, but if you have made that assumption yourself, then that says all it needs to, does it not?”

“You are awfully highbrow,” he said, leaning in so that his lips lightly brushed her ear as he spoke.

“For a barmaid?” she finished for him.

He shook his head. “Can I tell you a secret? I like it.”

She reached out, placing a hand on his chest, pushing him away for she was becoming too overwhelmed by his proximity, and as she thought, he floated backward a step.

“Keep your secrets. Now, unlike some people, I have a job to do. What do you want?”

“At least I finally caught your attention. A brandy would be appreciated.” His stare became slightly more intense, the black of his eyes widening slightly within their blue-gray skies. “But that’s not what I truly want.”

“No?” she raised an eyebrow, certain of what he was insinuating, but she refused to give him the benefit of seeing that she was interested in his assumption.

She couldn’t be.

She had promised never to be taken by any of these men, gentlemen or otherwise. They would only derail her from her plans. She had seen what could happen when one allowed men and emotions to overwhelm all else. She refused to allow it to happen to her.

“No.” He shook his head, causing a lock of light brown hair to fall over his forehead, and her fingers itched to push it away. “Something – someone – else has caught my attention.”

“Well, I wish this someone the best of luck,” she said, with a smile. “I have a feeling that he or she will need it with you.”

And with that, she pushed away from the wall toward the bar to fetch this man’s brandy so that she could deliver it and move on, never having to speak to him again.

He was trouble.

Trouble that she best stay as far away from as possible.

Michael watched the barmaid walk away with more interest than he should have.

Sure, he had no trouble attracting women, nor did he shy away from enjoying them.

Widows, young ladies, barmaids – he wasn't particular, although he was smart enough to know the limits of avoiding ruin or marriage with any of them.

Usually.

He did slip up now and again – he was human, after all – but he always had his brother to help him out. Good old Edward. Michael didn't think his brother had ever made a mistake in his life.

Which was why Michael liked to keep him on his toes. Lord knew Edward needed it, as the man lived the most boring existence Michael had ever witnessed.

However, this woman had his blood humming like any had in quite some time. His conquests had become too easy. This one would be a challenge. He could tell.

She would resist him.

But not forever.

He had sensed the attraction reciprocating from her. She was interested, even if she hadn't admitted it to herself yet.

When she delivered his drink, he thanked her with a nod but nothing else, and he caught her surprised eyes set upon him as though she had been expecting more.

Good. He'd keep her guessing.

He watched her as she glided effortlessly through the crowd over the uneven stone floors like a trained dancer moving around the simple tables, through the smoky establishment lit only by candles flickering in their iron sconces.

Her long, nearly black hair floated in waves around her shoulders, moving with her like it had a life of its own. She flitted about lightly, doing her job with ease. He was instantly jealous of the smiles she bestowed upon other men when she delivered their drinks, uncharacteristically wanting them all for himself.

She was... she was sunshine, he decided, watching her dreamily.

Michael was awoken from his reverie by a poke in the side.

“Ouch,” he said, glancing at his companion as he rubbed the spot where a bruise was likely to form. “What was that for?”

Lord Gregory was like him – a second son with little responsibility and nowhere else to be on an evening like this.

They were good partners, each of them here for the same reasons – a bit of fun and to win at a hand of cards if they were lucky enough.

“You look like a besotted sod,” Gregory said, “watching that barmaid with hearts in your eyes.”

“I do not have hearts in my eyes,” Michael retorted before his shoulders softened, and he laughed loudly. “Very well, maybe I do. Have you ever seen a more beautiful creature?”

Lord Gregory shrugged his shoulders. “She’s fine looking, yes, but she’s a barmaid.”

“So?”

“So, go for her if you’d like a spot of fun. But right now, you look as if you are ready to sink to your knees before her. What has gotten into you, man?”

“I’m overcome,” Michael said unabashedly with a sigh. “I cannot help myself.”

“Well, pull it together,” Lord Gregory said. “You look like a lovesick young boy. Straighten your shoulders, act like the man you are, and show her that she would be lucky to spend a night with you.”

Michael nodded. Gregory was right. He was losing himself in this woman’s beautiful dark blue eyes and lithe body, one that he longed to run his hands over.

When she delivered his next drink, he allowed his fingers to linger upon hers, and he could have sworn he felt the spark between them, almost like a physical charge.

Their gazes met and he knew the pull of attraction was also present within her.

He just had to convince her that they should make something of this.

The crowd was beginning to thin, and he was contemplating how to make his move when he noted that she was no longer moving as she had been. Where had she gone? He frowned as he scanned the tavern, trying to catch sight of her.

There – he couldn’t miss that hair anywhere. She was facing away from him, toward the bar itself. Her tray was at her side in one hand, the other balled into a fist at her hip as though it contained all her anger.

A man stood before her, one who Michael assumed was the tavern owner by the way his palms were spread face down predatorily on the bar. His gaze was dark, his eyes narrowed as he appeared to be berating her.

Michael waited for her shoulders to drop as she took on his anger, but instead, they lifted, as though her anger was rising, but she contained it, preventing herself from lashing out toward him.

Michael half rose in his seat, although he wasn't sure of his intention – was he inclined to defend her? Stand up for her? He had no right and was in no position to do so. He was a patron of this establishment. Sure, he might have some social clout, but he could still be tossed on his rear out the front door, and then he would lose any chance he had with this woman.

Although he certainly wouldn't miss the brandy.

It was cheap. Likely for the same reason this woman worked alone without any help.

So he sat, watching, waiting for her to return to him.

She was far more subdued when she did, her jaw tight, and he tried to determine how best to approach this. At least Lord Gregory had wandered away and joined a card game so he wouldn't witness this conversation.

She didn't meet his eyes as she set his drink on the table, and he took it, placing his hand over hers before she could remove it, holding her there with him.

“Are you all right?” he asked quietly, indulging in the warmth of her skin under his.

“Fine,” she said curtly.

“What's your name?” he asked, suddenly needing to know more than he had ever needed anything.

“Adelaide,” she said, still averting her gaze, although she hadn't moved her hand away from his.

“Adelaide,” he said, “what could you have possibly done that would have caused someone to be so displeased with you?”

“It is none of your concern,” she said, shaking her head, now drawing her hand away. He was filled with a sudden, desperate need to keep her with him longer.

“It is, though.”

“Why?” she said, lifting her head and finally meeting his eyes. “Why would it have anything to do with you?”

“Because,” he said, surprising himself with the truth of his words, “seeing you treated so poorly distresses me.”

“It shouldn’t.”

“No,” he agreed with her, “it shouldn’t. And yet, it does.” He leaned closer. “There’s something about you. Something that makes me want to know everything there is to know about you.”

“I’m sure you say that to all the women,” she smirked.

“No.” He shook his head. “I do say many flowery words, that is true, but not that. You are the first that has truly intrigued me for some time.”

“You know nothing about me.”

“No, I don’t,” he admitted. “But I want to. Meet me when the tavern closes?”

“I shouldn’t,” she said, closing her eyes briefly.

“But you want to.” He wrapped his hand around hers. “I’ll be waiting outside the back door if you’re interested. I have somewhere we can go. Somewhere discreet. Where we can get to know one another. Enjoy each other. Forget any troubles we

have for a time. Do you want to do that? Forget?”

He could tell she wanted to. Could see it in her eyes.

And when she met him an hour later, he did exactly what he had promised. He took away all of her troubles for the night.

But in the process, he unintentionally caused her so many more.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:55 pm

CHAPTER 1

ONE YEAR LATER

“O h, she is just darling.”

Adelaide looked up with a smile for Dot.

Well, Lady Mandrake, but Dot had told Adelaide she should never call her that, for they were family.

In a sense.

“She is, isn’t she?” Adelaide agreed, looking down at the sleeping baby she held. The three months since her daughter had been born had been both the quickest and the longest three months of her life.

“Is she sleeping any better?” Dot asked as she flitted about the clean, tidy, yet plain room, unable to stay still for any time.

Adelaide had never met a woman like Dot. The daughter of an earl, she had unconventionally become a midwife – a profession that she continued even after marrying Lord Mandrake.

Michael’s brother.

Adelaide tried not to think of Michael often, but it was hard when she held the

product of the one night they'd spent together in her arms.

The best night of her life.

One that she had the opportunity to repeat over and again if she so chose.

But that would only open herself up to even more heartbreak than she had already experienced. Heartbreak she had witnessed in the past, which she had vowed never to open herself up to, no matter the circumstances.

Including a baby.

"She's sleeping slightly better as long as she is in my arms," Adelaide said.

"She loves her mama."

"I'm lucky," Adelaide said as Dot finally stopped moving. When she came to sit beside Adelaide on the small bed, Adelaide knew she was preparing for a meaningful conversation. It was the only time Dot sat still.

"Adelaide," Dot began slowly, but Adelaide already began shaking her head.

"I don't want to see him," she said, closing her eyes tightly. "I cannot."

"He wants to see you and the baby," Dot said softly. "He misses you. Both of you."

"I know, and I feel terrible for that," Adelaide said, looking up and meeting Dot's eyes. "But it hurts too much."

"I do not want to pry," Dot said slowly as she did just that, "but perhaps if you tell him what he did wrong, it would help him understand. One moment, you were living

in Mandrake House, having his baby, and the next, you were gone, having run away to our shelter here.”

“I stayed during my pregnancy because I had to,” Adelaide said. “I had nowhere else to go until you opened your shelter. I will be forever grateful that this opportunity arose.”

“But did he?—”

“He didn’t do anything,” Adelaide said roughly. “He didn’t do anything but be the man he is. You know him, Dot, as well as anyone. He said he wanted to marry me, to spend his life with me, but he doesn’t, not truly. He only offered out of guilt. I will not be a burden to anyone. You must understand, better than anyone, what it means to have dreams, to want to see them through. I have plans for my life. I have seen what happens when a woman ties her dreams to a man. Especially me, being who I am and where I am from. He will not want to be with me for the rest of his life. It was a bit of fun, but that is all we were supposed to be together. If I agreed to anything more, he would eventually regret it, and I will be no one’s mistake any more than I already am.”

She took a shaky, shuddery breath as Dot absorbed all that she had said before she leaned forward and placed her hand on Adelaide’s.

“You’re right,” she said. “I do understand what it means to have dreams. Perhaps you could keep those dreams, and he could still see the baby?”

Panic seized Adelaide’s chest. “What if he takes her away from me?” She blinked away the tears that threatened her. “He could. You know that. He?—”

“He won’t,” Dot said. “I promise you that. Even if he tried – which he would never – he would have to answer to me.”

She looked so ferocious that Adelaide would have laughed if she wasn't so concerned.

"Oh, Dot," she sighed. "How did I get myself into this mess?"

"Well," Dot said, serious for a moment. "You see, Adelaide, when a man and a woman?—"

She couldn't finish as laughter overtook her, and Adelaide couldn't help but chuckle.

"If only I had considered that better," she said. "But here we are. And I wouldn't trade having Mabel for anything, despite the circumstances."

"Of course." Dot nodded.

"How is he?" Adelaide couldn't help asking, although she didn't meet Dot's eyes as she did. The truth was, despite the front she put on, she had cared about Michael. She still did. She just couldn't be with him.

"He is..." Dot hesitated, a flicker of uncertainty crossing her face. "He is not himself. Not since you left. I do not want you to feel guilt for that, for you must do what is best for you and Mabel. But he... well, he misses you. I suppose he thought his life was going in a certain direction, and then it changed so suddenly."

Adelaide nodded, her free hand picking at the blanket beneath her, her other wrapped around her sleeping baby, holding her close.

"I gave him such a hard time when I was with him."

"That was not your fault," Dot said firmly. "Your pregnancy caused you to struggle, at least so Magda and I believe."

Adelaide had been grateful that Dot and the midwife who had mentored her had understood the darkness that had overcome her, but it still didn't absolve her of how she had driven Michael away while living in his brother's house.

She did feel regret, yes. Regret that she had allowed Michael to think there was a chance for them. She had considered it for a time and allowed herself to think it was imaginable until she had been starkly reminded of how impossible it was.

It wasn't Michael's fault. It was who they were, the worlds they were from, and what it could mean for their future. For their daughter's future.

But Adelaide had a heart and understood what Dot was saying.

"Very well," she said, coming to her decision, even as her heart raced. "We will see him."

"You will?" Dot said, her eyes widening with a spark of hope. "Oh, he will be so glad."

"He is driving you crazy, isn't he?" Adelaide said, raising an eyebrow.

"Very much so," Dot said without an ounce of chagrin. "But this will help. I'm sure of it. It's the right thing, Adelaide. For everyone."

Adelaide could only hope that was true.

After passing his cloak to the butler who had met him at the door, Michael walked into the drawing room through the dark, refined yet understated entryway.

Only this was no typical drawing room.

Elegantly furnished, the plush sofas, gilded mirrors, rich crimson drapery, and glittering chandeliers were reminiscent of any drawing room in Mayfair. The paintings on the wall, just subtly different enough, hinted at this establishment's truth.

The paintings were risqué, although not overtly so. But enough that his brother would have fallen over backward at the sight of them.

Michael was momentarily overwhelmed by the smoky air, scented with rich cigars, fine brandy, and expensive perfume, a far cry from the pipe tobacco, ale, and herbal perfumes of another establishment, another night, and another memory.

But that night haunted his dreams, both sleeping and awake.

All because of her.

The woman had given him all he had ever wanted and then had left him as though it had all meant nothing.

As though he had meant nothing.

Which was why he was here – to feel better, even if it was just momentary.

“Mr. Redgrave, what a wonderful surprise.”

The owner of this place, a busty woman with blond, curling hair and a beauty mark strategically placed over her red lips, greeted him with a smile.

“It's so good to see you,” she said, her words laced with sincerity. “It has been far too long.”

“Yvonne...” He nodded at her. “You are right. It has been some time.”

She placed a hand on one hip, jutting the other out. “I heard you turned yourself into a one-woman man. I could hardly believe it. If there were one man I thought would remain a bachelor for life, it was you. Conventions be damned.”

Michael sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

“I thought the same,” he said before shrugging. “But it doesn’t matter. She’s gone. Left me.”

“Oh, you poor man,” Yvonne said, leaning over and running a hand down his arm. “How could anyone leave a handsome thing like you?”

“I doubt my looks are the issue,” he said, feeling sorry for himself all over again.

“Well, you’ve come to the right place,” she said confidently. “We have everything you need to make you feel better. Why don’t you sit, and I’ll see who is available for you? Do you still prefer Clarissa?”

“No,” he said swiftly.

Clarissa was brunette. The last thing he needed was to be reminded of another dark-haired woman.

“Light features,” he managed. “A woman with fair or red hair. And a drink, Yvonne, if you don’t mind.”

“Brandy?” she asked with a raised eyebrow, but he instantly shook his head.

“Whisky, if you have it.”

“I’ll see what we can do – on both accounts,” she said, with another look of pity as

she left him, and he did as she said, sinking into a lush chair in the middle of the room with a sigh.

He looked around the plush, comfortable seats and the other men who waited for a woman to provide company for the night. On some visits, he would start a game of cards, but tonight, he had no wish to speak to anyone.

It was the first time he had been here since... well, since he had met Adelaide, he realized.

Did his return mean that he had finally given up on her?

“Mr. Redgrave?”

Yvonne set the whisky down in front of him before gesturing to the woman at her side. She had found what he had requested. A blonde. Curvy, with an ample bosom and wide smile.

She was the kind of woman he would have once enjoyed and precisely what he should want. The opposite of Adelaide.

Why was she still the only woman he could picture in his bed?

“This is Violet,” Yvonne said, claiming his attention once more. “She is looking forward to spending time with you.”

“Thank you, Yvonne,” he said, taking the whisky and knocking it back in one shot. “Impressive,” he said, referring to the drink.

It seemed Violet misunderstood as her eyes glowed.

Which was fine. He was happy to compliment a woman, especially if it was deserved.

Even if it felt like something of a betrayal.

She stepped closer toward him as Yvonne walked away.

“Are you ready to go somewhere more private?” she asked, leaning over him, causing her breasts to push up and together.

“I—” He stood, and she held her hand out toward him, but he found himself backing up instead of accompanying her.

“I cannot,” he said, surprising himself.

“You cannot... yet?” she said. “That’s fine. We can spend time out here. Have a few drinks.”

“No.” He shook his head. “It’s not that. I cannot... do this. Any of this. I’m so sorry. I should never have come.”

He reached into his pocket, stuffing a few coins in her hand before brushing by her and out the door.

He was a fool. He knew that.

He had told himself that he needed to forget the idea that he had any chance of reuniting with Adelaide. It seemed that he hadn’t convinced himself to forget her or allow himself to move on.

He wouldn’t find what he was looking for at a brothel. Nor another tavern. Nor even a ballroom.

What he was looking for was out of reach. Had spurned him.

And he had no idea what he was going to do about it.

CHAPTER 2

A delaide hated leaving Mabel for any length of time.

It was hard to do so, especially when she was nursing, which made the shelter Dot had created so special. They had a wet nurse available for the babies if the mothers had to work, but they also helped the women find work placements with sympathetic owners who would only require them for a few hours at a time instead of the usual long shifts.

Four hours still felt long to Adelaide, but she appreciated the opportunity to try to collect enough money to start her new life.

The life she had always longed for.

Even if doing so was laced with some melancholy for what it would mean leaving behind.

She had wanted a life with Michael. For a few weeks after Mabel's birth, she even thought they could be married and had only been waiting for him to ask again.

But that question had never come.

And then she had come to the ultimate realization – that he didn't truly want her but had only been trying to do the right thing.

So here she was, working for her coin at another tavern, even though she would

rather be elsewhere.

But at least this time, she was getting paid what she was worth.

“What can I get you?” she asked one of the patrons, ably dodging the hand that reached for her hip. She had learned long ago how to spurn unwanted advances.

She had only ever answered one proposition affirmatively – and look where that had gotten her.

“I’ll be having an ale, and...” The man’s eyes wandered down to her bosom, which was as covered as it could be with the way her breasts had grown.

“Coming right up,” she said, turning around, running into a body standing so close and silently behind her that she couldn’t have evaded him if she had tried.

When the man didn’t move, she ignored him, providing him no attention as she moved to step around him, but she was stopped short when a hand reached out and roughly grabbed her arm.

“What, no love for a family reunion?” she heard in her ear as his hot, stinking breath on her neck caused her to shudder in revulsion.

“Jack?” she said in disbelief, stepping back and looking up. “What are you doing here?”

“Is that any way to greet your brother?” he asked, his eyes narrowing on her as they always did when he was angry. “It’s been a long time.”

“Not long enough,” she muttered under her breath. “How did you know I was here?”

“People talk.” He shrugged. “Imagine how surprised I was to find that my sister was working for someone else. A competitor.”

“This tavern is far enough from yours that it does not compete for business with you. And I am not really your sister.”

He clutched a hand against his chest. “You wound me.”

“Can we talk about this later? I have a job to do. And while I do not wait on all of the tables in this tavern – unlike in the past – these people deserve good service.”

“Where’s your baby?”

Adelaide’s heart caught in her chest. She hadn’t told her brother anything about the baby. All he had known was that she was expecting one with Michael. She had put up with so much from him over the years, but this was where she had to stop, to protect Mabel.

“There... there is no baby,” she said, hoping he would believe the lie, as awful as it felt to tell. But he had never been overly adept at reading emotions.

“Oh, so sad,” he said, no hint of sorrow in his tone. “Well, no reason why you cannot return to The Red Lion.”

He hadn’t even been original when naming his tavern, choosing the same name as half the taverns in England.

“I will not be returning to The Red Lion,” she said, trying to brush past him again, but he held so firmly onto her arm that she was sure she would have bruises tomorrow.

“Why not?”

“Because you didn’t pay me nearly what I deserved, and you often mistreated me,” she said calmly. “Excuse me now, I would like to do my job.”

“I—” His grip tightened, and his other hand drew into a fist. He wouldn’t do anything physical here before so many witnesses, would he? Before she could try to evade him, however, the big, burly figure of the tavern owner appeared over his shoulder and Adelaide sighed in relief.

“Is something the matter here?” asked Matts. He and his wife, Susie, who owned this place, were some of the loveliest people Adelaide had ever met. She would be forever grateful for the opportunity they had provided her.

“This is my brother,” Adelaide said through gritted teeth. “And he was just leaving.”

She eyed him in warning, but he was not a complete fool. Matts stood a head above him, likely two stones heavier. Most of the patrons here would also be loyal to him.

That didn’t mean Jack would give up entirely.

“I will leave now,” he said but returned to Adelaide, needing to add his parting words. “I will be back, though, Adelaide. If not here, then elsewhere. Don’t forget that I know a lot about you. Wouldn’t want those secrets to get out, now would we?”

With a leering grin, he turned and left, although Matts stood before her, arms crossed over his chest.

“Is he an issue for you?” he asked gruffly. “I can ensure he doesn’t return here, but is there anything else you need?”

“It’s fine,” Adelaide said with what she hoped was a nonchalant wave of her hand. “I can handle him.”

“That’s Jack Tate, no?” Matts said, raising an eyebrow. “He’s not the most well-liked of tavern owners. We’ve had people come here after working for him, and they do not exactly sing his praises.”

“I can understand why,” she said with a grimace.

“It’s not only that,” Matts said, staring down at her as though trying to decide what to say.

She didn’t want to think about what else he could have heard.

“There have been rumors that The Red Lion is more than just a tavern.”

“What do you mean?”

“That your brother runs some... let’s just say, less legitimate business out of it.”

“He’s not my real brother,” she exclaimed, knowing that was not the most important matter Matts had raised, but needing to distance herself from his accusations, for she had an inkling of what he was suggesting. She had never wanted to admit the truth, even to herself, but distance had created some clarity.

“Our parents married,” she continued in a rush. “But he is the only family I still have besides my daughter.”

“I see,” Matts said, even though he obviously didn’t understand. “Well, it’s your life, Adelaide, but I would be remiss not to recommend staying away from him.”

She nodded and continued with her work, even as her heart pounded.

For while Matts had slightly confused her, she knew exactly what Jack was talking

about and that he wouldn't hesitate to use her mother's past if it was going to get him what he wanted, which was, apparently, her.

Her secrets weren't why she had left Michael.

But they were undoubtedly reasons she shouldn't return – at least, not for good.

Despite everything he had been and all he had previously enjoyed, Michael was a good man. One who didn't deserve to be cut entirely out of his daughter's life.

She had thought long and hard about what Dot had said, and she knew the right thing to do.

Even if it would hurt more than she'd like to do it.

Michael felt like the ultimate failure whenever he returned home to his brother's townhouse.

He didn't even have his own place to reside.

He had previously lived in his own set of apartments, but he had given them up last year when he had discovered Adelaide's pregnancy and insisted that she come live with him so that he could take care of her.

Well, his brother had first convinced him to look after her and the baby, but once Michael had decided he would be part of their lives, he was all in.

He didn't do much in half measures.

He had tried to sneak her into his apartment, but it was an establishment for gentlemen only, and he was not nearly as covert as he had imagined himself to be.

When she was discovered exiting his rooms the very second day after she had arrived, he was told Adelaide could not stay and he had to take the only option available – to live with his brother.

Fortunately, Edward had married Dot partway through Adelaide's pregnancy, and his brother was much more bearable with his wife at his side. He no longer judged Michael's every action, which was a miracle in itself, although he still seemed to hold his breath every time Michael opened his mouth.

Michael supposed it was time to find an apartment again, but he had been hoping that instead, he would be seeking a home for him and his family.

Adelaide's pregnancy had been difficult for her, but he had hoped that once the baby came, they could find a way forward. Together.

Instead, she had disappeared.

He knew that Dot was aware of where she now lived, but she refused to provide him any information, although she had promised to speak on his behalf.

He would have to be satisfied with that.

He was relieved to find the house empty, which made sense given that it was still mid-afternoon and his sister-in-law was usually busy at the shelter for women she and Edward had established. He retreated through the house to his bedchamber to change to visit the stables, to immerse himself into his only true passion, one that he had retreated to when Adelaide had shut him out.

He had just reached his room when he heard a noise from below. He dismissed the sound as servants until he heard the murmur of voices that seemed far too familiar.

“Michael?” Dot’s voice rang out. “Are you home?”

He retraced his steps until he stood at the top of the landing.

“I just returned,” he said, unable to see her at the bottom, although she couldn’t be far. “Is all well?”

“Yes,” she said. Was that... joy in her voice? “Will you come down for a moment? I have a surprise for you.”

Little did she know that no surprise could make him happy at this point.

But she had done so much for him, he could at least indulge her.

His steps were heavy as he descended the stairs. When his head lifted toward Dot at the bottom, he could only stop and stare with shock.

For there, in front of him, stood his whole heart.

“Adelaide.” His jaw dropped as his shock overtook every other emotion. He wondered if he had conjured an illusion, for this seemed too good to be true. “What are you doing here?”

She was as beautiful as ever, taking his very breath away. Her hair was not down around her shoulders as he preferred but was pulled back loosely away from her face. He supposed that was to account for the baby in her arms.

His baby.

“We are here to see you, but it doesn’t seem as if you are particularly pleased by our arrival,” she said, raising an eyebrow, her expression guarded.

“I—of course I am!” he exclaimed, the words tripping off his tongue. “I am shocked, that is all.”

“I apologize; this is my fault,” Dot interjected, stepping forward. “I visited Adelaide yesterday and suggested that she allow you to visit with Mabel, and she decided today was as good of a time as any.”

“To get it over with,” he said with a humorless smile, following her thoughts.

“I’m sure that’s not—” Dot began, but Adelaide nodded, her lips pressed together in a firm line.

“Yes,” she said shortly, causing Michael’s heart to sink below his stomach.

She was not here for him.

She was not coming back to him.

She was only here because Dot had guilted her into it.

And he was desperate enough to overlook that and take what he was given.

When he finally convinced himself to tear his eyes away from Adelaide, it was only to move them down to the baby.

She had grown so much since he had last seen her. He knew exactly how long it had been.

Three months.

Three months since he had last seen the two of them. Three months since he had held

either of them in his arms.

He could still picture every moment of Mabel's birth.

It had been an agonizing few hours, listening to Adelaide as she labored, until he had forced his way into the room, unable to take the inaction any longer.

When she had allowed him in, he had sat next to her, holding her in his arms, wishing he could take away all of her pain.

And then Mabel had emerged. When Dot had placed her in Adelaide's arms and Michael held the two of them together, it was like the entire world had finally begun to make sense. All his experiences seemed worth it at that moment, for they had all led to this.

He had envisioned them making a life together as a family.

For two weeks, they had been happy.

Then she had left as though it had meant nothing, without a word or explanation.

Mabel had been so tiny then, not much more than the size of his hands, and now she was the length of Adelaide's arms.

"Can I... can I hold her?" he asked, looking up to meet Adelaide's eyes, wary of doing so, fearing what he might find there.

But he saw only compassion, and she nodded curtly.

"Perhaps we should sit down?"

She didn't trust him to hold the baby, but he didn't blame her. He didn't entirely trust himself, either.

They walked together into the front parlor, Dot stopping at the door.

"I'll give you a few minutes," she said before backing out and closing the door behind her, leaving them alone together.

It was like she had pulled all the air out of the room as they sat together in silence, opposite to how they had been when they first met, when Adelaide had first come to live with him before the melancholy had taken over her.

"Are you well?" he finally asked, not asking what he truly wanted to, but also not wanting to scare her away.

"I am, yes," she said, standing and walking over to the sofa where he sat.

"Would you like to hold her now?" she asked.

"Very much so," he said, positioning his arms how he thought he should take Mabel.

Adelaide leaned down and gently laid the baby in them.

Adelaide's familiar scent of lemon mingled with the lavender he assumed was attached to the baby.

When Adelaide straightened and returned to her sofa, he expected to feel bereft at the loss of her presence, but he had no chance to feel that, for he was too overtaken with Mabel.

His baby.

He stared down at her in wonder as she blinked up at him in surprise. He wondered if she had seen any man besides him – and perhaps Edward.

He hoped not.

She was beautiful. At that moment, he knew he would do anything for her, give anything for her, and renounce anything to ensure she was happy.

He didn't know how long he just stared down at her until he heard the smallest of creaks that must have been Adelaide shifting on the sofa.

He finally looked up, catching her eye.

"I'm sorry," he said gruffly. "It's just... she's just..."

"Everything," she finished softly, and he nodded slowly.

"Exactly."

They both sat staring at her, and even while Michael knew he could have stayed there forever, holding the baby in his arms as her little eyes became sleepy and started to close, he also knew that he had to say something, for this might be the last opportunity he ever had to make his dream come true.

"Adelaide?" he finally said, looking up at her, trying to show her his complete vulnerability. "I do not know if I did or said something that made you leave. If I did, I would do everything I could for the rest of my life to make amends. You only need to say the word to tell me how. For all I want, all I ask is, would you come back? Would you return to me? Be my wife?"

She stared at him, her eyes wide, panic filling them.

And he knew without her saying anything just what her answer would be.

Page 4

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CHAPTER 3

A delaide's breath caught in her throat at Michael's question.

She would never admit to him how much she enjoyed watching him watch their daughter. He was enraptured by Mabel as much as Adelaide was every time she looked at her.

Why hadn't she expected that? Maybe because she had never seen a man look at a baby that way.

It wasn't expected, especially among the nobility. From what she knew, most of them threw the baby to the governess and never looked upon them again until they became adults.

But Michael... he seemed different.

He had been during their time together; that much was certain. When she first met him, he was the charming rogue who loved every woman, and every woman loved him. He had impulsively asked her to marry him, to move into his house, and to be his wife. She had declined the latter, but she had seen how once he devoted himself to something, he was all in without hesitation.

But it didn't change anything.

His question caught her unaware, and she knew he must have sensed her shock when his shoulders dropped and his chin lowered to his chest.

“Never mind,” he muttered. “I?—”

“Michael,” she said softly. She knew she couldn’t tell him the truth but didn’t want him to think he was lacking.

What had panicked her the most was that she wanted to say yes. At that moment, she forgot why she should say no to his proposal of them becoming a family, moving back into his house, and spending every day – and night – with him. Thankfully, reason intervened before she said something she couldn’t take back.

“Michael, it is not because of you that I can’t. There are so many more reasons.”

“Which are?” he asked, his eyes pleading with her even as he kept his tone steady and even. “Why can you not? I would give you everything you ever asked for.”

“I know,” she said quietly. “But you could not give me what I truly long for. My freedom.”

“Freedom from what?”

“Freedom to do as I choose to do. To make my way forward. To own the inn that I have always wanted.”

“You want to own an inn?” he said, blinking, and she wasn’t sure if it was her fault or his that they had lived together for six months and never discussed it.

“Yes,” she said confidently. “In the town where I was raised. There is an inn there, and the owner wants to retire. I want to take over the inn, renovate it, and open it again. I have very small savings from before, and I will work hard to hopefully save enough to convince him when it is time. We have written letters, and he is even open to me slowly buying it from him.”

“Where... where would that be?” he asked, nearly gasping for air.

“Tunbridge Wells.”

“Tunbridge Wells?” he repeated, his voice rising. “A beautiful place, to be sure, but that... that is... why, that is a half day’s ride from here.”

“It is.”

“I imagined you would be close to me... even if you were not with me.”

“It is not truly that far,” she attempted, even as she saw the heartbreak on his face, her own nearly caving at it.

“I could move with you,” he said, shrugging as though it was nothing of consequence. “If you would have me.”

“It is not just that, Michael,” she said, coming to sit beside him. “It is so much more.”

How could she tell him that her family’s past – and perhaps present – would only bring about his downfall? She knew exactly what he would do. He would vow to fix it – or get his brother to fix it.

His family had already done enough for her. She wasn’t going to burden them with this, too.

They could have overcome that. But that wasn’t even the true reason she had left.

“Tell me,” he said, looking up at her suppliantly. “Please.”

“Very well,” she said, looking down at her hands. “I wanted to marry you after Mabel

came. I did. And that was selfish of me.”

“How—”

She looked up at him, eyeing him, and he nodded, silently agreeing to allow her to finish.

“The night we both went to Dot’s charity event, you spent so much time with me, watching over me, ensuring I was well, happy, and, enjoying myself. You were concerned, and I appreciated that. But then I would see you when you were talking to someone else. You were happy. You laughed. You were enjoying yourself. You were charming women – not in a flirtatious manner, at least not to you, but I could see how they enjoyed your company and how better they would be with you than I ever could. You were the man you had been the night we met, the man that somehow became lost when I came to live with you.

“You are not who you were meant to be when you are with me, Michael. I know you enjoy the idea of family and feel obligated to Mabel and me. I am not so proud that I will not accept any help for her, and I will not keep her from seeing you as long as...” her voice threatened to break, but she swallowed it and continued, “as long as you promise not to try to take her from me.”

“I would never,” he said so fiercely that she had no choice but to believe him.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “But to marry you would be doing us both a disservice. Especially you.”

“Adelaide, you do not understand. That night, I was concerned that you wouldn’t feel welcome at the charity event.”

“I understand that, and you’re right. I wasn’t welcomed there. I could feel the stares

upon me, could hear the whispers. I couldn't be myself either because to be myself would mean that I would not be welcomed at any event ever again. Not that I'll be going to any more. I only attended that one because I appreciate all Dot has done for me and all that she was doing for other women like me with her charity. I know it is easy for you to romanticize the life we could have together. But you must understand what different worlds we come from and that I do not fit into yours. I was raised by a single mother in a small one-room cottage in a town far from London. We only came to the city once she married, and our living accommodations worsened. They might have been slightly bigger but were shared and not nearly as clean. I am not complaining about my upbringing – most of it was wonderful, for I didn't know any better, and my mother was loving and did all she could for me. I was even educated with the innkeepers daughter. But it was worlds away from the manors, schools, and ballrooms where you are from, Michael. I've said I don't fit in your world, but I don't want to fit. I hate the pretension, the whispers. I am strong enough to withstand it, but the truth is, I do not want to. We don't work together, Michael. And the sooner you accept that, the better."

He stared at her, the pain in his eyes matching that in her heart.

But it would only get worse if they continued this. She knew that now.

He took a few tries to clear his throat before addressing her.

"Would you... at least allow me to find you somewhere to live? To pay for your accommodations?"

She bit her lip.

"You mean you would ask Edward to pay for them?"

"Well, any money I have is family money, so I suppose you could say it's from

Edward, who holds the title. But I do have my own trust.”

She could tell she had hurt him by saying that, but she didn’t want to take any more from his brother.

“I would accept a very – and I mean very – small amount to take care of some of Mabel’s needs. But we have accommodation. Thank you for the offer, however.”

He nodded, and they sat there in silence together.

“Would you allow me to visit you?”

“Men are not allowed where I live,” she said, even though she was likely revealing where she was staying. But unlike with Jack, she did not fear sharing her living situation with Michael. He was no threat to her, and despite everything, she knew that he only had her best interests at heart and would never threaten or hurt her intentionally.

“I see,” he said. “Well, know that you are welcome here anytime. And if you need someone to look after Mabel, I am happy to do so.”

“Dot has offered as well,” she said, looking down in her lap. She had never heard of a nobleman who would watch one of his children alone. But then, Michael was not most noblemen.

“Whatever you decide,” he said, unable to look her in the eye. “I trust that you know what is best.”

His trust in her nearly broke her. But she had to do what was best for all of them. Her, Michael, and, more than any other, Mabel.

“Adelaide.”

She jumped at her name being called from out of the shadows and turned around swiftly, her hand on the door to return inside to Matts’ tavern when her cloak was grabbed from behind.

“It’s just me.”

She wished that would ease her concern, but Jack’s presence only did the opposite – so different from her visit with Michael that very morning.

“I told you to leave me be,” she demanded, turning toward him with fire in her soul. She had enough to be concerned about without Jack and his problems. “I have a life for myself here, Jack. You can find someone else to serve your patrons.”

“They like your smiles best,” he said, attempting a smile of his own, but with his beard so unkempt and ungainly, it came across much more sinister instead.

“There are many women with many beautiful smiles,” she said. “Carry on, Jack. I have to go.”

Mabel would be waiting for her.

“Just a minute,” he said, pointing his finger toward her chest. “I need your help with something.”

“I cannot help you with anything.”

“I need you to use your connections for an introduction.”

“Connections? I don’t have any connections, Jack!” she exclaimed, lifting her hands.

“Look around you. I’m in Bloomsbury. Not too far from Shoreditch.”

“Yes, but you have that nobleman you visit in Mayfair. Who you lived with. Are you his mistress? Last I saw him, his brother was visiting me, trying to pay me off to take care of you and the baby that you say you don’t have. But I know you visited him, Adelaide. Don’t try to pretend.”

“Are you following me?” she asked, aghast.

“No,” he said before pausing with a chuckle, his face shadowy in the dim light. “Well, not me in particular.”

“I will say it again,” she said, lifting a finger and stepping toward him. “Leave. Me. Alone.”

“Or else, what?” he said, laughing mockingly. “You have nothing to threaten me with, Adelaide. Nothing to hold over me.”

“I know you are involved in something, Jack,” she said threateningly. “I can tell the authorities.”

“You would come down with me, Adelaide,” he sneered. “I could easily convince them that you were involved. How could you know nothing, living and working in the tavern for years?”

She opened her mouth and closed it as fury overwhelmed her. How dare he?

“I do not know anything. And I will not help you.”

He continued as if she hadn’t said anything. “All you have to do is go speak to your... friend and ask him to take this message to Lord Gregory. I tried to deliver the

message myself, but this needs to go directly into his hands. I can't take the chance of a servant opening it, and no one would allow me to see him."

"Shocking."

"Anyway. Be sure your nob doesn't open it, or he will also be implicated in this."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then all will learn that you were not the daughter of a widowed woman and her poor, killed soldier, but instead of a whore and a nobleman. They'll believe you planned your child as your mother did."

"Do not speak of my mother that way," she said, her hands balled into fists at her side, as she wished she could reach out and slap him but knew from experience how badly that would end for her.

"I don't care if the truth comes out, but your friend Mr. Redgrave and his brother might. Not sure if they would still support you and your daughter – oh yes, I know about the baby, Adelaide – if they knew where you came from. Would you want Mr. Redgrave to know about how one noble family has already rejected you? Then again, perhaps you could get lucky, and this could be one nobleman you could extort."

Adelaide hated how he used everything good in her life and made it sound so awful. She wanted nothing to do with this or with him, and she didn't care about her secret coming out. What did it matter? She was scandalous enough.

But she didn't want to see Michael's family drawn into further scandal. Support for their endeavor was already somewhat rocky as unwed mothers were not exactly looked upon with much sympathy, but what if word arose that Michael was involved with a woman with such a past? They might lose any support that they did have.

There was only one thing she could do. One that she knew she would likely regret in the future.

She held out her hand.

“Very well,” she said. “Give me the note.”

CHAPTER 4

Michael stared at the cryptic message in his hand, asking him to meet in St. James's Park across from The Queen's House in one hour.

That was awfully presumptuous. What if he was busy?

He sighed. There was little chance of that. He was never busy. That was part of his problem. At least it would give him a chance to ride.

"What do you have there?"

Edward walked up to where Michael stood in the front foyer, turning the note in his hand as he tried to determine the sender's identity.

He saw no point in lying to his brother, not when he most likely would have to come crawling to him once more for help.

"Someone has demanded my presence. In St. James's Park, no less."

"Michael, what could this possibly be about now?"

Edward appeared less judgmental and more exasperated, although Michael wasn't certain whether his upset was with him.

"If I knew, I wouldn't be standing here considering whether or not to go, now, would I?" he asked, lifting a brow, and Edward let out a sound that was part snort, part

groan. “The only person I would hope would be summoning me is Adelaide, but she could come and knock on the front door if she chose.”

“This better not be another extortion scheme like Adelaide’s brother once tried to pull,” Edward cautioned, to which Michael only rolled his eyes.

“He knows well enough not to try that again with you, and I have not done anything else worth blackmail,” he said before pausing. “At least, not that I know of.”

“Is that not the problem?” Edward asked dryly. “That there might be things you did while inebriated or with a woman that could come back to haunt you?”

Michael rubbed his forehead. Edward wasn’t wrong, but Michael was usually careful. Careful enough, anyway, and he had done nothing untoward in the past year.

“I do not believe I will go,” Michael decided.

“How could you not?” Edward asked, aghast.

Michael shrugged, unbothered.

His brother needed every question answered and every problem solved.

Michael had always thought the best way to ward off trouble was to avoid it.

“If I do not go, I do not have to deal with it.”

“Michael.” Edward stared at him in horror. “Problems do not go away just because you ignore them.”

“Ahh, that’s not always true.” Michael shrugged, and Edward reached out and took

the note from him, too quick for Michael to evade him.

“This is written by a woman,” Edward mused.

“How do you know that?”

“The penmanship.” Edward stared at him. “Do you think you have another child?”

“No,” Michael shook his head. “Absolutely not.”

“You have been with a fair number of women.”

“Had to make up for your lack of conquests, did I not?” He attempted to joke, but it fell flat. “I’m sorry, Edward, I know I said I wouldn’t bring that up again?”

Edward pinched the bridge of his nose. “Yes, you seem to have forgotten that. This is serious, Michael.”

“I know. I’m not an idiot, Edward, I know how to prevent—” He stopped when he caught Edward’s stare. “Very well. I did make one mistake. But that was with Adelaide. I got carried away as she overwhelmed my every sense. Before her, I did not error. As far as I can recall.” He scratched his head. “I have to go, don’t I?”

“Yes, Michael,” Edward said with a sigh. “You have to go.”

And, an hour later, Michael found himself standing on the edge of St. James’s Park, staring across the serene lake at The Queen’s House in the distance.

The park was not particularly busy at this time of day. However, he was still uncertain about how to find his mysterious letter-writer without knowing their identity.

He left his place and began to meander down the winding path, stopping in shock when he saw who was walking up to him.

“Adelaide,” he practically stuttered. “What—why...” He could only hope that she wouldn’t find out he was here to meet with someone. She couldn’t discover he was being blackmailed, for she would insist on knowing why. And if it was for a rather nefarious reason, he didn’t want her to learn anything about it.

His head hurt just thinking about it all. When had his life become so complicated?

When he’d had a baby with a woman out of wedlock and had then fallen for her.

“Thank you for coming,” she said with a sigh. “I was worried that you wouldn’t.”

“ You wrote me the note?” he said, aghast.

“Yes,” she said, blinking. “Who else would?”

“I don’t know!” he exclaimed. “That was my concern. Why would you not just come to the house? Or, at the very least, sign the note?”

“I needed to talk to you alone,” she said, lowering her voice as though someone was going to overhear her. “And if I signed it, Dot or Edward might see it and want to know why I was writing you. This was the best way.”

“This feels like we are spies for the Prince Regent,” he whispered, leaning in closer, only then noticing that she was wearing something rather odd on her back.

“What’s behind you?”

“Mabel.”

“Mabel?” he exclaimed, walking round to see behind her. The baby was sleeping on her back in some contraption. “Is that safe?”

“Of course it is safe,” she said, swatting at him. “I would never put our baby in an unsafe situation.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “I just have never seen anything like that before.”

“Because you are trapped in your high towers, never seeing women who do not have the luxury of a governess for their babies,” she said. “Not that I would want to hand my baby over to someone else’s care.”

“Why are we here, in St. James’s Park?” he said, looking around. It was fashionable enough, where many of his peers congregated due to its proximity to the royal residence. Its lush lawns were beautiful, with gravel paths winding around the serene lake accented by flocks of waterfowl, but Hyde Park was far more common.

“Because my most recent memory of Hyde Park includes me falling into the Serpentine and having to be rescued by Dot,” she said wryly. “It was not my best moment. Besides, I had no wish to be walking along with you and having to stop by every person we meet for you to greet them.”

“I like people,” he said unapologetically.

“So do I,” she said before eyeing him. “But not those people. Now, focus, Michael. I have a matter of importance to discuss with you.”

“Is everything all right with Mabel?” he asked at the severity of her tone, his heart rate quickening.

“All is well with her,” she said. “I promise, I would have told you immediately if

there was anything of concern.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“Can we walk while we talk?” she asked. “The movement will help keep Mabel sleeping.”

“Of course,” he said, falling in step with her, enjoying both the scenery and her company, as confusing as this might be.

“I have a problem. One that involves my brother.”

“Ah, yes, the infamous Jack Tate.”

“Unfortunately, yes,” she said wryly. “I’m unsure if I ever told you this, but he is not actually my brother. My mother married his father when we were both around fifteen years old, and we became siblings. Unfortunately, he was not the brother I had always wanted. Instead, he was extremely unkind and lived to torment me.”

“That’s what always bothered me,” Michael said. “Why did you stay working for him for so long?”

“Because I had nowhere else to go. I tried to get other jobs, but they all knew Jack, and he would spread lies about my terrible work or threaten their livelihoods so no one else would hire me. I don’t know how to do much else. It wasn’t until you and Edward looked after me that I had another choice. Thanks to Dot’s connections, I have somewhere else to work.”

His head snapped up to her at that. “You are working?”

“I am,” she said, raising her chin, challenging him to say more.

“Adelaide, you do not have to work. I will provide for you. I have told you that again and again.”

“And I told you I am saving for the inn I always wanted.”

He swallowed hard.

“If that is what you really want, then I will help you.”

“You will not buy my inn.”

“Why not? You are raising my baby!”

Their voices had risen, and she closed her eyes, calming down. She didn’t want to risk upsetting Mabel.

“We’ll have to come back to this, Michael, for there was another reason I wanted to talk to you today.”

“Very well,” he practically growled, for he was not done with this.

“Jack found me at my new job. He was angry with me for leaving and demanded that I return to The Red Lion where — trust me — the conditions would be less than favorable.”

“That son of a?—”

She held up a hand. “I told him I was happy where I was and wouldn’t be returning to work for him. Then he told me he needed a favor. I told him no, and he then threatened me.”

“What did he say?” Michael had never been a particularly violent man – he was more a lover than a fighter – but at this moment, he wanted to find Jack Tate and show him the consequences of threatening someone he cared for.

Not that Adelaide belonged to him. He would never make the mistake of saying that aloud, for then it would be Adelaide who would threaten him.

But still.

“He asked me to use my connections to do him a favor.”

“Your connections – to whom?”

“To you.”

“He knows that we still speak?”

“Apparently,” she said, her lips in a grim, tight line as she and Michael stopped for a duck and her babies to cross the path before them. “He knows about Mabel too, even though I tried to lie and say there was no baby.”

Michael turned toward Adelaide so that he could face her. “Adelaide, is your brother so threatening that you don’t want him to know about our daughter?”

She passed a hand over her face. “I don’t think he would ever hurt her, but I also know he will go to any lengths to get what he wants. I didn’t want him to know there might be a way to get to me or you.”

Little did the man realize that Adelaide alone was enough to get his attention. But he couldn’t say that now, for it would likely only scare her away.

“What does he want from me?” he said instead.

“He wants you to deliver a note to Lord Gregory.”

“Lord Gregory?” He leaned back, surprised. “He’s one of my closest friends. Although, I suppose it has been some time since I have seen him. Do you know, he was with me the night we met?”

She pursed her lips. “I am guessing now that was no accident.”

“I do not follow.”

“Did you decide to come to The Red Lion that night, or was it Lord Gregory’s idea?”

Michael scratched his head. “It’s hard to remember now, but I suppose it was Lord Gregory’s, for I wouldn’t have otherwise known about the tavern. Now, had I known who would be there?—”

“Stop,” she said with a laugh. “Back to the matter at hand. It was Lord Gregory’s idea.” She sobered. “I believe he and my brother are involved in some unlawful scheme together.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t say for sure,” she said. “When I worked there, I suspected my brother was up to something. He would disappear for periods of time, and he just had this look that told me there was more that I didn’t know about. But I never wanted to ask, for what would I do about it? I couldn’t turn him in, nor did I want to be involved.”

“So....”

“So now he wants this letter delivered to Lord Gregory. He said it had to go to him directly, that he couldn’t risk a servant handling it. He also wanted me to make sure you didn’t open it.”

“Why not?”

“Because he said then you would be connected to whatever they are involved with.”

“Well, let’s see it,” Michael said, holding his hand out, wishing that it was Adelaide’s hand he was reaching for, but he would take what he could get.

She reached into the pocket of her skirt. “I’m not asking you to open it, Michael,” she said. “I’m asking... well, I suppose I’m asking for your help.”

“For my help?” he repeated, blinking. “You mean my brother’s?”

“No,” she said, her brows furrowing. “Why do you think I asked you to meet me here? I don’t want Edward to know about this. Michael, your brother is a good man, but sometimes I think he is too good. He would likely want us to go to the authorities, which may be the answer in the end, but Jack said if I told anyone or did anything to get in his way, he would tell them I was involved in all of this. It would be believable, for how could I have been foolish enough to work there for so long and never know what was happening? And if something happened to me, then Mabel...”

The fear in her eyes distressed him, and even though he had told himself not to touch her, Michael reached out and wrapped his arms gently around her shoulders, his fingertips brushing the straps where the pack hooked onto her arms.

“First of all, if, in the very unlikely event that something were to ever happen to you, I promise you that I would take care of Mabel. I would never let anything happen to her nor allow Jack to come close to her, do you understand me? Even if you do not

trust me, we have Dot to help. But that is the worst-case scenario, for she needs you .”

She tilted her head, hiding those beautiful blue eyes. “Thank you, Michael. I do trust you.”

“I appreciate that. Secondly, I will protect you with everything I have, do you understand me? We will find a way to ensure that Jack doesn’t get away with whatever he is doing without allowing anyone to believe you are implicit. Fair?”

“Yes,” she said, lifting her face, her eyes shiny with unshed tears. “Thank you. You are doing far too much for me, considering I... that I...”

“That you turned me down?” he said with a rueful smile. “Yes, you did. But I thought a lot about what you said. It took me some time, for you said a lot. And I do understand you.”

He was still going to find a way through the barriers she had erected, for deep in his heart, he knew that none mattered. Not when they cared so deeply for one another. He could feel that she still held affection for him. How could she not? Even if she felt a small portion of what he did for her, it would be enough to overcome all of her objections.

It had to be.

CHAPTER 5

Michael was staring at her so intently that Adelaide worried he could see through her, to her every thought.

Which was most concerning, for then he might discover how she actually felt about him.

Finally, she had to break their gaze.

“What should we do with the note?” she asked, looking at it in her hands. “If we open it, Lord Gregory will know.”

“I know a way to open it and reseal it without anyone being the wiser,” he said with such confidence that her heart warmed. She loved it when he looked like this – that boyish, mischievous grin on his face, the dimples she had fallen for sunken deeply in his cheeks.

“And just how would you know that?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

He leaned in. “Don’t tell anyone, but I was a bit of a practical joker as a boy.”

“You don’t say?”

They both chuckled, and she passed him the note, which he slipped into his jacket. “I’ll open it and copy it,” he said. “Tomorrow, if you would like to call upon me, then I will tell you what it says before I give it to Lord Gregory.”

“Oh, Michael, what if it is awful?” she couldn’t help but ask.

“Well, then, we will deal with it together.”

They had rounded the path and were approaching the park entrance when Adelaide recognized a figure entering.

“Michael,” she whispered, standing on her toes so her lips would reach his ear, even though no one was close enough to hear her. Not that he was complaining. “Is that Lady Carroway?”

“It is,” he said, his face darkening when he looked upon the woman who had tried to ruin the lives of Dot and Edward. Fortunately, she hadn’t gotten away with it – partially because of Adelaide.

And she wasn’t going to hide from the woman now.

“Lady Carroway!” she called out, heading straight for the woman. A quick look back at Michael showed that, rather than warning her away, he was interested in the exchange that was to come.

Lady Carroway looked down her nose at them, recoiling when she realized who they were – not that she admitted her recognition.

“I do not know who you think you are, but I would prefer you not address me.” She sniffed before continuing on her path. Her husband appeared behind her but far enough away that he wouldn’t hear them right now.

“Do you avoid Hyde Park now?” Adelaide asked. “Since everyone discovered that you were a liar?”

“Now see here. I?—”

“We are leaving. I just enjoy seeing how those who once considered themselves so mighty can fall when they behave without thought for anyone around them.”

Lady Carroway let out a harrumph before pressing forward, and Adelaide couldn't help but grin as she watched her walk away.

“You certainly have no fears,” Michael said, watching her with awe, although Adelaide wondered how much of that was shock.

“I have fears,” she murmured.

“Do you now? I do not believe I have seen them yet.”

“Yes,” she said, returning her gaze to him. “My greatest fear is turning out just like my mother.”

With that, she continued out of the park, leaving him with the choice to follow or to leave her be.

When she heard the footsteps behind her, she couldn't help how her entire heart warmed. He had followed her. She shouldn't love that so much.

But she also couldn't help her fickle emotions, which were much more invested in this man than she would like them to be.

“I will walk you home,” he said when they exited the park.

“That is unnecessary,” she said swiftly, still wanting to maintain separation. She wasn't sure if he had discovered where she was staying, but?—

“I know where you live,” he said, answering her silent question. “There is no use hiding it, but I will not use that knowledge for my own gain.”

Mabel still slumbered in her pack, which had become the most important thing Adelaide owned, for it was the only way to keep the baby sleeping some days. It had been a gift from Dot and Magda, the midwife Dot worked with.

“I might open the letter today, but I will wait for you before doing anything with it,” he said. “I will not seek you out. I promise.”

She could see the pain cross his face – pain that she had caused – but all she could do was nod.

“Thank you,” she said. “I will try to come tomorrow. Perhaps I shall see if I can find someone to watch Mabel for a time.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “Bring her with you – please?”

“Very well,” she said, struck by how much he wanted to see his daughter. It was admirable, truly.

But she couldn’t allow herself to be taken in by his charm once more. She had to be strong, figure this out, and then move on to finish her plan and achieve everything she wanted.

It wasn’t going to be easy.

But she didn’t have much choice.

Michael had told Adelaide that he would open the letter once he returned home, but the truth was, it seemed wrong to do so without her present.

Fortunately, he didn't have long to wait. She appeared as eager as he was the next day to discover its contents.

"Mr. Redgrave? Miss Stone has arrived," the butler said without judgment after knocking at his bedroom door. Adelaide had stayed at the house long enough that the entire staff had fallen in love with her. Probably because she treated them as one of her peers. A lot could be learned from her, for the servants would do anything for her.

"I will be down momentarily," he said as he kept his attention in front of him on his work.

"No need. I'm here as well."

"Adelaide," he said, whirling around, holding himself back from rushing to the door with exuberance. "You are early."

"Not all of us wait until after the noon hour to begin our day," she said dryly as she eyed him. "Even those of us who work all night."

"Where is Mabel?" he asked, looking around, disappointed that she hadn't brought the baby despite his request.

"Dot stole her from my arms the moment I walked through the door," she said with a soft smile. "I'm sure she will allow you some time with her before we leave."

"Oh, good," he said in relief.

"What are you working on?" she asked, drifting into the room and standing next to him, immediately filling him with her fresh scent.

"Oh, just a hobby," he said, waving his hand at the papers before him, full of the

bloodlines of some of the top horses in England. It was much more than a hobby, but he didn't want to admit it.

"When did you acquire these?"

"After you left," he mumbled. "Actually, I've become reacquainted with my interest in horseflesh again. Aside from riding for necessity, I haven't been involved with it for years, but in the past few months I needed to focus on something else, and riding and breeding has been there for me."

She wandered over the book he had opened in front of him and ran her hand over the page.

"Are these your notes and illustrations?"

"Yes."

"You are so meticulous," she said, and he wasn't sure whether he was happy about the surprise in her voice or hurt that she would not have thought him capable of this.

"When I put my mind to something, Adelaide, I do so with complete focus," he said. "That is why I was such a good reprobate. I was dedicated to my craft."

She eyed him in amusement. "I see. Well, this is impressive, and if you would ever like to share more, I would be interested."

"I would love to," he said. "But we have so many other pressing causes."

"We do, unfortunately. Now, have you opened the letter?" she asked eagerly.

"I was waiting for you."

“You were?”

“Yes,” he said. “Come, let us go to the library.”

He led her out the door, down the stairs, and into the small library, which he had used as his study of sorts since returning to his brother’s house, not that he had an overly great amount of business. His papers were on a small writing desk in the corner, and she followed him over as he moved a chair next to the desk.

“Wait here,” he said, holding up a finger before going to the kitchen and asking the cook for a cup of steaming water. She seemed confused when he didn’t want any tea along with it, but she didn’t question him.

When he returned to the library, he didn’t say anything, although Adelaide watched him curiously as he turned the note over and held the seal right above the steam.

“You are softening the wax,” she murmured, and he nodded, keeping his attention on his efforts.

“Just a little more,” he mumbled until he finally decided it was enough. “That’s the trick – knowing when to stop so the wax will open but still maintain the original imprint.”

When he decided the timing was perfect, he removed the tea pot, setting it aside away from any important books or documents.

Then he slowly, carefully fit a letter opener beneath the wax seal and lifted it away from the bottom side of the paper.

“Aha,” he said triumphantly as he lifted the seal completely, breaking the two sides of the paper away from one another. “Here we are.”

She leaned over his shoulder, and his breath hitched at her nearness as he wished it was her interest in him bringing her closer and not her curiosity about the letter.

But he would take what he could get right now.

He cleared his throat and began to read.

My Lord Gregory,

I hope this reaches you in good health. The goods arrived, though some were not quite up to standard. We can pass them off as they are or special handle them. Either way, I reckon we'll get it sorted.

Things are quiet on my end, but there's been a bit of chatter around the place. I'll handle it for now, but it might be time to have a word with your man about tightening things up. Best to keep the wrong ears out of our plans.

We'll be ready for the next step. Just say when. We should hold a gathering next week in the usual spot. Keep it small. Too many tongues wagging, you understand.

I am looking forward to sorting everything properly. Send word when you've got it worked out.

J.T.

Michael sat back, turning his head to meet Adelaide's intrigued stare.

"Well, I am uncertain how incriminating that is for either of them," Michael began, wanting to prove his worthiness to her. "He does not say much."

"Not outright." She pursed her lips. "But there are a few things to take from this."

He lifted a brow, waiting. Adelaide was more intelligent than most would ever give her credit for, and he felt that if anyone could solve all of this, it was she. He only hoped she would still see reason to include him in this investigation of hers.

“I guess that Jack is working for Lord Gregory by the way he addresses him, although it is certainly a partnership, for he warns him as well,” she said, pointing to the page before them. “He talks about ‘your man,’ so obviously someone else is involved that we do not know about at this point.”

“Clearly, he is smuggling items that have arrived damaged, for he speaks about the quality.”

Adelaide nodded eagerly, leaning in, obviously excited about their progress.

“It sounds like whatever network they have is under some strain, as he said that there is chatter and things need tightening up,” she said. “And then the gathering.”

“The gathering,” he agreed with a nod. “That’s where the next step lies. I’m sure of it.”

“We need to be there,” she said with determination, but he was already shaking his head.

“I will go,” he said. “You cannot.”

“Michael,” she said, placing her hands on her hips, her brow furrowing. “I was the one who brought you into this. I?—”

“You told me that you were frightened that something might happen to you,” he said, lifting a finger.

“I didn’t say frightened ?—”

“Concerned then,” he conceded. “Either way, I am committed to keeping you safe, and I can hardly see how that will occur if you are at this gathering. I will deliver this letter to Lord Gregory and, when doing so, comment that I would like to return to The Red Lion if he is ever going.”

“Won’t he be suspicious?” she asked, but he shook his head.

“He only knows me as Michael Redgrave, second son, interested in gambling, women, and drink. Not necessarily in that order.”

Her jaw tightened as she nodded. “Very well. So you will accompany him – hopefully – to The Red Lion the night of this gathering?”

“That’s the hope. I will see what I can discover, at the very least, and then try to infiltrate myself into there. Hopefully, the meeting will provide us with some answers.”

“Such as what they are smuggling and who all is involved.”

“Exactly.”

“I would still like to be there.”

He shook his head.

“I do not think it’s a good idea.”

She didn’t reply but instead changed the subject. He knew exactly what she was doing, but he didn’t comment on it, for her next words had him far too excited.

“Well, should we go find our baby?”

CHAPTER 6

The waiting was the most annoying part of having Michael play such a vital part in her investigation.

Well, that and the fact that every time she came close to him, Adelaide had to hold herself back from touching him, sitting on his lap, or running her hand over his hair.

She had been around men her entire adult life but never had any affected her like he did.

If only they had found one another at another time, in another situation, then perhaps they could have been happy together. Truly together.

But for now, she would have to be content with the time she could spend with him.

She had not wanted to ask him for help. She wished she could do this alone, but as soon as Jack had involved Michael, she knew that the only way forward was to tell him the entire truth of the situation and then follow the line of investigation where it had led.

Thank goodness Michael seemed as eager to find answers as she was.

So, for now, she continued caring for Mabel, the time broken only by the few hours working for Matts each evening until she received the message she had been waiting for.

Addi,

He had called her that when they first came together, and it made her heart heavy that he was doing so again.

Lord Gregory has invited me to visit The Red Lion tomorrow. I will advise what I discover there.

X, Michael

Adelaide spent far too much time trying to determine what the X meant until she was pulled away from her thoughts by Mabel's cry and reminded of what she was supposed to be doing besides feeding her daughter – determining her next action.

She knew Michael didn't want her at The Red Lion tonight and could understand why he would say so, but he didn't understand how important this was to her. He couldn't. This was a game to him, something to divert his time and attention. For her, this was her entire life.

She hated being used, especially by Jack. She wanted nothing more than to cut all ties with the man she had called her brother, and she resented how he was using her past to keep her working with him. She had to be rid of him for good, and the only way she could think to do that was to figure out what he was up to and use that against him, one way or another.

And in the process, she had to ensure he didn't take her down with him.

So, she made a plan.

Michael wouldn't like it.

But he wasn't going to have much choice.

Michael's most significant concern about returning to The Red Lion was that Jack would recognize him and wonder what he was doing there.

He dressed as inconspicuously as possible, far from his usual meticulous fashion. Perhaps Jack wouldn't pay much attention to his face if he appeared to be someone other than his true self. He turned from one side to the other as he looked in the mirror, satisfied that he had achieved his goal.

He was much more unkempt than usual but didn't mind the rugged look. Fortunately, Dot and Edward were out at an event that evening, so he didn't have to evade them and their questions regarding his unusual attire.

Lord Gregory, of course, had much to say upon seeing him.

"My goodness, man, what are you wearing?" he asked as he and Michael walked into The Red Lion together, having agreed to meet there as they each could have varied departure times and destinations, depending on who they met that night – not that Michael plans for any women. Except Adelaide, but he knew that was not a possibility.

"I thought I would try to blend in tonight," he said with a shrug as though it didn't mean anything. "Be a working man. See how that goes for me."

"You know your true identity helps you with women, not hinders you, do you not?" Lord Gregory asked, staring at him as though he had lost his mind – and perhaps he had, although for altogether different reasons than Lord Gregory realized.

He had lost his mind and heart to Adelaide and no one else.

God, he missed her.

Perhaps if he could prove himself tonight by solving this scheme of her brother's to release her from this hold he had over her, he could convince her that he was the man for her and that she – and the baby – could rely on him for anything they might need in the future.

With renewed purpose, he squared his shoulders and faced the door.

“You know me. I'm bored. Thought this might be a bit of fun.”

Lord Gregory snorted and shook his head. “Whatever works for you. You will never find me in such attire.”

“Would not expect to,” Michael said as he followed Lord Gregory through the door, attempting anonymity.

The Red Lion's crowd was growing, although it was not nearly as busy as most of the taverns Michael used to visit. He could see why it wasn't as popular as it could be, what with the weak ale, subpar food, and the one overworked woman hustling among the patrons, but he supposed Jack was making enough from his scheming that he didn't much care about the business of the tavern.

They found a table and ordered a drink, although Michael didn't expect to have said drink in hand anytime soon.

The air was so smoky that it was hard to see across the room, and Michael had this strange sense to peer through the dim light to seek out Adelaide.

But of course, she wasn't here. That was his memory playing tricks on him, reminding him of what was and what could have been.

After finally receiving and forcing down the cheap whisky – no better than the brandy – Lord Gregory, Michael’s supposed friend, put a firm hand on Michael’s shoulder as he leaned in.

“Sorry to do this to you so early, but I’m going to do a round through the room to seek out any interested young lady worth my time.”

He was going to the gathering noted in the letter. Michael was sure of it. Now he had to follow him without raising suspicions. After giving Lord Gregory some space, Michael slipped off of his stool, staying to the edge of the room as he kept his gaze on the top of Lord Gregory’s black hat.

He was so intent on following the man across the room toward the back of the tavern that he stumbled over the person who entered his path.

A person who should not be here.

But who had never taken no for an answer.

Adelaide didn’t recognize Michael at first, which was something to be said as his handsome face was so unmistakable.

While she wasn’t sure he would admit it, she knew he prided himself on achieving the most fabulous style of the day. He was dressed so far from it tonight that she couldn’t help laughing to herself.

A well-worn, unfitted short coat made of thick, durable fabric hung over his shoulder while he had sat beside Lord Gregory, laughing. His plain, dark wool, unbuttoned waistcoat barely covered the simple, slightly worn linen shirt beneath, the sleeves rolled up to show off his strong, muscled forearms, which Adelaide longed to run her fingers over again.

His sturdy breeches had been made for a man smaller than him. Adelaide wondered who he had borrowed them from as her eyes followed the line of his legs hanging over the side of the stool, the fabric snugly fitting his muscular thighs. She was biting her lip when she finally finished her perusal down to his heavy, serviceable boots.

He probably had no idea how much she enjoyed his casual clothing nor how she would truly prefer he remove it all and reveal what was underneath.

When Lord Gregory stood and began to walk away, Adelaide pushed herself away from the wall where she had been hiding in the shadows to intercept Michael as he followed him.

“Michael,” she called out to him, but he didn’t hear her over the din. She reached out to tap him on the shoulder but was bumped out of the way by another customer who’d had too much to drink.

She had no idea how that was possible with the slowness of the service she had witnessed, but perhaps this was not his first tavern of the night.

She was finally successful in surging through the crowd and stopped in front of Michael, but he was so intent on Lord Gregory that he continued to barrel forward and would have knocked her right over if he hadn’t reacted quickly enough to reach out and catch her against him.

The instant his warm, strong arms wrapped around her, her entire body sagged against him in relief, like she was finally safe. Home. Comfortable.

She sighed at the feeling of his strong chest beneath her cheek, even if the fabric between them was much rougher than it had ever been before.

“Well,” she finally heard from above her, “it is good to see you too.”

That was enough to bring her back to the present moment. She pushed herself up and away from him, remembering where they were, what they were doing, and, most importantly, who they were.

“My lady,” he said, thankfully breaking the tender moment and sweeping his weathered felt slouch hat off his head as he bowed toward her. “You are not supposed to be here tonight.”

He eyed her with a look of reproach that did not change her feelings as she shrugged.

“You could not keep me away.”

“Apparently not,” he said. She couldn’t help but stare at the bare, tanned skin that peeked out from where his cravat would usually be tied.

He rubbed a hand over his chin, where he must have allowed stubble to grow since he had planned his attire.

It just wasn’t right that a man could look so delicious.

It almost made Adelaide forget all her promises to herself and have one night where she would pretend that they were not themselves but other people entirely.

“What is with the costume?” she asked, lifting her hand up and down.

“I am trying to go undetected by your brother,” he said in a low voice. “I thought he wouldn’t place me if I were not dressed as my usual self.”

“But Lord Gregory knows you are here,” she said, raising a brow. “Is he not the

leader, or at the very least, a partner in this?”

“Yes, but he is not aware of my involvement with you. If my name doesn’t come up, perhaps the two of them will not understand that I might have some idea of what is happening.”

“Perhaps,” she murmured, but she still felt uneasy about the situation.

“What about you?” he asked, leaning in toward her. “Just how will you explain yourself if your brother finds you here? No costume will prevent him from knowing who you are.”

“I am going to pretend that I am here to ask Jack to leave me out of this in the future. If he sees me, that is.”

“And if they realize we are together?” he asked.

“I’m sure we can come up with a logical reason for spending time with one another again,” she murmured, as heat stole up her face at just how they would do that. He must have known it, too, judging by his smirk. Suddenly, she felt he would go out of his way to ensure they had reason to prove their excuse.

“Where does this back door lead?” he asked Adelaide, keeping her just in front of him, a hand on the small of her back that was reminding her of all sorts of delicious things he had done to her in the past and could very well do to her again.

She had to clear her throat to bring herself back to the moment.

“It is a storeroom. There are no other doors leading out of it except to outside.”

“Lord Gregory disappeared through that door. Is there a way we can see the

proceedings in there without exposing ourselves?”

Adelaide frowned.

“There is a small gap between the storeroom and the kitchen. If we can stay undetected in the kitchen, we should be able to listen in – as long as the kitchens aren’t too loud.”

“Lead the way.”

His head was dipped close to the back of her neck, and Adelaide wanted to lean back into him, to feel his lips on the soft skin of her neck again, to?—

Stop, Adelaide. Just stop. What was wrong with her? She had never been this type of woman in the past. It was all Michael’s fault. He made her feel things and think things she had no business revisiting.

She opened the door to the kitchen just a crack and leaned in, finding the room, for now, blessedly empty.

“Come quickly,” she said, waving Michael in, and he caught her hand, kissing her knuckles briefly before he dropped it. When she looked up at him in surprise, he bit his lip, a lock of hair falling over his forehead as he smiled ruefully and adorably.

“I’m so sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to do it.”

“It’s fine,” she said with a quick smile. “No harm done.”

No harm, but far too much heat.

She led him through the kitchen to the back. “Behind the potatoes,” she said, pointing

to the piled sacks in the room's shadows.

She squeezed through first before he grunted behind her as he moved a few sacks out of the way to make space for his much larger body.

He sank behind her, her back to his front as he pressed against her so that they would fit. She realized, then, that this might have been a big mistake.

One she might not be able to come back from.

CHAPTER 7

Michael nearly forgot what they were doing there.

He was too focused on the lemons wafting from Adelaide's hair into his nose, her soft body pressed against his, the rightness of having her in his arms.

But she didn't want this.

She was only here because she didn't trust him to see this through without her.

He refocused on the small gap she pointed out. If they looked closely enough, it provided a glimpse into what must have been the storeroom.

A group of five men stood in a circle. A few of them were on the outskirts of the circle, and Michael guessed that they were the muscle present to guard the proceedings and watch for any threat—for someone like him.

As Michael had suspected, Lord Gregory was in the center, although he still couldn't quite believe it. How could he have been so ignorant of the intentions of this man he had considered a friend?

And there, of course, was Jack. He looked as unkempt as Lord Gregory was elegant, and Michael wished he could better hear what was happening. Adelaide leaned forward, closing her eyes as she concentrated. Michael was briefly distracted by the long eyelashes that rested against her cheeks, just above the dash of freckles splattered over her nose.

Michael bent toward her, finally picking up the faint words being spoken.

“This has been unacceptable,” Lord Gregory was saying. “The shipments are always delayed. When they do arrive, half the orders are damaged.”

“Not my fault,” Jack said, shaking his head. “I move the goods. I don’t make them.”

“To blame it on the printing is a lie. The papers are getting ruined in transport,” said the third man, stepping forward. “Not my fault.”

“They’re coming to us ruined already,” Jack argued, and Lord Gregory stepped forward, waving his hands between them.

“Shifting blame isn’t going to help. The truth is, it’s probably a bit of both. I can tell you it’s no good to me coming damaged.”

“Not to us, either,” Jack said. “Especially as you’re not giving us any true payment.”

“If this is good enough for me, it’s good enough for you,” Lord Gregory said. “I’ll give you all another chance to pick up the quality, understood? We have to do this together. If we don’t, this will never work, and we will all be screwed over. Now, what do you have for me today?”

Michael leaned forward to see what the third man held out toward Lord Gregory, his breath catching when he saw what was in his palm.

It was currency. He couldn’t be sure how much, but that was a sizeable stack in his hand. Why would this man be paying Lord Gregory unless?—

“The currency is what they are smuggling,” Adelaide whispered, coming to the realization simultaneously with Michael. She turned her head around toward him. “It

must be fake.”

His jaw dropped open. He had imagined they were importing alcohol or fabric, but to create currency? That was beyond smuggling. That was treason.

He tightened his hold on Adelaide as though to protect her.

“How could I not know?” she whispered, but he was shaking his head against her.

“It makes sense that you wouldn’t,” he responded in a low voice. “If Jack is only providing the transport, it likely wasn’t here long, and if it was, it was disguised as something else. But Adelaide, we must ensure you have no part in this.”

If Jack tried to bring her down with him, it could have dire consequences for her, that was for certain. Counterfeiting was punishable by hanging.

“The third man must be printing and manufacturing it,” he said. “Do you recognize him?”

“I’ve seen him in the tavern before, but I don’t know him,” she said. “Do you?”

“I do not, but we can discover his identity.”

“One of them has to be a weak link,” she said. “But we should go before we are discovered.”

“Very well,” he said, wiping his hands on his rough pants as he began to stand, quickly crouching back down as the door scratched open behind them, and Adelaide looked backward, sharing a panicked glance with Michael.

“What do we do?” she whispered, her gaze swinging wildly between him and the

door.

He lifted his finger to her lips, telling her to keep her words to herself, but then footsteps sounded closer toward them.

“Hey! No one’s allowed back here!”

Michael would like to say that he acted without thought, but the truth was, he had planned this well in advance, knowing exactly what he would do if they were discovered.

It was what he had longed to do since the last time he did it.

He leaned down and kissed Adelaide with all of the passion that had been building within him.

He might have kissed her to avoid discovery.

But he was going to make it mean much more than that.

Adelaide’s breath had caught in her throat when she heard the door open behind her.

She’d had an inkling of how Michael had planned to keep them hidden, but he had kissed her so swiftly that she had still been taken off guard.

It wasn’t just that he had kissed her.

It was how he had kissed her.

Michael’s lips were now pressed against Adelaide’s with a fierce tenderness that she felt throughout her entire body.

The world around them, including the tavern, Lord Gregory, and Jack, faded away as he pulled her closer, deepening the kiss with a passion that took her breath away. Adelaide melted into his embrace, her hands reaching his strong shoulders as she returned the kiss with equal fervor.

His fingers entwined in her hair and sent shivers down her spine. In that moment, in the secluded corner, hiding behind the sack of potatoes with some unknown man looking on, Michael and Adelaide were lost in each other, consumed by what they had both wanted but had denied themselves for so long.

Every piece of her came alive, from the top of her head to the tips of her toes.

It wasn't just the physical.

Oh, no.

The passion he was pouring into their kiss went far beyond him physically wanting her. His lips moved slowly and tenderly against hers, sending shivers down her spine. She could feel the depth of his emotions in every touch, in how he cradled her face and deepened the kiss with each passing moment. It was more than just physical desire – they shared a true connection in this intimate act.

Maybe it truly was love.

And that was the most challenging part of this entire situation.

For she wanted it so badly. She felt him; she needed him. But she couldn't have him, which pained her more than anything else ever could.

This was why she had denied him for so long – so that she didn't have to admit to herself what she wanted.

Damn him. Damn her brother for including him in this scheme. And damn herself for being unable to stay away from him.

“I say, that’s enough,” came the voice from a distance, and she blinked open her eyes as Michael finally pulled back away from her, the two of them returning to the present.

Her heart seemed to stop beating as she wondered if Jack could be there, but when she turned, she met the shocked eyes of Abraham, a cook who had worked for Jack for as many years as she had.

She wondered how much he knew about the illicit operation in the room beside them.

“Adelaide?” he gaped at her. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to speak to my brother,” she said when she finally found her voice. “But I couldn’t find him. Instead, I ran into... well, an old friend.”

Michael slid his hands up and down her arms. “Is that what we’re calling me these days?” he said, although there was humor in his voice.

“Something like that,” she said, nudging him forward so they could emerge from their hiding place. Adelaide had no idea if Jack knew about the small crack between the kitchen and the storeroom, but she didn’t want to risk him finding them here, for he would likely know exactly what they were doing. “We best go. It is good to see you, Abraham. I hope you are well.”

“As well as can be, Adelaide,” the man said, a tired smile on his face. “We miss you around here, but...” he looked behind him before leaning forward and speaking in a hushed voice, “we are glad that you got yourself away from here.”

Adelaide nodded her thanks, appreciating his words, even if she knew their existence in front of Michael would mean she would have some explaining to do later on, explaining that she didn't wish to get into for she was uncertain what he would do with the knowledge. The man who used to be apathetic had become more protective than she would have ever anticipated.

She tugged on Michael's hand as she led him out of the storeroom, through the tavern, and onto the street beyond. It was busy at this time of night, people moving about, but Adelaide wanted nothing more than to be as far as possible from Jack, The Red Lion, and Shoreditch itself.

"Adelaide." Michael's voice was quiet in her ear. He pulled her into the shadows, putting his back against the cold brick wall as he drew her toward him. "Are you all right?" he asked as he softly stroked one side of her face with his fingertips.

"Why wouldn't I be?" she asked, putting on a tough exterior, but it was clear he saw through it.

"You witnessed your brother's involvement in a counterfeit scheme that could see him hanged, and he has threatened to bring you down with him. I can see how you would be concerned. And then there is you and me, and what happened in there. We?—"

"Successfully convinced Abraham that we were enjoying a passionate moment," she said in a rush before he could finish with the truth. "You could be an actor on the stage, Michael. If you weren't nobility, that is. Or perhaps I am the one with the acting skills. I?—"

"Shh," he said, gently placing a finger against her lips. "Neither of us was acting. You know that as well as I do."

“I—”

She lost the words as he leaned his head down, slowly, gently moving toward her, giving her time to pull away if she so chose.

But she didn't.

She was not nearly as strong as she should be, for she closed her eyes, tilted her head, and accepted his kiss.

His lips pressed against hers lightly, without the passion of the kiss in the kitchen, but with tender exploitation, as though he was relearning her lips, understanding who she was, and showing her what he felt for her.

It was both too much and not enough in the same breath.

This was why she had tried to distance herself from him. Because it was too easy to fall under his spell, to listen to his sweet words and give herself over to his touch.

This would be a goodbye kiss, the last one, she decided as his arms wrapped around her and pulled her close. His touch was light, likely because he was nervous that he would scare her away, but she would give herself to this moment.

One last time.

CHAPTER 8

Michael had no idea what he was doing nor why.

He only knew that he needed to do it.

When he finally came up for air, he was still lost within Adelaide's wide blue eyes, uncertain of how every rational thought had fled entirely.

He stilled at the lone tear that was falling down her cheek.

"Addi," he said, wiping it away with his index finger, "what's wrong?"

"I miss you," she admitted, causing his heart to stutter. "I miss this. We fit together so well."

"Then let us be together," he said, trying to keep the desperation out of his voice but knowing he had failed.

"You will only hurt me," she said stubbornly. "I have seen it before, and I know that you are not the type of man to settle down with a wife and children, Michael. You would be bored."

"That is what you do not understand," he said, having only just realized it himself. "I have spent my life bored. That's why I acted as I did, searching for ways to fill my days, time, and attention. Until you came along. You are everything that I wanted but never knew I needed."

“You have a beautiful way with words,” she said with a fleeting smile.

“I only use them to tell you how I feel,” he said, but he became aware of her pulling away from him already.

He had tried to prove that he could be the man for her, but the truth was, he wasn’t certain he could be. He knew he didn’t deserve her, although that didn’t stop him from trying to win her anyway.

He was no self-sacrificing martyr. The moment she said she would have him, he would be there to win her heart.

It was how to make her understand the sincerity of what they shared, which was hard when she had refused to even speak with him for so long.

“What do we do now?” she asked, and he knew she was ignoring what was between them and moving back to her brother and the counterfeit scandal.

“We need to gather evidence, determine who this third man is, and where he is manufacturing the money,” Michael said. “They all have much to lose, but Lord Gregory likely has the farthest to fall and could take down the most people with him. His family would have a difficult time weathering such a scandal.”

“Why would he take such a chance?” Adelaide asked.

“There are so many reasons why someone would risk it all,” he said. “Financial need. The thrill of taking such a risk. Or, maybe,” he said, unable to help the shadow of a smile that crossed his face, “he was simply bored as I was.”

“That’s a terrifying thought.”

“Agreed.”

“We need a plan.”

“What if we could determine how Lord Gregory is circulating the counterfeit money? I could see him doing so through the gambling tables, but he could have other methods. If I could get my hands on some of the physical counterfeit, perhaps it would help us determine where it is being manufactured.”

He was watching Adelaide’s reaction – he couldn’t tear his eyes away from her beautiful face – but he was also keeping an eye on the door.

“And,” he said, “when that third man emerges, I’d like to follow him.”

She whirled around to look behind her at the entrance to the battered tavern door. “I should have thought of that.”

“You had other things on your mind,” he said with a slow grin, causing her to roll her eyes.

The door to the tavern opened, and a lone, shadowy figure stepped out into the night, fixing his cap over long, straight hair. It was a figure Michael recognized, even if he had been viewing it through the smallest gap between wall boards.

He straightened. “There he is.”

Michael drew Adelaide into his side. “Hopefully, he will go in a direction allowing me to see you home.”

“I’m coming with you.”

“Adelaide, it might not be safe.”

“Michael, I know this neighborhood far better than you do, and despite that clothing you have donned for the evening, I would guess I fit in much better than you ever could.”

“Point taken,” he said. “But?—”

“I have some rudimentary skills at defending myself and a dagger strapped to my thigh.”

“Careful, Adelaide,” he said, biting his lip. “That kind of talk makes me want to forget this mission and discover the weapon for myself.”

She pinched his arm, and he pressed his lips together to prevent a yelp.

“Around that corner,” she said, leaning toward Michael to point behind him and he relished every excuse for them to be close. “He’s looking back.”

“We have to be careful,” he said, reaching down and taking her hand.

“I can walk by myself.”

“I know,” he said, sighing at her insistence on proving that she didn’t need him. “I intend to avoid notice by posing as a couple. We should be far less suspicious that way.”

He took the fact that she didn’t argue as her agreement, and they continued following the man through a winding maze of streets. Finally, he stopped before a small house and took the stairs to the first story.

“That side of the street is all residences,” Adelaide whispered.

“Agreed. I do not believe this would be where he is creating the fake money,” Michael mused. “He must live here. Do you have any paper on you?”

“I shall take my quill out of my pocket along with the sheaf of papers,” she said, and he paused in confusion before she let out a short laugh. “I am jesting, Michael. Of course I do not have anything.”

“Well, then, how is your memory?”

“I used to take ten drink orders at a time and never made a mistake.”

“Perfect. Do you see an address?”

“I do not. Unlike Mayfair, many of these houses will have no numbers adorning them.”

“Very well. Do you know what street this is?”

“Holywell Lane, I believe.”

“Good. The house is right opposite the coal yard.” Michael peered into the darkness. “Wait. There.”

“What are you looking at?”

“The house next to our friend’s has a number on it. Number 8. Which would make this 9 or 10, depending on how this street is numbered. If I can determine the house, perhaps I can figure out who lives here.”

“Or I can. I know this neighborhood, Michael. People are more likely to talk to me.”

“True, but I do not want any of this coming back to you. If Jack found out you were scrutinizing this...”

“There would be hell to pay. I know. But the sooner we figure this out, the sooner we are both free of him.”

Michael only hoped that didn't mean that Adelaide would want to be free of him as well. He couldn't risk losing Adelaide and Mabel again.

“I think this is all we can do for tonight,” he said. “I best see you home.”

They began down the street with far less urgency, giving them time and space to converse.

“So tell me, where did you find those clothes?”

“I asked my valet to help me,” Michael said, tipping the cap back at a jaunty angle. “What do you think of the look?”

“Do you know, it actually suits you somehow,” she said in wonder. “You seem more... relaxed. Happy.”

“Ah, yes. That makes sense,” he said, risking a glance over at her. “But I am not happy because of my clothing.”

“No?”

“I am happy because I am with you.”

“Michael—”

“I know, I know. You have given me all the reasons you do not want to be with me. You have plans of your own. I could break your heart. Understood. But I need you to understand something, Adelaide.” He stopped their forward progress and reached out to turn her gently toward him. “I will prove to you that I am the man for you. That I can be there for you. I only need you to give me a chance.”

She bit her lip, her eyes darting away from him. “I shall think about it.”

“Thank you,” he said, hope rising that there might be a chance for them. “Now, where did you get that dagger, and do you know how to use it?”

“I do,” she said proudly. “My mother taught me.”

“I would like to see it in action one day,” he said, but before he could finish the sentence, he found himself against the building, the very same knife at his throat. “Adelaide!”

“Is this not what you wanted?” she asked, lifting an eyebrow.

“Oh yes,” he said wickedly, “very much so.”

She scoffed as she dropped the knife back to her side and continued down the street. He had to take a moment to recover before he hurried to keep up.

“Impressive,” he said, but she didn’t comment. “You were right about one thing,” he continued. “I have no idea where we are right now. You do know these neighborhoods far better than I do.”

“That is not exactly surprising.”

“No,” he said, “although I have spent some time in them myself.”

“Ah, yes, visiting your taverns and brothels.”

“I didn’t visit a great many brothels,” he defended himself.

“Because you didn’t have to.”

“This is true,” he admitted. He had never been a liar. “I was usually able to find interested women at a tavern or even society events. I was a favorite among widows.”

Adelaide wrinkled her nose.

Good. She was jealous. He knew he was being petty, trying to make her so, but he was desperate for any reaction from her.

“You’re too handsome for your own good.”

He mockingly placed a hand over his heart. “Are you complimenting me?”

“Don’t get used to it,” she said, shaking her head at him. “Here we are,” she said, and it was only then he realized that they had entered Bloomsbury and were near the house where Dot and Edward had created their foundation for single young women with children. The time had gone so quickly, but it always did when he was with Adelaide.

“You did not have to work tonight?” he asked.

“I told Matts I needed a night off,” she said. “He and his wife are most accommodating.”

“I do wish you didn’t have to work,” he said, lifting a cap and running a hand through his hair. “If you ever change your mind?—”

“I know, Michael, I do,” she said. “But I need to make my way in this world myself.”

Because she didn’t want to depend on him. She didn’t have to finish the sentence for him to understand what she was insinuating.

“In the meantime,” she said, changing the subject, “I will try to determine who lives at 9 or 10 Holywell Lane.”

“Without drawing suspicion upon yourself,” he cautioned, to which she nodded.

“Of course.”

“And I will answer in the affirmative to Lord St. James’s invitation.”

“Lord St. James?”

“Lord Gregory’s brother. He and his wife are hosting a party on Saturday. I had no intentions of attending, but now I believe it will be the perfect opportunity to see if I can follow the counterfeit money, if Lord Gregory dares to use it in his brother’s house.”

“Do you truly think he would?”

He shrugged. “If he’s bold enough to be involved in counterfeiting, why would he not be bold enough to introduce it there?”

She shivered, and Michael wanted to reach out and wrap her in his arms, but he refrained from doing so, knowing that would only make her back away from him.

“I will be in touch.”

“As will I,” she said, turning to go, stopping with her hand on the door as she looked back over her shoulder. “Thank you, Michael.”

“Of course,” he murmured, watching her walk through the door, away from him, taking his heart with her. “Anything for you.”

CHAPTER 9

Adelaide began her search with the other women who lived in the house with her. They had diverse backgrounds, some of them servants, other women like herself who had worked in a tavern. Some who had even formerly worked in a brothel.

None knew the Holywell Lane residents – none, until Mrs. Clements overheard them speaking. She managed the house daily and worked closely with Dot. She'd had experience as a housekeeper and raising a child of her own out of wedlock.

"Are you speaking of the house across from the coal yard?" she asked, setting down the tea urn to lean back against the counter behind her as she eyed Adelaide curiously. "With the green shutters?"

"I believe so," Adelaide said, trying to mask her excitement. She hadn't been able to see the color in the dark, but this must be the place. "Do you know it?"

"I know a woman who lived there," she said, crossing her arms over her ample chest. "Her husband was into some underhanded business. Which makes me concerned as to why you want to know about it, for I imagine the man still lives there."

"I'm asking for a friend," Adelaide said, telling as much of the truth as she could without putting anyone else at risk. "He has business with the man but was uncertain of his name."

"Hmmm," Mrs. Clements said, apparently alert for any trouble as she considered the situation for a few moments while Adelaide waited as patiently as she could. "I will

give you his name, as long as you promise me you will have nothing to do with him yourself, do you understand me?"

"Of course, Mrs. Clements," Adelaide promised.

"Bert Rawlins," Mrs. Clements said, although suspicion was still written on her face. "A man you would be best to stay far away from."

"Thank you, Mrs. Clements. And I promise you that I will take care."

"Very good," she said, eyeing Adelaide once more before picking up the teapot and continuing to pour for the other women.

"So, Adelaide," said Lucy, sitting back in her chair, holding her baby in her arms. Lucy had worked for Lady Carroway before Dot had helped her birth the baby, and then Edward had provided a place for her to live and work. She had chosen to come to stay here so that she would have help looking after her baby, who was nearing a year old, while she worked throughout the day. "Does this friend go by the name of Mr. Redgrave?"

Adelaide stared at her with a raised brow. "Why would you think that?" she asked.

Lucy smiled knowingly. "Because you said your friend was a man, and I do not suspect you are interested in any other. Not when I have seen firsthand how you look at him."

"And just how do I look at him?"

"As though you are in love with him."

"I am not!" Adelaide protested as fear sliced through her heart. If that was what Lucy

thought after seeing them together a few times, then what did others – what did Michael himself – think? “I care for him, yes, but only because he is Mabel’s father and is a good man.”

“One willing to marry you,” Lucy said, her eyes widening incredulously. “Honestly, Adelaide, no matter what excuse you give, none seems good enough to turn down that man. Not only is he incredibly handsome, but he is noble and wants you .”

“Shocking,” Adelaide said wryly, but Lucy only rolled her eyes. “You know what I mean.”

She didn’t – not truly – but she nodded.

“I do, Lucy, but my reasons are my own. Now, I best be on with the day.”

She picked up Mabel, for she had to see to the never-ending task of feeding her. Then, she had a note to write to Michael. Not only did she have to tell him what she had discovered, but the more she thought about it, the more she knew what she had to do.

Something she had told herself she would never do again.

But it would be worth it. It had to be.

Or this all meant nothing.

Michael stared down incredulously at the note sitting beside his breakfast plate. How Adelaide had identified their third man in less than a day was incredible to start with, but that wasn’t even the part that surprised him most.

It was the second part of the note – the one that told him she would meet him at Lord

St. James's on Friday, if he would be willing to have her as his guest.

If he would be willing? That wasn't even a question.

He recalled, however, the last time she had attended a society function. It had been the fundraiser for Dot and Edward's charity home – the very same one where Adelaide was now living, as it happened – and it had caused Adelaide to leave him, never to see him again until she had no other choice.

He wasn't certain that he wanted more reasons for her to back away from him, not now when he was finally making some progress and was back in her life.

He had to be careful, though, because if he had learned anything about Adelaide, it was that no one told her what to do. She made her own decisions, and an attempt to sway them would only lead her in the opposite direction.

“Michael? Is everything well?”

He had nearly forgotten that he wasn't alone but that his brother and sister-in-law were sitting around the table with him. Dot had been the one to address him, concern covering her face.

“Will the two of you be attending Lord St. James's party on Friday?” he asked instead, his question causing Dot and Edward to exchange a concerned glance.

“No, of course not,” Edward said, frowning. “Not only is it a masquerade, but it is not the most... circumspect of events. You know what Lord St. James is like.”

Of course, Edward would disapprove of the marquess.

But then, so did Michael.

“He does like to have his fun, although you are right, it is usually laced with some malice,” Michael said.

“But you are attending?” Edward asked, lifting a brow.

“I am considering it,” Michael said. “Lord Gregory has asked if I would be interested.”

“Lord Gregory,” Edward scoffed, placing his utensils down as he prepared to tell Michael precisely what he thought of Lord Gregory – not that Michael hadn’t heard it before. “The man is?—”

“Michael’s friend,” Dot said, placing a hand on Edward’s arm, instantly calming him. “Is he not, Michael?”

“He is,” Michael answered in the affirmative, hating that after all of this, Edward would likely be right about the man and would certainly take the opportunity to remind Michael of the fact.

“I, for one, am glad to see that you are showing interest in your pastimes again,” Dot said. “You have been rather melancholy as of late.”

“How could I not be?” Michael asked, rubbing his temple, wondering what Dot would think of the truth – that Adelaide herself had brought him back to life. “I lost everything.”

“You cannot lose what was not yours in the first place,” Edward said, earning himself a stern look from his wife, and Michael couldn’t help but smirk at his brother for getting himself into trouble.

“You’re right, Edward,” Michael said, placing his hands on the table and pushing

himself to his feet. “Adelaide was never mine. Not truly. But I would still like her to be.”

“Oh, Michael,” Dot began, and Michael hated the pity that crossed her face. He was sick of people judging him, consoling him, encouraging him to better himself.

“Not to worry, Dot, all will be fine,” he muttered as he left the table.

It had to be. He had so much to prove. To Dot and Edward. To Adelaide. To Mabel.

And, most of all, to himself.

Adelaide stood before the grand Mayfair townhouse, questioning herself and her decisions.

She was giving up an evening with her daughter to return to the bear pit.

It wasn't that she didn't trust Michael to do this himself. It was that she needed to see this through. She was the one who had brought Michael into this. He was supposed to be helping her, not overseeing the entire investigation.

She smoothed her hands over her dress as she waited nervously. She wore the same gown she had donned for Dot's society affair, the only one she owned that was appropriate for such an event. She hoped no one would notice, but most would not even recognize her, for she was no one.

Not here.

She hated that these people made her question herself when she had always been so confident in who she was and what she had to offer the world.

It was why she had told herself she couldn't join Michael's society or attend such an occasion again.

It was all Jack's fault that she was back here, and she cursed the man who had become her brother when she and her mother had been so much better off before the Tate men had entered their lives.

Her breath caught at Michael's voice, which was like a beacon of light in the darkness.

"You look beautiful," he said, the glow in his gray eyes as they roamed over her face and body proving his sincerity. "But then, you always do."

"Thank you," she said, forcing down the words that were about to emerge, words that would tell him she was nothing compared to the other women he saw at such events.

But she was just as good as any of them and would not lose herself to them. Not again.

He held his elbow toward her, and she slipped her arm through.

"You do not look so bad yourself," she murmured, unable to look him in the eye.

"A bit better than the last time you saw me?" he jested.

"I told you that I liked that look!" she protested. "I meant what I said."

"Well, I am glad to hear that you enjoy me no matter what I wear," he countered, and she sighed, knowing that there was no winning with him. "I have something for you," he said, reaching his other arm into the pocket at his side before passing her a small piece of fabric.

“Is this a mask?” she asked, holding it before her.

“It is,” he said. “I was remiss in sharing that this was a masquerade ball. I chose a silver mask for you, hoping it would match your gown. I see I was correct, for it sets off the dark blue of your dress just beautifully. May I help?”

She nodded her assent, and he stepped behind her, taking up the pieces of string on either side and bringing them together and tying them in a quick bow.

“There,” he said. “Perfect.”

His hands lingered on her shoulders, which she allowed before she stepped away from him and turned around.

“What about you?”

He pulled another mask out of his pocket, and she was shocked to see that it was exactly like hers, only bigger.

“We are matching.” He grinned. “I hope you do not mind?”

“No.”

They stepped through the entrance into the house’s foyer, and Adelaide was instantly overwhelmed by the floral scents descending from the lilies and white roses that lined the room and the cloying perfumes on the women who had invaded the house.

She stepped closer to Michael as though he could shield her from all of them, and he seemed to understand as he pressed her arm against his side.

“Well, who do we have here?” their host said from beneath a full black mask.

“You’ve brought company, I see, Mr. Redgrave.”

“I have,” he said. “A woman whose identity I will keep a secret from the likes of you.”

Lord St. James threw his head back as he laughed at that.

“I am glad you understand what a threat I can be,” he said as he turned to Adelaide and picked up her gloved hand. Her eyes widened as he lifted her fingers and kissed them.

“If you tire of Mr. Redgrave, you lovely creature, then be sure to seek me out,” he said with a flourish of both his words and his arms toward the drawing room beyond. “Now, enter if you dare!”

CHAPTER 10

Michael belatedly realized that he should have warned Adelaide about Lord St. James. He knew she was not the most conventional of women, but even she wouldn't have suspected a night like tonight. The only reason that Lord St. James got away with this was because his parties were usually masquerades. Masks always seemed to cause the ton to forgive whatever happened behind them.

The first room they entered was dark, candles lit on either side of the path leading them into what must have been the ballroom beyond.

"This is all rather odd," Adelaide whispered to Michael. "Is this typical of ton events?"

"Not at all," he said, shaking his head. "Lord St. James is eccentric and rather wicked. His parties are known for their debauchery. Let us say that Edward would never be found here."

"I understand," Adelaide said, having spent enough time with Michael's brother to know precisely what he meant by that. "Is there anything I should be watchful for?"

He met her eyes through their masks. "Everything."

They entered the ballroom, which was only dimly lit by a few wall sconces and candles within the chandelier above them. It was rather macabre with the white flowers in their funeral arrangements, which was apparently the theme this evening.

“Will we be able to find Lord Gregory?” she asked, to which Michael nodded grimly.

“Lord Gregory always draws attention to himself,” he drawled. “Nothing to worry about in that regard. If I know him, I would guess that he will enter the ballroom after everyone else, just before his brother, to make a grand entrance. Would you like a drink while we watch for him?”

“I would love one,” she said, deciding that she might need more than one to get through this evening, although she could not overdo it. That would only lead to disaster for both of them.

They walked through the crowd, who curiously eyed Michael and Adelaide, finding drinks before Michael led her over to the card room to see if Lord Gregory might be hiding there for the time being. They found only a couple of players at this early juncture of the night, and the money exchanging hands all appeared to be verifiable, at least from what Michael could see.

“We will return later,” he said in her ear as he led her from the door. “But I will need you as my good luck charm if you don’t mind.”

“Of course,” she said with a small smile, which he hoped meant she liked that idea.

They had just walked into the ballroom when Adelaide was jostled by a woman stepping backward, and Michael caught her with ease just as the woman turned around.

“My apologies—oh, Mr. Redgrave!”

It took Michael a moment to realize to whom he was speaking. She looked familiar, but then, most of the women here did.

He took in the blond curls artfully piled on her head in what he could only describe as a bird's nest, down the purple mask to the pink dress beneath, one that just barely held in her ample bosom.

Oh, yes, he remembered her now. Lady Johnson, a bored widow. He instantly wished she hadn't addressed him when he was with Adelaide.

She ignored Adelaide altogether now as she leaned in closer to him, so close that he worried her breasts would pop right out of her dress.

"It has been so long. I wondered when we might see you again."

"Yes, I have taken a break from most social engagements," he said.

"I heard rumors," she said, her voice a loud whisper as Adelaide crossed her arms over her chest and Michael clenched his jaw. He knew that look in Adelaide's eyes, and if this continued, they would not stay undetected for very long.

"Rumors which were likely true," he said, causing the woman to gasp as Adelaide's eyes widened. "Did you hear that I had a child?"

"Well, yes," she said, looking from side to side. "I was appalled. You always take such precautions!"

Adelaide's swift intake of breath was the only sign that she was affected by the reminder that Michael used to have his fair share of lovers.

"Well," he said, choosing his words carefully. "Sometimes, when one finds the right woman, he becomes overwhelmed in the throes of passion. You are right. That has never happened to me before. But this time, with this woman, it did."

Lady Johnson blinked at him in confusion as she realized he was insinuating an offence but hadn't figured out what that was. She had never been the most intelligent of women, but that was not why he had selected them. Not in the past.

It wasn't until her friend leaned in and whispered in her ear that she gasped.

"Mr. Redgrave!"

"Apologies, Lady Johnson," he said with a shrug. Widows had been his preference in the past, but no more. He no longer cared if they did not feel special. That distinction belonged to only one woman.

Suddenly, Lady Johnson turned her attention toward Adelaide as though realizing for the first time that the woman in her presence, the one who she had ignored, just might be the one who had caught Michael's attention.

"Is this?—"

"I hear a waltz beginning," he said, not wanting to draw attention to Adelaide, for he assumed that was the last thing she would want. "Shall we?" he asked her, holding out his hand, and she nodded in thanks, although he didn't miss the large grin she sent toward Lady Johnson, who gasped once more.

"If that woman continues to breathe so desperately, she's likely to pass out," Adelaide said as Michael took her onto the dark dance floor.

He laughed loudly as he twirled her in his arms. He loved that it was dark, that here, they were all supposed to be anonymous, despite knowing one another well enough to guess each other's identities beneath the masks that covered half of their faces.

"Michael, I'm afraid that I do not know how to dance — at least, not this kind of

dance.”

“Never mind that,” he said confidently. “It’s a waltz. Just shift your feet from side to side and follow me. I’ll do the rest.”

He took a chance and tugged Adelaide slightly closer toward him, bringing his lips just next to her ear.

“Do you see anyone you know?”

“No,” she said. “But then, I do not know these people as you do.”

“You can thank God for that,” he said. “Not many of them are worth knowing.”

“It seems you know some of them rather intimately,” she quipped, and he pulled back slightly to look at her.

“Why, Adelaide, are you jealous?”

“Of course not,” she said, lifting her chin. “I have no reason to be.”

The stiffness of her body told a different story, and despite Michael enjoying that she cared, he wanted her to return to the joyful woman she could be.

Just when he opened his mouth to tell her a joke, there was a commotion at the door to the ballroom, and a black-cloaked man, his entire face covered in a gold mask, entered the room.

“My goodness,” Adelaide said. “He looks like the angel of death.”

“And that,” Michael said, “would be Lord Gregory.”

“At least he will be easy to follow,” she murmured. “Why would he call such attention to himself if he is committing a crime?”

“That is exactly what a man like him would do,” Michael said. “Hide what he is doing in plain sight of everyone.”

“Interesting,” she murmured.

“That he is,” Michael said. “If you have your eyes on him, tell me what he is doing, and I will do the same if he is on the other side of us.”

“Very well,” she said. “At the moment, he is walking around the room, speaking to guests.”

Michael nodded. “He probably won’t try anything until he reaches the card room. Do you notice anything else out of the ordinary?”

“That might be a better question for you, as everything I see here is out of the ordinary.”

Michael chuckled. “I can see why you would say that. I do not think anyone else here appears suspicious. I wonder if Lord St. James is part of this or is oblivious to his brother’s misdeeds?”

“Would he be willing to risk his reputation?”

“That would depend on Lord Gregory’s motivations.”

Michael had to hide his smile that Adelaide seemed to be drawing closer to him as they danced. She likely didn’t even realize what she was doing, but now he could feel the warmth of her breath on his cheek, and he closed his eyes as he relished in their

closeness. Her soft, subtle scent was becoming his main focus over the suffocating perfumes around them.

It could very well be because he was the only thing familiar in a place of unknowns, but he would accept it for what it was.

They danced twice. Michael wasn't sure if Adelaide knew the social conventions or if she would even care. It didn't matter to him, for not only were they masked, but he would have danced with her all night if he could.

But they had other matters of concern.

Michael would like to have said that he kept his head, but he was so lost in Adelaide that she was the one who alerted him to the fact that they had to go.

"Michael, he's leaving the room."

"Who?"

"Lord Gregory," she slightly pinched him. "Who else?"

"Of course," he said, stepping back and taking her hand as he led her off of the dance floor.

"Well, what do you say?" he asked. "Are you up for a game of chance?"

"My life has been a game of chance," she said grimly. "Lead the way."

CHAPTER 11

Adelaide hoped that Michael didn't realize just how shaken she was.

She wished she could blame it on the atmosphere or Lord Gregory or their motivations for this entire charade.

But no. It was her proximity to Michael and the charged, passionate dance they had shared.

She barely knew how to dance, but he had led her around the floor with a firm possessiveness that had her nearly melting into him.

She was proud that she had maintained her focus on their tasks and had managed to catch Lord Gregory slipping out of the ballroom.

They were now following his path, Adelaide's arm through Michael's as they entered the card room once more, where the number of players had drastically increased.

"Another player, I see!" Lord Gregory said, having removed his mask and laid it beside him. He was the only player whose face was bared entirely, obviously uncaring if his identity was revealed.

"Just who could it be?" he said, but he winked at Michael, clearly well aware of his identity.

"Deal me in," Michael said, taking a seat and gesturing for Adelaide to stand behind

him.

She rolled her eyes behind her mask, hating the role of the supportive woman, but she supposed that, in this regard, Michael knew best what was expected.

She placed a hand on his shoulder, taking her turn as the possessive one as she leaned over and watched the cards being dealt into his hand.

Adelaide recognized the two lords were beginning a faro game, as were the other players in pairs. She had seen card playing often enough in the tavern and had even partaken herself when time allowed, although that hadn't been frequently.

The tavern games were nothing like this, however. She sensed the tension growing in the air as the two lords faced off against one another.

As opposed to the ballroom beyond, candlelight cast a warm glow over the opulent drawing room, illuminating the intricate gilded details of the furniture and the rich tapestries that adorned the walls. Lord Gregory's face was set in a mask of determination, if not fabric, as he deftly shuffled the deck of cards.

Michael's sharp features were hardened in concentration as he picked up his cards, his fine silk cravat impeccable against his pristine waistcoat. The outcome of this game mattered for more than the usual reasons, for Adelaide knew that Michael would want to win to inspect the coin and paper Lord Gregory added to the stakes.

"Place your bets, gentlemen," the dealer intoned, his voice smooth and practiced.

Adelaide and Michael watched carefully as Lord Gregory placed his coins on the table and the stakes were raised, even though he likely didn't even realize in what regard.

The click of coins being stacked resonated through the room like a heartbeat, each movement calculated and deliberate. As the cards were revealed one by one, Adelaide's heart raced alongside the unfolding drama before her.

"Three of spades," Michael announced as he laid down his card, a small smirk playing on his lips. Lord Gregory's eyes narrowed slightly, a flicker of uncertainty crossing his face before he composed himself.

"Queen of hearts," Lord Gregory countered confidently, laying down his card with a flourish. Adelaide held her breath, her eyes darting between the two men as they revealed the remaining cards in their hands. A hush fell over the room as the final card was turned over.

"Ace of diamonds," Michael declared, a triumphant gleam in his eyes as he revealed the winning card. Lord Gregory's shoulders sagged imperceptibly, a resigned smile tugging at his lips.

"Well played, old friend," Lord Gregory conceded graciously, though a hint of disappointment colored his tone.

"Better luck next time, Gregory," Michael replied with a nod, already raking in the pot of coins that had accumulated in the center of the table. Adelaide could practically taste his eagerness to examine them all.

As Michael deftly counted his winnings, Adelaide observed the subtle exchange of glances between the two lords, and she found herself thinking far too hard about the situation, wondering if Lord Gregory had any idea that Michael suspected him.

They played a few more rounds, and while Lord Gregory won one, Michael continued to come out ahead. He was either the luckiest man at the card table, or mischief was at play. Knowing how fickle luck could be, Adelaide suspected the

latter.

“One last round?” Lord Gregory asked, but Michael was shaking his head.

“I think I will take my winnings and go,” he said, a hint of a smile playing on his lips as he gestured towards the growing pile of money before him. “I must spend something on my beautiful companion.”

Lord Gregory’s eyes flitted up toward her. “A wise decision,” Lord Gregory agreed, his eyes traveling up and down her body, causing a poor taste to fill her mouth – unlike how she felt when Michael admired her. “I fear my luck has run dry for the evening.”

With practiced ease, Michael deftly gathered the remaining coins into a small velvet pouch, the weight of his victory palpable in the air. Adelaide couldn’t help her surge of pride that, at least as far as anyone else knew, he was hers for the evening as he thanked the dealer and bid farewell to Lord Gregory.

“I must say, Michael, I do not recall you having such a talent for faro,” Lord Gregory remarked. “I shall be more vigilant next time we meet at the card table.”

Michael chuckled, a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes. “It was a good game, Gregory. But remember, luck favors the bold.”

Michael reached out and tucked Adelaide’s arm into his elbow as though it belonged there. He was about to steer her out of the room when Lord Gregory called out to them.

“Before you go,” he said, “I must say, Michael, your companion looks awfully familiar. What did you say your name was?”

“I thought we were supposed to maintain the secrecy of our identity,” Adelaide said, not wanting to be caught in a lie, nor did she want to give her name on the off chance that Jack had mentioned her. “Masquerade and all that.”

“All the more intriguing,” Lord Gregory said, practically licking his lips.

Michael didn’t miss his interest and stepped forward, almost blocking her from Lord Gregory’s view.

“She might not be sharing her identity, nor will she be shared in any other way, understood, Gregory?”

“Of course,” Lord Gregory said, waving his hand forward. “Forgive me, and goodnight.”

Adelaide squeezed Michael’s arm as they walked to the door.

When they had left the room, she looked up at Michael with a playful glint in her eye. “I must say, Michael, you were impressively ruthless at the table tonight.”

Michael grinned at her, his gaze softening. “Only when necessary, Addi. And you know what was truly at play.”

“I do,” she said. “Do you think Lord Gregory allowed you to win?”

“I do, actually,” he said as they started back through the ballroom, Michael pulling his mask low to avoid anyone speaking to him. “I played well, but not that well, and no one is that lucky. I imagine he was trying to get his counterfeit into circulation.”

“How badly are you itching to look into that bag of coins?”

“Am I that obvious?”

“Only because I feel the same way you do,” she said, catching a strange, wistful look across his face.

“I didn’t like the way he was looking at you,” Michael said, his face hardening, so unlike the usual jovial air he wore. “How often was he at The Red Lion when you worked there?”

“He was a frequent visitor,” she said. “He certainly had reason to recognize me, although I was out of context enough that it seemed to have saved me. He never did try anything with me, likely because I was Jack’s sister.”

“Well, I would prefer you are not alone with him anymore.”

She raised an eyebrow, although she wondered if he could tell in the dim light as they weaved back through the ballroom to the front entrance, leaving the party altogether by unspoken agreement.

“I do not believe that is up to you, now.”

Michael’s jaw tensed, but he didn’t argue with her as he took her cloak from the footman and tied it around her shoulders.

“I suppose it isn’t,” he said. “Although I would prefer that my daughter’s mother remain safe and healthy.”

She hated that uneasy feeling and wondered whether he cared for her because she was the mother of his child or because of who she was herself, but she supposed she would never truly know. He had desired her before she became pregnant, but he had only offered marriage after he had known that she was with child.

If he hadn't found out about the baby — which came with no expectations on Adelaide's part — then she would likely have never seen him again.

"How did you travel here?" he asked as they left the house, and he called for his carriage.

"I took a hack," she said and could practically feel him chastising her through his stare.

"Would you allow me to give you a ride home?"

"Will we have a chance to look at the notes together?"

"Of course."

"Then, yes."

He nodded, a small glimpse of pain in his eyes that she wondered about, but it passed as he held out his hand and helped her up the stairs of his carriage.

They sat on one side of the squab together, Adelaide marveling, as she always did in one of these carriages, at the luxury of a single vehicle when some people didn't even live in homes nearly half as comfortable.

Michael left room between them as he dumped out the bag's contents on the carriage seat.

It was a mixture of coins and paper money, and it was probably a poor decision to look at it in the carriage with the lack of light.

Michael reached into his pocket and pulled out a tinder box, striking a flame.

“Careful,” Adelaide warned, worried that the paper money or squab itself might start on fire.

“I will be,” he murmured, the glow of the fire casting warm light onto his face, reminding Adelaide of just how handsome he was, how the planes of his face were near perfection, and she couldn’t help but remember the exquisite roughness of the stubble on his chin beneath her fingers.

They peered down at the mix of currency, Adelaide picking up a crown piece and turning it over in her hand before bringing it up to her mouth and biting on it gently.

“Is it soft?”

“Doesn’t seem to be,” she murmured. “It seems a bit hard for a true coin, but I’m worried for my teeth if I bite it too firmly.”

She ran her hand around the coin’s edge, and Michael furrowed his brow as he watched. He had no idea how to spot a counterfeit coin, although he was aware that paper counterfeit was easier to identify.

“Ironically, we would check for fake coins at the tavern,” she said with a slight laugh. “We usually didn’t see enough paper to worry, however.”

“Well, then, we make a fine pair, for that, I do know,” he said. “What do you think of the coin?”

“There is a ridge around the edge,” she said. “It is just hard to tell whether or not it is a regular pattern. I think to be sure we would have to weigh them. We can also try to drop them on a hard surface to see the sound they make but there aren’t any within the carriage.”

“No, there are not,” he agreed. “As for the paper,” he lifted one up between them. “I would say this one looks legitimate. I do not see any smudges, and the weight of the paper seems appropriate.”

“Compare it to this one,” Adelaide suggested, holding up another bill. Sure enough, the paper felt different when she leaned over and rubbed the one Michael held between her fingers.

She met his eyes, surprised to find how close they had moved toward one another in the small space of the carriage.

“There’s a smudge, too,” he practically whispered, as though scared that she would pull away if he spoke too loudly. “It has to be a counterfeit.”

“So, he truly is circulating the money through venues such as party card tables,” Adelaide said. “Unbelievable.”

“He has audacity, that’s for sure,” Michael agreed. “Now I have to see if I can trace the notes to where they are printed.”

“How will you do that?”

“I can ask around to a few trusted printers and see if they can help. I assume it will lead us to Rawlins. Perhaps there is a watermark or other such mark, or they might recognize the work.”

“Be careful, though, Michael,” she warned. “Just being caught with counterfeit could have harsh penalties. It was why we were always so careful at the tavern.”

“I will be,” he promised, “although I am less likely to be prosecuted, as much as I hate to admit that.”

“It is rather unfair,” she sighed.

The carriage was already slowing as they neared their destination, and Adelaide found herself wishing the time would slow down, that she could spend even more of it with Michael.

“Will you tell me what you discover?” she asked.

“Of course,” he said. “I will send a note around.”

“And if you find a printer’s shop to investigate, you will tell me?”

“I will,” he said, “although you know what I will say.”

“That you do not want to see me come to any harm. Yes, I know,” she said. “But I think we will all face the least danger by ending this as soon as possible.”

He nodded his agreement, a strange look on his face as he stared at her.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he said, shaking his head and looking away from her. “Thank you for coming tonight.”

“Thank you for bringing me,” she said. “And for helping me with this.”

“Anything for you, Adelaide.”

They shared a charged stare, and for a moment, Adelaide wondered if he would lean in and kiss her. She was just as curious about how she would respond.

But with a shake of his head, he took himself out of it and opened the carriage door.

“Goodnight, Adelaide,” he said softly, more meaning in those two words than in any kiss he could have bestowed upon her.

“Goodnight, Michael.”

CHAPTER 12

After Mabel fell asleep the next day, Adelaide was counting her savings when she received two different notes.

Which was a big deal for someone who hardly ever received any correspondence.

The first was from Mr. Dale in Tunbridge Wells. He owned the inn where she had grown up, where her mother had worked, and where Adelaide had practically been raised alongside Mr. Dale's daughter.

It had always been assumed that Elizabeth, Mr. Dale's daughter, might one day run the inn, but she had married a rector and so had gained different responsibilities.

Adelaide had stayed in touch with Elizabeth even after she and her mother had moved to London, and Elizabeth hinted that her father was interested in retiring soon.

Initially, Adelaide had been hoping that she could return to Tunbridge Wells, apprentice for a time, and then eventually buy the inn. However, Mr. Dale's health was declining, and he was looking for someone to purchase the inn so he could stop working and hopefully improve.

Adelaide had been diligently saving ever since, not only needing her savings to grow but also waiting until Mabel was old enough to travel more easily. Adelaide didn't want to think about squishing her newborn baby into one of the stagecoaches. She knew Michael wouldn't hesitate to provide her with a private carriage, but she couldn't find it within herself to ask him when it would mean taking his daughter so

much farther away from him.

Mr. Dale wrote now, telling her he was willing to lower the price for her, but she would still require at least several more months of work before she would have enough.

Then there was a second note.

This one was from Michael. He had asked around, and he had an idea where the counterfeit paper money might be manufactured – a small shop not far from the house they had seen the third man enter.

Michael suggested it was a secluded warehouse and planned to visit it the next day.

Adelaide approved that he would go in the light of day rather than at night when it would be difficult to see anything.

She would also be there, whether Michael liked it or not.

And so, the next afternoon, she found herself loitering outside of his brother's townhouse, wondering whether anyone was going to question her about her intentions standing outside so long.

“Adelaide!” Michael exclaimed when he finally emerged from the house. She was annoyed that she had waited so long, even though it wasn't Michael's fault, for she hadn't warned him that she would meet him. “I never heard from you, so I assumed you weren't coming.”

“Well, here I am,” she said, somewhat apprehensively, but then that wide smile broke out over his face.

“I am happy to see you,” he said. “I was going to hire a hack to be less conspicuous as my carriage would not be a usual sight in the neighborhood we are visiting.”

“Clever,” she said as they walked together to the corner of the square to find a hack to transport them. Once they were seated inside, in far less luxurious but much more familiar quarters than his usual carriage, they faced one another, Adelaide ready to ask him where they would visit.

But she became lost in his blue-gray eyes before she could get a word out. She would like to say it was due to the memories of their past together, but if that was the case, then wouldn’t she also remember the bad memories that accompanied them?

Instead, she couldn’t help but consider the Michael here with her now. The Michael who was putting everything aside to help her. The Michael who was assisting her, even with the knowledge that once she was free from Jack, she would be even more prepared to take their daughter and leave him.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked, trying to will away the tears welling in her eyes.

“Well,” he said, misunderstanding her, “if we can determine that this is the counterfeiter’s shop, then we can gain enough evidence to put together a case to threaten Jack to release you from his life and this scheme of his. Is that not our aim?”

“It is,” she said, inching closer. “But why are you helping me? I have given you no reason to feel anything for me but resentment. I used you and your brother to provide for me while I was expecting Mabel, and then I left you once she arrived. Now, I have asked for your help, but what are you receiving in return? Nothing except my resolve to walk away again. It is unfair to you.”

His features fell as his long lashes brushed against the hard planes of his face, so at

odds yet complementing each other beautifully.

“Isn’t it obvious?”

She stilled at the agony in his tone.

“I would do anything for you, Adelaide,” he said, his eyes flicking up to reach hers.

“I love you.”

Her breath caught in her throat, and she nearly couldn’t breathe for a moment. He loved her? What in the?—

“Do not say anything back,” he said, the words rushing out. “Positive or otherwise. I know you don’t feel the same way about me. You made that abundantly clear when you lived with me. You could hardly stand the sight of me.”

“It wasn’t you,” she swiftly said. “I was in a bad way when I was pregnant. I hated everyone.”

“I know,” he said understandingly. “Even though I knew that, I was so incredibly desperate to make you happy again, and I am so sorry I could not do so. Even still, I knew the person you were and could understand your sacrifices. When you left, I realized I was not your man. You are too good of a woman for me, and you have dreams beyond me. You have made that very clear. I would never have said anything had you not asked. But that is the answer to your question.”

She stared at him in shocked silence, trying to find words to respond to him, but she was struggling to discover what she felt even within herself.

She was not immune to him and knew that, deep within, she had feelings for him that she did not want to recognize, that she was trying to push away, for to admit them

would change everything.

It was so much easier to keep her focus on their mission to take down Jack and the counterfeit ring. She would say it wasn't fair Michael had told her this, but he was right. She had asked, so she had to be prepared for his answer.

He reached out, stroking her cheek almost reverently. He must have read her expression, for he shook his head before she could prepare any words. "Do not say anything. Please don't. Instead, why do I not tell you how I found this printer's shop? I did as I said and went to a few printers who Edward told me could be trusted. I have no idea how he knew such a thing, but that's Edward. They recognized a watermark found on the paper and directed me to the shop. Apparently, it has been known for less savory work and will not turn away a customer. Over half of my winnings, actually, were counterfeit. I weighed the coins."

"Is Rawlins the printer? Or how is he a part of the scheme?"

"That, I don't know. I suppose we might learn more when we see who the printer is."

She nodded, a lump still sitting in her throat. Michael had told her not to say anything, but it was still difficult not to respond to him, not to give him something, even if she had no words.

The silence was deafening, and Adelaide was relieved when they stopped in front of a warehouse on the edge of St. Giles.

"This is it?" she asked.

"It is," he said, leading her out of the hack after paying the driver.

"What are we going to do?"

“I was thinking that we could pretend to be patrons,” he said as he led her up the few stairs to the door of the plain brick building with very few windows. “I will see if he will do a job for me, and in the meantime, hopefully, we can explore.”

“Good idea,” she said. “What are we printing?”

When he looked over at her, that cheeky grin had returned, and she nearly lost her wits at those dimples that resurfaced.

“Naughty prints,” he said, laughing at the shocked expression on her face before he knocked on the door.

They waited for a couple of minutes, and no response came despite Michael knocking a couple more times.

He reached down and tried the doorknob, his smile returning when it turned in his hand.

“Shall we go have a peek?” he asked, and Adelaide bit her lower lip, wondering if it was a good idea, but nodded.

She followed him into the room lit only by the daylight filtering in through the dirty windows. The air was thick with the scent of ink and damp paper, the worn wooden floorboards dusted with scraps from past print runs.

“Good afternoon,” Michael called out. “Is anyone here?”

He was met with only silence and exchanged a glance with Adelaide, shrugging before turning his attention to the room.

“This might be the opportunity we needed,” he murmured. “Let’s see what we can

find.”

Adelaide moved to one side of the room, Michael to the other by silent agreement as they began to search through the work stacked in neat bundles. There were papers of many sizes, some already containing print, others empty.

She picked up one pamphlet.

“This one is nearly treasonous,” she said, wide-eyed. “Look at what it has to say about King George.”

She held it up to Michael, who grimaced. “I wouldn’t be leaving my place unlocked with seditious pamphlets like that sitting out.”

“Do you think counterfeit would also be sitting out in plain sight?”

“It would be hard to believe, but it is not impossible,” he said. They worked for a few more minutes in silence before he called out. “Adelaide! Over here.”

She hurried over to him, following his pointed finger to a pile of heavy metal objects.

“What are those?”

“They are plates for the press,” he said, reaching down and flipping one over. “What does that look like to you?”

She raised her eyes to his, elation brimming within her.

“It looks like a banknote.”

Their exchange of glee quickly fell as a banging noise sounded from the back room.

“Is that the press?” she whispered as a heavy machine in the next room clanked ominously, as though it had heard her. “Can it start without anyone working it?”

Michael shook his head slowly as he moved the plate down, hiding it, just as a voice resounded.

Adelaide’s heart began to race.

“It’s Jack!” she exclaimed, and Michael motioned her to the door, the plate still held in his hand. Apparently, he intended to take it with him as evidence.

At the footsteps sounding behind them, however, they realized simultaneously that they were not going to make it to the door.

Adelaide was too focused on the impending danger that she wasn’t watching where she was going, and her foot snagged on an uneven footboard beneath her. She went tumbling forward, arms out to catch herself even as she knew she was going to cause more commotion than they could survive, but Michael reached out and caught her in strong arms.

Without saying anything, he half-led, half-dragged her across the room.

There was only one thing to do.

Hide.

CHAPTER 13

Well, here they were again.

Michael had never bared his soul to someone before.

Now that he had, it was enlightening.

If humbling.

He just wished he hadn't done so minutes before the very woman he had given his heart to was pressed against him in the corner of a printer's shop.

He wondered how uncomfortable Adelaide was having to remain in such proximity to him, although that shouldn't be his immediate concern.

No, that would be the men walking around this shop and warehouse, one just in front of them, likely looking for the very plate he held in his hand.

Another pair of footsteps sounded beyond the desk where they were currently hidden, and Michael tightened his arm around Adelaide when she trembled ever so slightly.

"I told you that I didn't need you to be involved in this," came the third man's voice, the one they had followed the other night. This must be Rawlins. "Your role is transport."

"I had to see for myself how these notes were getting damaged. I'm not taking the

blame anymore,” Jack said. “Perhaps this shop isn’t up to the task.”

“I own part of this shop,” Rawlins responded, his insult obvious. “Our standards are high.”

Jack snorted, obviously unconcerned with riling his partner.

“I will decide that for myself,” he said. “We are late with this order, and your man cannot even find the proper plates for your press.”

“We’re fine,” was the response. “It’s you here that’s the problem.”

“I am nothing, Rawlins,” Jack said. “Wait ‘til Lord Gregory decides to visit.”

“I have been thinking about that,” Rawlins said, lowering his voice. “Do you think we really need him?”

“Lord Gregory?” Jack said, his disbelief evident. “He was the one who started all of this.”

“True, but what does he do, hand out the money to the nobs? All we get in return is the fake stuff, and if we are caught, we’ll be hanged. We cut him out, and we keep it all. You can use the tavern, and I’ll find my own means. If we’re going to risk so much, it might as well be worth it.”

“Are you mad? The beauty of it is that he would never be suspected,” Jack said, his voice a loud whisper, even though they wouldn’t know there was anyone to hide from. “My tavern is always checked for counterfeit. We make sure it never crosses our paths for that very reason.”

“I’m sure you could make an excuse if you were ever caught.”

“No, you idiot. We are the kind of people who fall for this kind of thing.” There was a pause. “I might have to tell Lord Gregory about this.”

“You had better not.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Just making it in response. Think about what I am saying, and it will make sense,” Rawlins said. “To tell Lord Gregory would be folly.”

Adelaide shifted slightly in Michael’s lap, her bottom rubbing over him in the most pleasurable painful way he could imagine.

He loved having her close and wished they were not continually forced into these positions, for all it did was remind him that it would not happen in any other way.

“I’ll think about it,” Jack said. “But we don’t have time to wait for this one plate. We will have to make more of the other notes instead. Don’t make this mistake again.”

His footsteps were loud as he stormed out of the room, and Michael and Adelaide waited a minute before the second pair echoed after him, much less assured.

Michael had been sitting in the same position for too long to move without complaint, especially with Adelaide still on top of him. She pushed herself to her feet, reaching down to help him up. He wasn’t too proud to take her hand. Besides, he’d take any excuse to touch her.

He gestured toward the door, and they rushed out before they were found out again.

They looked both ways down the street, but finding no one about, they hurried on to find a hack once more. It wasn’t until they were within – on opposite seats this time,

although Michael allowed their knees to brush together – that he pulled the plate out of his pocket and inspected it.

“It has the printer’s mark,” he said, showing it to her, their heads bent low over it together. “Which means we can tie the counterfeit to the printer.”

“But how do we tie the printer to the rest of them?” she asked. “With this, just the printer would go down, and he is likely the most innocent party out of this.”

“From the sounds of it, they will be turning on another very soon,” he said grimly. “We just need to prove that Rawlins is in partnership with Jack and Lord Gregory.”

“Or maybe he would turn on them,” she suggested. “He did not seem particularly pleased with either of them. If we can convince him that he doesn’t need them to continue the operation, that he could do it himself?—”

“Then perhaps he could provide us proof, yes,” Michael said.

The hack stopped in front of the shelter, and Adelaide paused at the door on her way out. Michael knew she felt a need to respond to his earlier declaration, but he didn’t want to hear empty words from her. However, that was the beauty of Adelaide. She would never say what she didn’t mean.

“Do you have some time?” she asked, and Michael managed a smile.

“All I have is time.”

Especially now that he had given up all of the vices that had previously kept him occupied.

“If I go to find Mabel, would you like to walk together?” she asked, somewhat

hesitantly. “I like to get her some sun each day, and if you have nothing else to do?—”

“Absolutely,” he said, not hiding his enthusiasm. “I would love that.”

He was aware of how desperate he sounded, but what was more desperate than declaring his undying love to a woman who had rejected him time and again?

However, setting his pride aside was worth it when Adelaide emerged from the shelter with Mabel in her arms.

“May I see her?” he asked.

“Of course,” she said, turning so that he could smile down at the baby.

They started down the Bloomsbury street, this one lined with modest townhouses. As they moved to the next, the residences turned more elegant, their red-brick facades covered in climbing ivy and surrounded by tall, wrought-iron railings.

Michael glanced at Adelaide, whose face was dotted with the dappled shade of leafy plane trees. Her head was held high, her strength evident in the way she carried herself. While Michael missed her presence in his house, he was glad to see her true self had returned.

Well-dressed gentlemen strolled with purpose past them in their leisurely walk. As they neared the British Museum, scholars strode past, the occasional carriage clattering, wheels echoing against the clean-swept cobblestones.

Michael decided to simply enjoy this moment, not considering what had happened between them in the past or what was to come in the future. Adelaide was certainly more subdued than she had been when they first met, but he supposed she was no

longer the same woman he had developed a relationship with. She was a mother, responsible for another human being, and intent on looking after this little one all by herself, no matter the help he offered her. His heart sank at the thought of life without the two of them, although he knew that Adelaide would always allow him to visit.

No matter the situation, he would be present in this child's life. Of that, he was certain.

He would not be his father, any more than he knew Adelaide would never be a woman like his mother.

"What were your parents like?" he asked suddenly, and she looked at him in surprise before facing forward again, taking her time to put thought into her answer.

"I never knew my true father," she said. "He... well, I know his identity but not anything about him, for he was never in my life. He used my mother, then discarded her as though she was nothing more than a plaything for him. My mother was everything to me. She worked hard, yes, but any free time she had was spent with me, making sure that I never wanted for anything, that I knew what it meant to be loved."

She paused, swallowing, the next part of her story obviously difficult, but Michael didn't stop her, selfishly needing to know everything about her. "She changed when she married Jack's father. He tried to control her, to tell her when and where she could go. He broke her spirit, and I truly believe that was what eventually killed her. Not the sickness. That was the instrument, yes, but he was the reason."

Michael instantly hated him for the hurt he had caused Adelaide, even if it was indirect.

"What happened to Jack's father?"

“He died in a tavern brawl,” she said without any sympathy. “A pool cue found his eye and was pushed in too far. It was ghastly.”

“Were you there?” he asked in shock.

“I was,” she said grimly. “Not something I would want to see again, no matter how much I hated the man.” She paused. “When I gave you the note to send to Lord Gregory, it was because Jack threatened me with spreading the truth about my father.”

“Do you know who he is?” Michael asked with surprise.

“Yes,” she said, biting her lip. “Lord Montrose.”

“Lord Montrose?” Michael said, his eyes widening. “He was a friend of my father’s. Which should probably tell you what you need to know. Have you ever met him?”

“I have not, nor do I have any wish to,” she said. “My mother told him about me, and he did nothing to help her nor had any interest in me. I would prefer not to meet him nor hear him say anything about my mother.”

“I understand,” said Michael. “And your father makes no difference to me. Nor should it matter if Jack spreads the rumor.”

“I was worried about the harm it might bring to your family.”

“Trust me, Addi, we have caused enough of our own scandal.”

“I just don’t want to add to it. Besides, I have enough issues with Jack. I don’t need to add my father to it.”

“Jack does not seem too different from his father.”

“He’s not.”

“I wish you did not have to work for him for so long.”

“So do I,” she said with a sigh. “So do I.”

They walked in companionable silence for a few minutes, time which Michael spent pretending that this was his true life. That this was his family, enjoying a day out together. That nothing was keeping them apart or would threaten them, that Adelaide wanted to be with him as much as he wanted to be with her.

Their relationship confused him. He might not be the best judge of character, but from what he could tell, Adelaide enjoyed his company now and felt more than friendship.

Yes, they had moments in the past where they had been at odds, when she had not been impressed with him, especially when he had been drinking, but they had come through that to the other side.

Was she too proud to accept what he offered her? Or did she truly harbor no further romantic feelings than what had brought them together in the first place?

He had resolved to see this through, for her to change her perspective of him. He supposed there was nothing more he could do but continue his plans.

He would go to Jack tonight, present him with the evidence they had gathered, and convince him to release Adelaide from this hold he had upon her. He knew Adelaide would want to know his plans, but Jack might allow his pride and emotion to overcome reason if she were present.

He would try to get this Rawlins involved if his plan didn't work. He couldn't see the man giving his partners to the authorities, for it would put him at too much risk, but maybe Michael could at least threaten them.

He was trying anything possible now.

For he had no choice. Not if he would save Adelaide – and himself, in the process.

CHAPTER 14

A delaide's steps down the familiar street were slower than usual. She had never enjoyed coming to this place, but even less so when leaving someone so beloved behind.

Her baby.

But this had to be done. She knew Michael would want to be involved, but he had done enough for her already. She had only asked for his assistance because Jack had included him in this scheme.

Now, it seemed the note they had passed on had brought this merry trio of criminals back together, which meant that not only was she an accomplice to it all, but so was Michael. They were trapped.

She knew better than anyone that there wasn't much good left in Jack, but perhaps he would listen to reason.

The tavern was quieter tonight than when she had last worked there. She wondered if Jack had allowed the quality to lower so much that most patrons had found another place to indulge themselves.

It also meant that it wasn't long before she was noticed.

“Adelaide, what are you doing here?”

Abraham was pouring drinks tonight, and Adelaide greeted him warmly.

“Good to see you. I am looking for Jack.”

“He’s in the back in a meeting, though I don’t know with who,” Abraham said, leaning over the bar. “I thought I told you that you shouldn’t come back here, that it was good you got away.”

“You did,” she said, drumming her fingers on the bar as she looked around for her brother or anyone else who might be a threat. “And I appreciate that. Trust me, I am trying to stay as far from here as possible, but first, I need to free myself from something Jack is holding over me.”

“What would that be?” Abraham asked, his brow furrowing in concern.

“I’ll take it up with Jack,” she said flippantly. “I don’t want you to be involved and have any of this come back on you. But thank you, Abraham, truly. What room is Jack in?”

“His office off the kitchen,” Abraham said, and she nodded her thanks before pushing through the door into the back rooms.

She heard the voices echoing through the kitchen, even from the closed door between it and Jack’s office. She wondered if he was meeting with one of the partners from the smuggling ring. She crept closer to the door, quieting her footsteps, hoping to hear something of value.

Then froze when she recognized the voices within.

That was Jack, yes.

But that was not Lord Gregory or Rawlins with him.

It was Michael.

Michael had been a fool to hope that Jack would be reasonable.

He was, in fact, the exact opposite.

When Michael had arrived at the tavern, Jack had appeared as though he was a terrier who had caught a rat. He had led Michael into his office to sit in a hard wooden chair before taking a seat across from him in a much more comfortable one.

“Surprised to see you here,” Jack said. “Usually, you send your brother to do the dirty work for you.”

“I did in the past,” Michael agreed. “I can admit that I was a coward.”

“What has changed?” Jack asked, his voice so soft and sweet that Michael wanted to be sick.

“Much has changed,” Michael said, crossing his arms over his chest. “I think you know most of it.”

“Are you referring to my sister? The one that you tried to pay off?”

Michael gritted his teeth, hating the reminder. When he had found out that Adelaide was pregnant, yes, Edward had come here to The Red Lion to try to pay off Jack to absolve Michael of the responsibility of the baby. Still, when Edward had seen how awful the man was and had understood the life the child would be born into – and that Adelaide would have to endure – he had ensured that Adelaide was looked after directly.

It hadn't taken long for Michael to decide that he was the one who had to look after her and the baby, then and forever. He never did anything in half-measures, and when he decided to go all in with her, he had done so in the extreme.

She had just never quite agreed to his idea.

"I had a lapse in judgment, but one that I will never make again," he said quietly. "Which is why I am here. Adelaide needs to be free of you. She has never wronged you, Jack, in any way, and you must release her from the threats you have made upon her."

"You will have to tell me more about what you are referring to," Jack said with a sly smile that told Michael he knew exactly what he was talking about.

"You have threatened her, telling her that she must do your bidding or you will accuse her of being involved in your counterfeit scandal."

Michael felt intense satisfaction at the surprise that lit Jack's face.

"Who said anything about a counterfeit scandal?" Jack said. "Perhaps you are the one who is framing me."

"Enough of this," Michael scoffed. "I have enough evidence of what you are doing that I can expose you. I know what you will say – that you will take Adelaide down with you. But you will preserve yourself, Jack, I know you will. You are not going to risk your life. I have evidence against you, while all there is against Adelaide is hearsay."

"You are willing to take that chance?" Jack said, a sly smile crossing his face. "Risk her life?"

“There is one thing you must know about me, Jack,” Michael said, standing and placing his hands on the table and leaning toward Jack menacingly. “I am not skilled at many things, but gambling is one of them. I know how to read people. And right now, you are bluffing. Not doing a very good job of it, either, for a man who owns and lives in a tavern.”

Jack’s face turned furious, his entire facade dropping as he stood, his hand reaching into his pocket before pulling out a pistol and holding it up to Michael’s face.

“Get out.”

“Here I was hoping for a reasonable discussion.”

“You do not come into my place of business and threaten me,” Jack snarled, and Michael sighed. Jack could have made things so much easier on himself.

“You do realize that my offer is not to turn you on or to halt your... production,” he said, holding his hands up, hoping that Jack would have enough rational thought to realize that killing a nobleman in his place of business would bring him nothing but trouble and certain death. “My only request is that you release Adelaide. Tell her that she does not have to be involved anymore and that you will keep her name out of this.”

“Here is what you do not understand,” Jack seethed, inching closer toward him. “I do not want Adelaide to go anywhere. She should be here with me, where she belongs. You find her, and you tell her that. Then you can be released from this.”

“I am not concerned about my involvement,” Michael said. “No one will believe it. Speaking of noblemen, what will Lord Gregory think of being exposed?”

“He will think he needs to find a new friend,” Jack returned, pressing the pistol

against Michael's forehead. "Now?—"

Just as Michael began to say his prayers, the door scraped open behind him, and he swung around.

"Adelaide?"

"Michael?"

"Oh, perfect timing," Jack said with a vile grin. "Our lovers are back together."

"Adelaide, what are you doing here?" Michael said, watching the horror fill her eyes as she stared at the gun. "You must leave. Now."

"I cannot leave you here with him alone!"

"I assure you that I can take care of myself. You need to go. We cannot leave Mabel without either of us."

"I hate to interrupt," Jack said, leaning in, waving the pistol from one of them to the other, "but as it happens, neither of you make the decisions here. The two of you have stuck your noses where they don't belong, and now you know more than you should. My original plan was to blame all of this on you, but it seems you might be able to prove the truth. So, onto the next."

Michael didn't like the sound of that.

"It will be too messy in here, though," Jack mused.

"You are going to kill us?" Adelaide gaped, moving closer to Michael, except she didn't hide behind him as most people would. Instead, she took his hand in hers,

standing with him unitedly.

“I am going to kill him ,” Jack said, pointing at Michael. “You, I am going to keep for myself. I should kill you, but I just don’t seem to have it in me. I need you with me, but instead, you let this fool plant a sprig.”

“Jack, counterfeit is one thing, but murder is another,” Adelaide said, and Michael wondered whether Jack also heard the desperation in her tone, as matter-of-fact as she tried to be.

“Is it, though?” Jack said with a shrug. “I’m already this far gone, what’s another crime? Now, to the back, Mr. Redgrave , or I will shoot Adelaide, whether I need her or not.”

Michael swallowed. If he had been the only one threatened, he would have attempted to wrest the gun away from Jack, but he couldn’t put Adelaide at risk.

He nodded, running his hand down Adelaide’s arm to her palm.

“It will be fine,” he murmured before leaning down and whispering in her ear. “You must escape. As soon as he is occupied with me, run. As fast as you can. Take Mabel and go to Edward. He will know what to do.”

“Michael—” she whispered back, but Jack stepped forward and waved the gun between them, forcing them apart.

“That’s enough sweet nothin’s between the two of you. Let’s go.”

“I will not stay with you, Jack,” Adelaide said as he nudged them forward, and they walked in front of him, Adelaide still gripping Michael’s hand. “You cannot force me to.”

“You are right, we are not staying,” he said. “I’ve saved enough. I am going to cut my losses and get away from here. Find somewhere else, be someone else. And you will come with me. Maybe we can follow that dream you were chasing, together.”

Michael noticed he said nothing about the baby. He had either forgotten or didn’t care.

“Where are we going?” Michael asked, trying to gather information.

“Outside. Don’t want to have to clean up any more than I have to.”

Jack led them out the back door, through the kitchen and the storeroom, destroying any hope Michael had of catching the attention of a tavern patron or worker.

When they stepped outside, he turned to Jack.

“I will make this easy on you, but you must release Adelaide.”

Jack laughed menacingly. “Have you heard nothing I’ve said? She’s staying right here. Now, take two steps forward.”

Michael looked at Adelaide. “You have to let go,” he said, urging her attention to their joined hands.

“I will not,” she said, tears seeping out of her eyes as she stared at him. “Michael, I?—”

“Enough!” Jack said. “If you don’t want to ruin your dress, Adelaide, do as he says. You have ten seconds.”

“Stop this, Jack,” Adelaide begged. “Please. I?—”

“Five seconds.”

“No! Michael, you need to know. I?—”

“Two.”

Michael tore his hand away, not wanting to leave her, but knowing that it was the only way.

“I love you,” he said, staring at her. “Run.”

“One.”

He braced for impact as Adelaide’s horrified stare looked back at him, and he decided that if he had to go, her face was the perfect last memory.

The shot, however, never came.

He cringed, waiting, and he did hear a crash and a thud, but it was much softer than expected.

He and Adelaide turned together, their mouths dropping open at what they saw.

For Jack was no longer standing there. Instead, he was lying on the ground, the pistol dropped from his hand next to him. He was knocked senseless.

In his place was the man Jack recognized from the kitchen last time and the bar today. He held a bottle in his hand that was now nothing more than jagged edges as bits of brandy washed over Jack and the ground next to him.

“Abraham!” Adelaide cried. “Thank you. Thank you so much. I?—”

“Go,” Abraham said, gesturing to the side. “Before he wakes up. I told you not to come back here, Adelaide. He has the strangest designs on you.”

“But—”

“I was about to step into the kitchen when I saw him holding the gun on you,” he said. “Go now, I beg of you.”

Michael didn’t know anything about this man, but he owed him his life – his and likely, Adelaide’s.

“If you ever need anything, come to Brook Street in Mayfair,” he said. “Ask for Lord Mandrake. He is my brother and will take care of whatever you need.”

Abraham nodded his understanding, gratefulness in those warm brown eyes.

Michael looked over at Adelaide. “He’s right. We need to go. And we need to go now.”

CHAPTER 15

“ A nd just where are we going?” Adelaide asked as they ran down the street together, not having to speak to agree that they had to get to Mabel before anyone else did.

Jack was many things, but he was not an idiot. He would know that she was the means to both of them.

“We need to get out of London,” Michael said between breaths. “We can go hide at Edward’s estate for a time.”

“Where is it?”

“Near Horsham,” Michael said grimly. “It is about a half-day’s drive. I know it is not ideal — that you do not want to be with me and that you have plans of your own. But for right now, we need to both stay alive.”

“Of course,” she said, and he looked at her in surprise.

“Really?”

“I am not going to risk my daughter’s life,” she said, more snappily than she meant to, but she was spinning. When she had thought Michael was about to die, she had been overcome by so many emotions. Guilt was present, yes, but it was more than that. Despair. Grief. And not just grief for a friend, an acquaintance, or the father of her daughter.

It was grief for a man she loved.

But she couldn't love him. That would ruin everything.

Which left her with only two choices.

She could deny her feelings, allow reason to intervene, and keep on the path she had set out for herself – once this situation was resolved.

Or she could give in. Accept that she loved him, give up the dreams she had held to do as he wished, and agree to be his wife.

Either way, she was losing something. It was what she had feared, but she had done everything she could to resist him.

At the worst, she would end up like her mother. Broken, alone, and keeping herself together only for her daughter.

Or the best could happen. A scenario she had denied for so long because to admit its possibility also meant that there was so much more to lose if it didn't come to be.

She could not properly consider all of the options right now, however.

For right now, they were running for their lives.

They arrived at the shelter, where a very surprised Mrs. Coleman awaited.

"You cannot come in here," she said, barring the door to Michael, who lifted his arms and nodded his head, understanding.

"I know," he said, "I know." He turned to Adelaide. "I'll return to Edward's, borrow

a carriage, and return for you and Mabel while you prepare to depart. I do not want to take her in a hack.”

“What is going on?” Mrs. Coleman said, directing her question to Adelaide in concern, obviously having picked up on the urgency in their exchange.

“It’s my brother, Jack,” Adelaide said grimly. “He is after us. Both of us. We have to escape before he comes for me or Mabel.”

“This place is as safe as they come,” Mrs. Coleman said with a suspicious glance at Michael, even though he was related to the very man who funded this organization. “Would it not be best that you stay here?”

“We need to leave London,” Michael said stubbornly. “It will be safest for all of us.”

Mrs. Coleman returned her attention to Adelaide, as though to ascertain whether this was her decision as well, and she nodded her assent, warming Michael through that she trusted him, agreed with him, and was allowing him to protect her and Mabel.

Their family.

“I’ll be back,” he promised, and then hurried off into the night, to find a hack and return with the carriage as soon as possible.

Even this brief separation was too much, especially with everything threatening them. He jumped from the hack as it was practically still rolling to a stop, having directed it to the mews so that he could ask the groom to prepare one of the carriages. The man looked sleepy, having been about to retire, but nodded, not asking any questions. Thankfully, Edward and Dot were already abed when he returned home. For once, Michael was grateful for Edward’s predilection to act like a seventy-year-old man.

It wasn't that he didn't want to explain himself to them. He simply didn't have time to tell them all he needed them to know and ask questions.

There would be time for that in the morning.

He would leave this moment if he could, but he knew traveling through the night would be far too dangerous. Instead, he would have Adelaide and Mabel stay at Edward's London townhouse through the night and leave as soon as they could in the morning.

By the time he returned to the women's shelter, he was fraught with worry that he would arrive to find Adelaide and Mabel gone, but he was considerably relieved to see them waiting for him. He bundled them into the carriage, taking his first deep breath once they had returned to Edward's.

Adelaide wished him goodnight right away as she retired to the room she had once called hers, and Michael wished he could lie outside of her bedroom door all night to keep her safe, but he had to make do with sitting in the drawing room.

He knew he was likely too vigilant, but he would never forgive himself if anything happened to them.

Like it or not, they were his, and he would keep them safe.

Whatever it took.

Adelaide paused outside the door of the breakfast room.

Here she was again.

She had left this house months ago to move forward alone, and now here she was,

running away from her problems again. She supposed that one couldn't ignore her past and hope it would disappear.

It was time to face it head-on.

And she supposed it was finally time to admit that meant asking for help, from the man she seemed to continue to return to. The man she had doubted she could ever rely on, but who continued to prove her wrong.

Michael.

“What a wonderful surprise!”

Dot rose as Adelaide entered the breakfast room, Mabel in her arms. She passed her over to Dot, who ignored the rest of them as she gave all her attention to the baby.

Adelaide glanced over at Michael, wondering how much he had told his family.

From how Edward looked at her, she guessed he had shared most of it.

“I am sorry for all that you have gone through,” Dot said, leaning over and patting Adelaide's hand. “You shouldn't have to deal with that from anyone, let alone family.”

“Michael told you about the counterfeiting scheme, then? About my brother?”

Edward's face darkened. “He did. I would like to take the information to the authorities, but Michael has convinced me that would not be in your best interest. At least for now.” He looked at Michael. “I told you that Lord Gregory was a good-for-nothing scoundrel who?—”

“Edward,” Dot murmured, placing her hand on his arm and lowering his finger. “We talked about this.”

Edward sighed. “Yes. It is an unfortunate circumstance and no one’s fault. But that doesn’t mean we cannot affect change for the future. Are you certain you feel safest at Mandrake Hall?” he asked her and Michael, looking between them.

“I cannot see Jack making the journey,” Adelaide said, about to pull out her chair, but Michael swiftly rose and did it for her. She smiled her thanks. “He said he wanted to leave London, but he would have saved for one particular plan. He wouldn’t have any money left if he came after me.”

“I will hire a man to keep an eye on him,” Edward said. “That way, we will know if he has any designs to leave London.”

“Oh, you do not have to do that!” Adelaide exclaimed. This family had spent far too much on her already.

“I do not have to, but I want to,” Edward said sternly. “You are part of our family, and we will care for you.”

A twinge of guilt rippled through Adelaide at that statement, for she wasn’t truly part of their family. Mabel was, but Adelaide had declined the opportunity to join the family herself.

Dot seemed to understand her thought, for she leaned over and patted Adelaide’s hands.

“Edward is right. No matter what, you are one of us.” She paused. “Actually, we would like to join you at Mandrake Hall in a few days. We will see to everything here, stay apprised of Jack’s movements, and then start on our way.”

“I would like that,” Adelaide said, telling the truth. She did enjoy Dot’s company, and it would be nice to have her help with Mabel.

But for a few days... maybe she would appreciate some time alone with Michael. For the last time.

She realized she’d had more than one “last time” with him, but this time she meant it. She had to, for she was getting so far into this that to fall any further would mean to lose herself to him forever.

Dot helped them prepare for the journey, expressing some concern for Mabel over the long roads but encouraging Adelaide that all would be well. It was so rushed that when they finally departed, Adelaide had to take a deep breath before looking across the seat at Michael.

“Well, here we are,” she said with a crooked smile.

“Here we are,” he agreed before his gaze dropped to Mabel in her arms.

Adelaide’s breath caught, for she wasn’t sure she had ever seen such a look of pure adoration cross over someone’s face. Especially a man’s. Especially Michael’s.

It made her heart melt, washing away any concern she might have previously felt about Michael being the father to her baby.

“Would you like to hold her again?” she asked softly, and he nodded, not removing his eyes from the baby’s face.

He stiffened his arms in front of him in a very rigid cradle, and she laughed lowly before reaching one arm out and softening his arms.

“If you are concerned, she will feel it,” she said. “Be open to her.”

He nodded slowly, his shoulders drawing down as he tried to relax them before holding his arms out to welcome Mabel. When Adelaide placed her in his arms, the baby blinked up at him, cooing, before reaching out one chubby fist and grabbing his finger, bringing it up to her face.

Michael stared at her with so much love that Adelaide struggled to contain her own emotion, watching the two of them. Michael’s lips curled upward, his dimples appearing, and he met Adelaide’s gaze in amazement.

“I do think she likes me,” he said, just above a whisper.

“Of course she does,” Adelaide said with a smile of her own. “She recognizes you.”

“She’s barely seen me.”

“She recognizes your soul. As her father.”

He lifted his head, and their eyes caught and held in a moment of complete vulnerability, as he seemed to understand that Adelaide didn’t just mean that he was Mabel’s father by blood, but by far more than that. That maybe, just maybe, she was considering involving him in their lives.

She knew it might be folly.

But she couldn’t help but feel that it was the right choice.

“You said the ride to Horsham is about a half day?” she asked, as, now that they finally felt safe in the carriage, the events of the previous night began to catch up to her and her eyes felt heavy.

“It is about four hours, yes, depending on the roads,” Michael said, “but we can stop anytime you or Mabel need a break.”

“Perhaps I will just rest my eyes for a moment,” she said, the yawn sneaking out before she could stop it.

“Sleep,” he said, his voice a low rumble. “I have you. Both of you.”

Adelaide nodded, telling herself that all she needed was a few minutes, and she would be refreshed enough to make it through the day.

Then the peace that had eluded her for so long finally wrapped itself around her, and she fell into a deeper sleep than she had in months.

Just as she drifted off, she admitted the truth to herself, somewhere in the deep recesses of her mind.

The safety wasn't from being away from Jack and London.

It was Michael.

He was safety.

He was home.

CHAPTER 16

Michael could have watched Adelaide sleep all day.

He would have liked to have allowed her the hours she needed to catch up and had hoped that the nap Mabel had fallen into in his arms would have lasted long enough.

But, alas, after a couple of hours, the baby woke and was no longer quite as happy that the face staring down at her was not her mother's. Michael tried to soothe her, but eventually, her cries woke Adelaide, who waved away his apologies.

"She's hungry," Adelaide said. "There is certainly nothing you could do about that."

In all his years, Michael had never witnessed a mother like Adelaide, but he supposed that was due to his lack of a female presence in his life and the noble inclination not to provide a young one any care beyond that which could be employed.

It was the first carriage ride of any length he could remember actually enjoying, but when it ended, he was not disappointed, for it only meant more time with Adelaide and Mabel.

The servants had not been expecting them, with Michael and Adelaide's decision to come having been so hastily made, but they welcomed their arrival, even if many seemed suspicious of their arrangements. Likely so, since most only knew Michael by reputation, for it had been so long since he had spent any length of time at Mandrake Hall.

Of course, they all doted on Edward, the most benevolent employer any could ever ask for, and were pleased to hear that he would be arriving in due course.

Adelaide requested her meal in her room so that she would have time to prepare herself and the baby, and it wasn't until a few hours later, when Mabel was sleeping for the night in a cradle that had been rescued from the attic and now sat in Adelaide's room, that Michael saw Adelaide once more.

He knew immediately that the knock on his bedroom door was hers due to its hesitancy. He reminisced on the last time she had arrived at his bedchamber, when the scenario had been the complete opposite, and she had nearly knocked it down with her enthusiasm.

"Michael?" she called out. "Can I come in for a moment?"

"Of course," he said, standing and meeting her halfway across the room. She could come in for as long as she would like. A moment. The night. The rest of his life.

But he would start with this.

"Are our rooms connected?" she asked.

"They are," he confirmed. "I left the door shut for your privacy, but I wanted to be close, so that I would be here if you needed me."

She shut the door to the hall behind her and opened the one that adjoined their rooms together. "So I can hear Mabel if she cries," she explained, and he nodded in understanding.

She turned to him, smoothing her hands over the rough fabric of her blue dress as though she was embarrassed of it, but of course, she had no need to be, for she was

beautiful in anything she wore.

“Is something amiss?” he asked, concerned that perhaps she already regretted coming here with him.

“No, not at all,” she said quickly. “Everything has suddenly changed, and I feel... unsettled.” She crossed the room and sat on the edge of the bed while he decided his safest bet was one of the chairs in front of the fireplace. She twisted her hands against one another, a rare set of nerves overcoming her. “I am sorry I pulled you into this. Now I can add making you leave your home to the list of things that getting tangled with me has meant.”

“It’s an adventure,” he said with a slow-spreading grin. “But isn’t that what life is? I told you that I was bored before, but now, Adelaide, I have purpose and enjoy every moment of it. There is no one else I would rather race across the country with to escape counterfeiting schemers trying to capture us.”

She let out a shocked laugh. “You cannot be serious.”

“Oh, but I am,” he said earnestly, leaning forward. “In fact, I am more concerned about you. You’ve had a lot constantly change on you.”

He sensed there was another reason she was here in his bedroom. She’d had time enough to apologize on the carriage ride here, and apologize she had. Was she lonely?

“What do you need, Addi?” he asked in a softer tone. “What can I do for you?”

Eyes locked on him, she rose from the bed and took slow steps toward him, stopping just before his chair. He swallowed at her nearness, not allowing himself to believe that this was going anywhere beyond a conversation.

“Do you remember the night we were together?”

Did he remember it? He only revisited it in his mind every night that he lay down to sleep, getting him through all of the days and nights without her by his side.

But he didn't want to appear too desperate.

“Of course I remember it,” he said, his voice husky.

“That night,” she said slowly, her eyes downcast, her lashes fluttering over her high cheekbones, “was the first time in a long time that I set aside all that had been holding me back and just allowed myself to be me. To have fun. To remember everything I loved about... well, life, before Jack and his father stole that from me.”

“I'm glad I could help you remember,” he said, unable to stop himself from reaching out and taking her hand. “I would do anything for you.”

“I know I am being selfish in asking you this, after what you've shared with me,” she said. That he loved her. She didn't say it, but they both knew to what she was referring. “But I was wondering if, tonight, we could just... well, we could just pretend that we are back there, in that night? That we are other people? That there is no past between us, no future to worry about, that we are just two people taking enjoyment in one another?”

His jaw went slack as he realized what she was saying. He also knew that she was right. It was selfish of her to ask because it would make him want her all the more.

But he also knew that he could never deny her. Especially in this.

He stood slowly, not wanting to scare her away as he leaned in and cupped her cheek, which molded perfectly into his large palm.

“Of course,” he said. “Anything you need.”

“This time we should probably skip the pregnancy part,” she whispered. “Do you think you can stop in time?”

He solemnly nodded. “Yes. I promise.”

Her eyes locked on his, she stood on her toes, lifting her chin toward him. He took it between his thumb and index finger, slanting her face to the right so that it was at the perfect angle, and then he claimed her lips with every possessive bone in his body that wanted her with a desperation he couldn’t put into words because that would surely have her running out the door and all the way back to London, the risk of Jack and his pals and all be damned.

So, instead, he plundered her mouth mercilessly, not going slow as he should have, no easing into it, but taking up right where he had left off, his tongue diving between her lips to find hers, stroking the velvety softness as he committed her taste and feel to memory.

She was strong, determined to take care of herself and look after everyone around her, but she also allowed herself to be vulnerable and accept his help.

And, damn, was he happy to be the man she needed right now.

Last time they had been together was hurried, passionate, but tonight, despite his promise that they would pretend they were other people, he wouldn’t. He couldn’t. He would make love to her the way he had been desperate to for months now.

With the full depth of his emotion, to show her what she truly meant to him. He would take care of her in every way he knew how, and by the end of this, she would understand what it truly meant to be loved.

He broke their kiss only to bend down and pick her up, his hands beneath her knees and her back, before he carried her over to the bed and laid her down gently upon it.

Their eyes met, a silent understanding passing between them. Overcome by the intensity of emotions he had never felt, Michael whispered, “I want you never to feel alone again. If nothing else, we will always know this.”

Adelaide’s eyes widened but her gaze never left his as she nodded in response, causing Michael’s heart to pound in anticipation.

She reached out, her soft fingers tracing the contours of his face as though committing them to memory, and Michael pushed away the thought that she was saying goodbye to him. “I trust you,” she murmured, her voice sincere.

Michael’s hands roamed Adelaide’s clothed body, caressing every curve and valley with worshipful devotion. He trailed his lips along her neck, savoring the softness of her skin and the way she shivered beneath his touch.

“You are so beautiful,” he murmured against her collarbone before pressing a tender kiss against the bare skin that was calling to him. “I will make you feel incredible, Addi. I will show you how much I adore you.”

His breath caught as he worried that he had said too much, that she would back away when reminded of what he felt for her, but his shoulders dropped in relief when she sighed in pleasure, arching into his touch.

“Yes, Michael,” she breathed. “Give me everything.”

He captured her lips in a deep, sensual kiss as his hands found the ties of her dress. Slowly, reverently, he undid each fastening until the garment slipped from her shoulders. Adelaide helped him, shrugging out of the dress, revealing her bare form

to his hungry gaze.

Michael drank in the sight of her, from the swell of her breasts to the curve of her hips. "Perfection," he declared hoarsely. "You are perfection."

Bending down, he took one pert nipple into his mouth, swirling his tongue around the sensitive bud. Adelaide gasped and threaded her fingers through his hair, holding him close as he lavished attention on both her breasts until she was writhing beneath him.

Adelaide arched into his touch, soft moans escaping her lips as he swirled his tongue around one nipple.

"Michael," she sighed, tugging on his hair. "That feels wonderful."

He glanced up at her with a roguish grin. "I'm just getting started, love. I want to taste every inch of you."

Continuing his sensual exploration, Michael blazed a path down her soft stomach with his lips and tongue. He dipped into her navel, smiling against her skin when she twitched and gasped. Settling between her parted thighs, he pressed a reverent kiss between her curls.

"You are exquisite," he murmured, inhaling her intoxicating scent. "I could spend hours here."

"Please, Michael," Adelaide whimpered, undulating her hips in a silent plea.

Unable to deny her, he parted her glistening folds with his fingers and laved his tongue over her sensitive pearl. Adelaide cried out sharply, fisting the sheets beside her. Spurred on by her response, Michael delved deeper, thrusting his tongue inside her while his thumb circled her bundle of nerves.

He licked and suckled, stoking the flames of her desire higher and higher until she was writhing beneath him. Her moans of pleasure were the sweetest music to his ears. Relentless, Michael added two fingers, pumping in and out of her slick heat in tandem with his tongue.

“Yes, don’t stop!” Adelaide panted, her fingers digging into his shoulders, telling him she was sitting on the edge.

With a skillful curl of his fingers inside her and a firm press of his tongue, Michael sent her flying. Adelaide shattered with a cry, her inner muscles clenching rhythmically around him as he took satisfaction that he was the one who could bring her to this place, that she was his – for now, at least. He gentled his ministrations, coaxing out every last tremor until she lay boneless and sated beneath him.

Michael kissed his way back up her body until he claimed her lips in a deep, passionate kiss.

“I want to make you feel good too,” she said huskily, rocking against his straining erection.

He straightened up just long enough to divest himself of his clothing before settling his naked body over hers, both of them groaning at the slide of skin against skin. Michael rocked his hips, his hard length nestling against her slick folds.

“Are you sure, Addi?” he asked, searching her face, needing her agreement even in his haze of desire.

“Yes,” Adelaide replied without hesitation, wrapping her legs around his waist. “Make love to me, Michael.”

Nearly undone by her declaration, Michael aligned himself at her entrance and slowly

pushed forward, joining the two of them. He stilled for a moment, in awe of how she enveloped him perfectly, as if they were made for each other.

“Addi,” he rasped, beginning to move in deep, purposeful strokes, knowing that his mouth was running away from him but unable to stop it. “You are beautiful. Incredible. I’ll never stop loving you.”

That was too much. He knew it the moment he said it, his eyes meeting hers. Her blue eyes glistened, a tear seeping out of them as she didn’t respond but nodded, telling him that she understood.

They rocked together in perfect synchronization, giving and receiving in equal measure. Soft moans and whispered words filled the air as the world narrowed to the two of them, lost in their passion.

Michael angled his hips to hit that sweet spot inside her with every stroke, determined to bring her back to the edge.

Adelaide’s velvety walls fluttered around him as he drove into her again and again. She clung to his shoulders, nails biting deliciously into his skin as she arched to meet his thrusts.

“Yes, Michael, yes!” she cried, throwing her head back in abandon. “Harder.”

Growling low in his throat, he complied, snapping his hips forward with increased fervor. The bed creaked beneath them as their bodies came together, urgency building with each stroke. Sweat glistened on their skin, the air heavy with the scent of lovemaking.

Michael dipped his head to capture one rosy nipple between his lips, swirling his tongue around it. Adelaide held his head in place. He lavished attention on her breasts

once more, suckling and nipping until she was writhing beneath him.

Releasing her nipple, he crashed his mouth against hers in a bruising kiss, tongues tangling with need as he continued to plunge into her willing body.

“So tight, so perfect,” he rasped against her lips, finding himself sitting on the edge, but willing himself not to fall until she did again. “I never want to stop making love to you.”

“Then don’t,” she returned breathlessly, undulating her hips to take him even deeper.

His control snapped at her impassioned plea. Hooking her legs over his shoulders, he pounded into her, the new angle allowing him to penetrate to the hilt. Adelaide cried her approval, fisting the sheets as he set a relentless pace.

“Let go for me, love,” Michael commanded, reaching between their sweat-slicked bodies to circle her swollen pearl.

“Michael!” she screamed.

Her inner muscles clamped down on him like a velvet vise, milking his shaft and nearly triggering his own release. He gritted his teeth, holding on as long as he could before he pulled out of her and with a hoarse shout, spilled his seed on the blankets beside her, wave after wave of blinding pleasure crashing over him.

They clung to each other as the aftershocks slowly ebbed, hearts pounding in unison. Michael rained tender kisses over Adelaide’s face, whispering words of love and devotion against her skin. He waited for her to pull away, but she sighed contentedly.

Carefully, he withdrew from her warmth and rolled to the side, gathering himself and passing a hand over his face.

He had been right to fear that he would fall even deeper for her.

He hadn't thought it would be possible.

But the idea of walking away from her now nearly tore him in two.

CHAPTER 17

A delaide was becoming a little too settled.

She had thought that no night with Michael could ever be better than when they had conceived Mabel, but she was wrong.

The first night between them here at Mandrake Hall was better than anything she had ever experienced.

He had told her that he loved her, yes, but she hadn't realized the true depths of what he felt until he had worshipped her entire body. She had felt it in the way he touched her, the way he kissed her, the very way he said her name.

She wished she could say the words in turn, and it truly felt that her body was saying it for her, but she couldn't put voice to it. If she admitted to him how she truly felt, how could she walk away from him when this was all over?

She did have the option of staying. Of telling him how she felt. Of marrying him, growing a family with him. She had been over this time and again, but it always came back to the fact that she knew she would not be happy as the wife of a nobleman, no matter what she felt for him. She hated society events, but the alternative of staying home behind closed doors when she was the type of person who loved being around others would also be sure to bring her back to her lowest point.

To give everything to him would mean to deny herself, which she couldn't do in good conscience, for it wouldn't be fair to either of them.

She knew she shouldn't have asked him to give her part of himself. It was selfish, as she had admitted to him, but she had felt so lonely, had given in to the part of her that recognized his soul as belonging to hers.

And she had enjoyed being cherished by him.

After their coming together, they had lain in each other's embrace for a few moments until she had heard Mabel's cry. She had jumped up to soothe the baby, though she knew this wasn't the end.

He had followed her into the room, had placed her wrapper around her shoulders, and she had welcomed him to sleep next to her in her bed that night.

His was soiled, after all.

The next few days passed in near-perfect bliss as they had forgotten the outside world and had instead focused on themselves. They'd played with Mabel, taken walks around the grounds, enjoyed meals, and had visited one another's bedrooms every night.

Adelaide knew that Dot and Edward would soon arrive, and as much as she had been looking forward to it, now she wished they had more time alone.

"What are you thinking about?" Michael asked, looking over at Adelaide. The sunlight struck the hard planes of his face, highlighting its flawlessness. He had told her that she was perfect, but the truth was, he was such a fine specimen of a man that she wasn't sure how she had gotten so lucky to call him hers – even if it was just for a time.

"I am thinking about how much I have enjoyed myself with you," she said with a small smile.

“I feel the same,” he said.

“Have you heard from Dot and Edward?”

“No,” he said, his smile faltering momentarily. “I imagine they will just arrive without any warning.”

At his words, the rumbling of wheels against the gravel reached them, and they turned together to see a cloud of dust coming down the road.

“Well, we must have spoken them into existence,” Adelaide said, forcing a smile as though she was pleased about the turn of events.

“I’ve enjoyed our time together, Addi,” Michael said, ignoring the incoming relatives. “I know you would like to go your own way after this, and I understand why. But can we not try to find a way forward – together?”

Her heart leapt at the idea, even as her mind told her to calm herself.

“I have enjoyed this time, too, Michael,” she said, unable to meet his gaze. “I just do not see how we can be true to ourselves and be together. Your life is so different from mine.”

“It is,” he agreed. “But does that mean we cannot find a compromise?”

“I cannot return to your life in London,” she said, her voice just above a whisper as she wrapped her arms around Mabel, who was snug and fast asleep in the carrier in front of her. “It would take my very soul away from me.”

“Then what is it that you want? Your inn?”

She raised her eyes to his, surprised that he remembered. She had mentioned it once but would never have thought he would have recalled it after all this time.

“Well, yes, I suppose,” she said. “But that is in Tunbridge Wells. What kind of life would that be for you?”

“It would be a life with my family,” he said with a shrug.

“You are much more yourself with the people in your own class.”

“I might be different. But I am happier with you,” he countered. “And I can be myself with anyone around me, no matter who they are or where they come from. Besides, what is holding me in London?”

“There is Edward, Dot, and the life you have built for yourself.”

“A life of what?” he scoffed. “Of society events? Gambling? Drinking? That does not appeal to me anymore.”

“A life running an inn is not at all what a man raised in the noble set would be used to,” she argued. “There would not be servants seeing to your every need. You would not have anyone doing the more menial tasks you have never considered. It might sound fine in theory, but in practicality, would you be able to handle that? I am sure after a time it would become as boring to you as your drinking and gambling have.”

His face hardened at her words. “Do you truly think so little of me?”

“I do not think little of you, Michael,” she said, her stomach turning that he would think that she didn’t respect him. “I am only being sensible. It would be better for us to break things off early, before we fall too far.”

“It’s too late for that,” he said grimly, as they turned the bend and the manor came towering up before them. “I should go greet Edward and Dot,” he said, the harmony between them vanished.

“Would you like me to come with you?” she asked.

He turned to face her, his lips set in a line, and when he answered, she knew that he was responding to far more than her simple question about this moment in time.

“You can do whatever you’d like, Adelaide,” he said. “As is always the case.”

She swallowed hard, taking a step back at the pain in his eyes, knowing that she had put it there.

“I might take another loop around with Mabel,” she said. “To keep her sleeping.”

“Of course,” he said with a curt nod, and before she could say anything else, he disappeared toward the house, his steps hard and unrelenting, his body tightly coiled in the anger she knew he would never release upon her but that she felt all the same.

She stepped backward frantically, nearly tripping over her feet before she rushed away as fast as she could, unable to watch him any longer, knowing that he took her heart with him as he walked away.

She fought back the tears that threatened to blind her as she retraced their steps. She had been enjoying her time with him so much that she had foolishly thought she could forget the world around them and focus on these few days together. She had, of course, been wrong. No matter how much she tried to run, she had to face her problems head-on, or they would continue to shadow her every move.

Did that mean she should return to London, tell the authorities what she knew, and

turn Jack in? She had tried to handle this herself, but she had managed to run away from him and the truth. Maybe it was time to do what she should have done from the start – ask for help from those who could put him away for good, even if it meant she was putting herself at risk.

She sighed, kicking a rock as she rounded the bend in the path toward the lake in the corner of the property. It was at the bottom of a valley, and she turned her gaze skyward, wondering if she should venture up to explore the hill. Maybe it would offer the most beautiful view, she determined. Maybe it could tell her what direction she should take in her own life.

She turned, about to rise, startled when a strange shadow from the treeline beyond caught her attention.

“Is someone there?” she asked, loud enough to be heard but not so loud that she would wake the sleeping baby.

When the man stepped out into the path, her stomach dropped at his appearance.

“Adelaide,” he said with a growl, his dark eyes threatening. “You can run for a time, but you cannot run forever.”

She squared her shoulders, refusing to allow him to see her fear.

“Jack,” she said. “This is unexpected.”

Michael knew he had bungled that exchange.

In the recesses of his mind, he was aware that this was a brief reprieve from the rest of their lives, but the present had returned so suddenly that he had been taken by surprise and he had lashed out. But what was he supposed to do? He wanted Adelaide

to remain in his life with such desperation that it was hard not to allow that emotion any space.

Even walking away from her to return to the house was difficult for him. How was he supposed to walk out of her life forever? Or even for months at a time?

He had been considering coming with her to run the inn for so long that it had hurt more than he'd like to admit just how dismissive she was of the idea, though she was right. He was not used to looking after himself. Even when he had lived alone in his apartment, he had a valet who saw to his needs and a maid who cleaned daily.

But he could learn, in the same way he was learning to be a father.

Adelaide was pushing him away for deeper reasons. He simply didn't know what they were just yet.

He entered the manor through the library doors, walking through the house to the front entrance.

"Edward?" he called out. "Dot?"

When he reached the grand front foyer, he saw a man standing at the door, though his identity was blocked by the butler.

When the servant stepped to the side, all the blood drained from Michael's face.

"My lord, I was just coming to find you, to announce your visitor," he said, holding out the unnecessary calling card to Michael. "Lord Gregory has arrived."

CHAPTER 18

“Gregory,” Michael said, forcing a smile as he held out his hand in greeting. Was there a chance that Lord Gregory wasn’t aware of his knowledge of the counterfeit scheme? He figured he had to feign ignorance in case. “Good to see you.”

“And you,” Gregory said with a smirk that nearly solidified he was well aware of Michael’s investigation.

It hit Michael suddenly that if Gregory knew where he was, Jack likely knew too – and Adelaide was here with him.

He was torn between wanting to go after her to ensure she was safe and distracting Gregory so he wouldn’t become aware of her presence.

“I have to see to a couple of things,” he said, taking a few steps backward. “Anderson, can you see Lord Gregory into the drawing room? I shall be there momentarily.”

He turned to walk away when he heard the tell-tale click of a pistol.

“I do not think you will be going anywhere. We will both go into the drawing room for a little visit.”

“My lord?”

Michael turned around to see Anderson staring wide-eyed at him.

“It’s all right, Anderson,” he said. “Keep the servants away from the room, please.”

He tried to incline his head toward the front door in a silent plea for Anderson to take a look for Adelaide, but he couldn’t be sure whether the servant understood his request.

Michael walked stiffly into the drawing room, Gregory following with the pistol trained on him.

How good was Gregory with a weapon? The man had no military training but then, neither did Michael.

That had been Edward, of course, who had gone off to save the world.

“Would you like to explain, Gregory?” he asked, maintaining his nonchalant attitude, hoping he could still fake his way through this.

“Are you trying to pretend you don’t know anything?” Gregory asked, motioning for Michael to sit as he took the chair across from him, his back to the foyer, but open to the library beyond. Michael prayed that Adelaide wouldn’t walk in through the library doors and that the staff would be able to notify her of what was happening in time.

“About what?” Michael said, doing exactly that.

“Jack told me everything,” Gregory said. “I am well aware of what you and his sister have been up to. And it all makes sense now – why you were so eager to return to The Red Lion and win money off me at the card table at my brother’s masquerade.”

“I wouldn’t call that money ,” Michael said, deciding that he had no choice but to have a candid conversation. “Listen, Gregory, I have no issue with you. We were

trying to discover evidence to convince Jack to release Adelaide from any ties to this. He is threatening to bring her down with him, but the truth is, we do not care what happens to him. We just want him to let her go.”

“Why do you care about this tavern wench so much?” Gregory said, ignoring his words and peering more closely at Michael.

“Do not call her that.”

Gregory’s eyebrows rose as he let out a shocked laugh and sat back in his seat. “You do care about her.”

“What I feel for her is of no consequence.”

“Oh, but it is,” Gregory countered, shaking his head, the smile on his face growing. “For it means that you will do anything to keep her safe. Anything at all.” His smile creepily remained stuck to his cheeks. “Where is the money?”

“The counterfeit?”

“Whatever you would like to call it.”

“I left it in London,” Michael said with a shrug, telling the truth. “It seemed safer there.”

“You have no way to tie it to me.”

“Do I not?” Michael said, raising a brow. “Many people saw me win the bag off you, where the counterfeit currently sits. I also have a copy of the note Jack wrote you. It might not make sense if someone happened upon it without context, but with some background, it just might be enough to prove what you are up to. Then there is the

plate from the printer's shop. If Rawlins goes down, don't think he will not turn on you. It all comes back to you, Lord Gregory. The three of you are caught in a whirlwind, one that will be very hard to claw your way out of. Unless you let Adelaide go."

Lord Gregory shrugged and sat back in the chair. "I care nothing for this Adelaide, although Jack certainly does."

"Where is he?" Michael asked, allowing his concern to get the better of him and come floating out of his mouth. It might give Lord Gregory an advantage, yet he couldn't help but ask.

"Does it matter?"

"It matters," was all he said, and Gregory smirked.

"Once I have what I need from you, I will tell you what you want to know about your precious tavern wench."

"I told you to stop calling her that."

"Or what?"

Michael leaned forward, about to spring toward him, but Gregory rose and buried the pistol in his chest, right over his heart.

"I'd rethink that if I were you," he murmured. "Now tell me where I can find all of this evidence, and don't lie, or else your woman will pay for it."

Michael looked around, trying to find an escape. Surely Anderson would have tried to rally the servants or gone for help? He knew none of them overly cared about him,

but hopefully they would feel enough loyalty to Edward to save his brother.

“Will you convince Jack to leave Adelaide out of this? To allow her to leave London and do as she wishes?”

“I’ll ask nicely.”

It was no promise, but Michael knew it was likely as good as he would ever get from a man like Gregory.

“Very well.” He nodded. “It’s in a safe in Edward’s London house. I will have to ask him to release it.”

“I will ask him myself. You will be... otherwise occupied.”

Michael’s stomach dipped at the gleam in Gregory’s eyes, and he realized there was likely little chance he would leave here alive. While he wasn’t sure he would have played much of a role in Adelaide’s life, the thought of never seeing Mabel grow up, not having the opportunity to prove himself to Adelaide, to know that he would have failed in her eyes, was all nearly too much for him.

“Just let me go, Gregory,” he said, trying to sound persuasive. “Don’t add murder to your list of crimes.”

“If you are not here to present evidence against me, then there will be no crimes to atone for. Now, out the door,” he said. “We wouldn’t want to leave a mess for your brother to clean up.”

Michael dragged his feet as they walked out of the house, intent on finding an escape. So what if he failed? It would be of no worse consequence, although Gregory was right. They wouldn’t want to leave Edward and Dot a reminder of what had happened

here.

He took the front door route, hoping they could avoid Adelaide's path. He wondered where she was and whether she realized that danger threatened. He only hoped she could find a way to hide until Gregory had left.

And prayed that Gregory had come alone.

He blinked when he saw dust across the drive, wondering whether that meant an additional threat remained.

"Let's walk to the other side of the gardens," he suggested, hoping that he could take Gregory past the fountain. It might provide him the opportunity to trip him up and gain the upper hand.

"This is far enough," Gregory said, thwarting his plan. "Turn around."

Michael took a breath, closing his eyes for a moment, ready to pounce as he turned. At least Gregory had the decency not to shoot him in the back.

He turned, prepared to jump – when a shot rang out, and he stiffened, waiting for the pain to engulf him.

But none came.

Instead, he heard a cry of pain, and he turned, shocked, to find Gregory lying on the ground, blood seeping out of a wound on his arm, the pistol lying next to his outstretched fingers.

He raised his head to determine what had happened, relief pouring through him when he saw his brother standing there, hand outstretched, pistol smoking in his palm.

“Edward!” he called out in surprised delight. “Good shot, man!”

Edward lowered his arm. “I have been trained in such things,” he said, as though it was no bother, that he did this routinely.

Michael supposed he had, for a time.

He reached down, picking up the pistol and leaving a moaning Gregory on the ground. For goodness’ sake, it was his arm, not his lung, although Michael was aware that such wounds could fester and kill a man.

“Have you seen Adelaide?” he asked Edward hurriedly, to which Edward shook his head.

“We only just arrived. We saw Lord Gregory’s carriage in the drive and decided to circle around the back. Anderson met us and told us what was happening. I am sorry to hear that Adelaide isn’t with you. Where is Mabel?”

“With Adelaide,” he said. “We were walking out of doors before I returned to the house and Lord Gregory arrived. My greatest hope is that her walk took her away from the house and she will soon return without knowing what happened. Will you deal with Gregory while I go look for her?”

“Of course,” Edward said. “Was he alone?”

“I hope so,” Michael said grimly, about to take off into the grounds beyond when Dot came running from the house.

“Michael!” she called out, her gown flying behind her. She clenched a piece of paper in her hand, and Michael’s heart stopped at the thought of what the letter could contain. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, yes, fine,” he said, hurrying her along. “What does the letter say?”

“I found it in Adelaide’s room, right in the middle of her bed, when I went looking for her,” she said, placing her other hand on her chest as she was breathing rather heavily. Michael reached out a hand, concerned about her, but of course, Edward was there to ensure she was well. She passed it over to Michael, and he opened it with trembling fingers.

Michael,

I have taken time to think about us. I have enjoyed all you have given me and appreciate your care for Mabel and me. However, our lives are too different, and it is time to part. It was too hard to say goodbye in person. I wish you well.

Sincerely,

Adelaide

“She left me,” was all he could manage, lifting his eyes to look at Dot.

“Are you certain?” Dot asked as she leaned on Edward, who had wrapped his arm around her protectively.

“That’s what the note says.”

“Are you sure she wrote it of her own accord and not under duress?” Dot asked, her brow furrowing.

“Was anyone with Gregory? Did the servants see anything?” he asked, caught between wanting Adelaide to be safe and also wanting to know that she hadn’t chosen to leave him.

“Anderson directed all of the servants to the servants’ quarters to keep them safe before seeking out Adelaide and Mabel, but they were nowhere to be found. He didn’t see anyone else. I’m sorry, Michael. I wish I knew.”

“How would she even have left?”

“One of the carriages is gone, and Jones, the driver, has also disappeared. She could have asked him to take her somewhere. I cannot see him disagreeing with her if she told him you knew of her plans.”

Michael was shaking his head, hands on his hips.

“It just doesn’t seem right. This isn’t Adelaide. She likes to plan, to save. She came here so willingly, and we were enjoying ourselves. She was looking forward to seeing you, Dot. She wouldn’t just up and leave.”

Maybe he was being a fool, but he had to follow his heart and instincts.

“So, what are you going to do?”

“I suppose I will follow along and see if I can find her,” he said, his jaw tightening. “I have to try. I have to believe that she wouldn’t do this to me.”

“Why don’t we ask our friend, Lord Gregory, over here?” Edward said, walking over to where the man lay on the ground, trying to regain his footing despite his grimace of pain.

Michael felt the fool for not thinking of that sooner, but he had been so preoccupied with this damn note.

Edward stood beside Michael’s former friend, pushing him back down to the ground.

“Lord Gregory, do you have anything to say for yourself?”

“Not to you,” Gregory snarled, and Michael’s mouth fell open when his normally docile, mild-mannered brother reached over and stepped down on the gunshot wound on Gregory’s arm.

Lord Gregory cried out in pain, and Edward crossed his arms over his chest as he stared down at him.

“Do you have anything to say now?”

“Fine!” Gregory bit out. “Yes, Jack was here. He came with me.”

“How?”

“We rode horses,” he said. “It was close enough that we were able to make good time. The horses should be in the stables.”

“What did he intend to do with Adelaide?”

“Take her with him,” Gregory said, panting. “He had some escape plan and said that he needed her for it. I believe he has this strange sense that she belongs to him.”

“Where were they going?”

“That, I don’t know.”

Edward stepped down harder and Gregory shouted.

“I honestly do not know! I swear I would tell you. I have nothing good to say about Jack Tate. He is a scoundrel who I never should have involved myself with.”

“I think you are just as much a scoundrel as he,” Edward said, reaching down and roughly helping Gregory to his feet. “You have betrayed your country, and you should be ashamed of yourself. You deserve whatever is coming to you.”

“I do not deserve to be hanged!”

“Why not? You knew the penalty when you began this scheme.”

“This is all well and good, but I need to find Adelaide,” Michael said, and Dot nodded.

“Go.”

Michael rounded the house and was nearing the stables when he could have sworn he heard a cry. He stopped, tilting his head to listen again. There it was. A muffled shout.

He peered around the trees next to the outbuildings, hoping to find Adelaide waiting for him, but instead, it was the driver, his hands, feet, and mouth tied as he was propped with his back against a tree.

“Jones!” he called out, rushing over and loosening the tie around the man’s mouth before moving to his hands.

“Mr. Redgrave!” he huffed out, taking deep breaths, his face red.

“What happened? Was this Jack Tate?”

“Miss Adelaide and the baby,” he breathed out.

“Yes?” he said, dread growing in his stomach.

“A man with a pistol came in, leading Adelaide in front of him. I was the only one there, and I didn’t want to risk their lives.”

“It’s fine, Jones, no one is blaming you,” Edward said as he approached; he must have been following Michael. “He took them?”

“Yes. He loaded them into the carriage, made me prepare the horses, and drove them away,” he said. “Miss Adelaide was angry as you can imagine, but she wouldn’t do anything, not when the baby was threatened.”

“Which way did they go?” Michael asked.

“South.”

“I’m going to go saddle a horse. Are any of them ready?”

“Take Patience,” Jones said, pushing himself up.

“Michael, we need to think this through—” Edward began, but Michael shook him off.

“Edward, I need to go find them. And I need to go now.”

“I will come with you.”

“No,” Michael said, shaking his head. “You cannot. You need to stay with Dot. You cannot leave her alone, especially in her condition. And then there is Lord Gregory to deal with. Where is he?”

“With Anderson, and of course, you are right,” Edward said before stepping toward Michael and placing his hands on his shoulders. “Take care of yourself and your

family, Michael, all right? Do not do anything reckless.”

Michael had spent so much time resenting Edward in the past few years that sometimes he forgot how close they had been at one point, how much they meant to one another.

“Thank you, Edward,” he said. “You take care of yourself too, you hear me?”

“I always do.”

At that, Michael took off running toward the stables..

He needed to get to Adelaide.

And he needed to get to her now.

CHAPTER 19

A delaide would have been much more forgiving had she been the only one in danger.

But this man – a man who called himself her brother – had threatened her baby.

She was going to kill him herself if she found a way to do so.

They had been driving for a couple of hours, she and Mabel in the carriage itself while Jack drove, which didn't give her a chance to reason with him.

Not that he was an overly reasonable man. This entire situation proved that for sure.

She had to find her way out of this. She didn't know Jack's plan for her and Mabel, but she refused to be a part of it. She had not spent the last few years working to escape him only to be forced to be even closer to him.

She closed her eyes, thinking of the life that had been available to her with Michael, a life that she had foolishly turned down.

He had offered her everything he had to give, and she had said no. He had even offered to leave behind all the comforts he enjoyed in life so that she could live out her dream, and she had declined, insulting him by telling him that it wasn't a life for him, not allowing him to decide for himself.

She still partially believed in her words, but should she not have given him a chance,

even if it would mean allowing too much hope into her heart that it could become a life together?

She looked down at Mabel, who she had mercifully lulled to sleep upon the drive despite her own growing fears. From what she could see out the window, they were heading south, but any direction was wrong when it took her away from Michael.

What would he think when he read the note that Jack had forced her to write? When Jack had come upon them in the woods, he had everything prepared. Somehow, he had already entered the house and had packed her few belongings. It wasn't because he had their best interests in mind, however. He only wanted it to look like she had left of her own free will.

She had tried to think of a way to disguise a message to Michael in that note, but Jack was looking over her shoulder, reading every word.

Her only hope was that Michael would realize she would never leave without a goodbye, nor would she have accompanied him to Mandrake Hall if her plan was to depart without a word.

But she knew well enough not to rely on a man to come rescue her. Look at where that had gotten her mother.

She glanced down at Mabel, hating to wake a sleeping baby, but they were getting too far now.

She reached a hand through the window and rapped as hard as she could on the wood above her.

"We need to stop!" she called out, causing Mabel to turn her head from side to side, seeking comfort, which Adelaide provided her. It took a few minutes until Jack

pulled to a stop and wrenched the door open.

“We were making good time,” he muttered. “What is it?”

“I need to relieve myself,” she lied as she stepped out of the carriage, Mabel in her arms. “Where are we?”

“Not where we should be,” he said, sneering at her with his arms crossed over his chest. “You do understand what it cost me to come to you?”

“First, we all would have been much better off had you left me alone. Second, it seems to me that Lord Gregory covered that cost, so I’m not sure what it matters,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “You know this is folly, Jack. You cannot abduct me and expect no one to care.”

“Your lord will think you left him.”

“You do not know nearly as much about my relationship with him as you think you do.”

“And you, Adelaide, are a fool if you think he actually cares about you,” Jack scoffed. “Do you not recall your mother also believing that a lord was in love with her? How did that turn out for her?”

“That was an entirely different situation,” she said, lifting her chin, realizing that she, shockingly, meant what she said. That she was not just defending herself from Jack but speaking her truth. Somewhere along the way, she had begun to believe in Michael’s words and had trusted that he was the man he said he was, that he cared for her in the way he had promised.

That he loved her.

“Let me think about that for a moment,” Jack said, tapping a finger against his lips mockingly. “Your mother became pregnant by a lord. Once he found out, he decided he wanted nothing to do with her. Eventually, she agreed to marry my father, and she was with him until she nagged him to death.”

Rage grew within Adelaide at his every word, and if she didn’t have her baby in her arms, she would have planted her fist in his nose.

“Your father was cruel, just as you are,” she lashed out, and it only made things worse when Jack laughed at her.

“Your words mean nothing, Adelaide. I’ve made something of myself while you are the unwed mother of a bastard child. It could have still ended fine for you, but you screwed something up along the way. You could have been kept as his mistress, you know that?”

“I could have been his wife ,” she bit out, wishing the words back the moment she said them, for she noted the instant gleam in his eye.

“He asked you to marry him?”

“He, ah, suggested it,” she said, and she could see Jack’s mind turning as he tried to determine just how he could use this information in his favor.

“Well, if he does happen to appear, at least we know that he might actually care for you more than I would have thought,” he said, rubbing his chin. “How shocking.”

“You mean to insult me, but you have brought me here with you, so it appears that you have reason to want me as well,” she said. “When you try to cut me down with your words, be sure not to lie, Jack, for I can see right through them.”

“So smart, are we?” he sneered. “Don’t flatter yourself. I need you for what you can do for me. Not because I want you around. I thought you needed to relieve yourself.”

“I do.”

She began for a small thicket of trees, stopping when she heard his footsteps behind her.

“I would like some privacy,” she attempted, to which he laughed.

“Do you think I am that stupid?” he said. “If I give you privacy, you are sure to run.”

“I am also not a fool, Jack,” she said, rolling her eyes. “I have a baby with no way of transport nor any sustenance. I would prefer not to be with you at the moment, but I am also aware that you are not going to hurt me. If you wanted to, you would have done so by now.”

“Perhaps you are more clever than I give you credit for,” he said, some surprise in his tone, and she wished she could turn around and kick him.

That would have to come later.

Fortunately, he did give her a few moments to herself before she rejoined him. If Michael was following her, then perhaps she had given him some time to make up ground. He would not, however, have the skills to track them, although if by some grace he had managed to discover their direction, perhaps he could have just kept on the same road.

“I have one question, Jack,” she said, trying to stall him further.

“Just one? It seems to me you’ve had many.”

She ignored him. “Why go to all this trouble? From the counterfeit money scheme to leaving it all to making me come with you. Why?”

“Why not?” he said, crossing his arms over his chest as he stared at her. “I’ve worked my whole life and got damn near nothing to show for it. One night, Gregory was at the tavern, and I caught him trying to pass off a counterfeit bill. Told him to hand over a real note instead, and the bastard just laughed in my face. But when he saw I wasn’t messing around, he made me a different offer — said instead of paying me back, he could cut me in. Needed someone in the middle to move the counterfeit and stash it for a while. I already had plenty of goods coming and going, so I was the perfect man for the job.

“I said fine, but we needed a better printer. Lucky for him, I knew a guy who knew a guy, and that’s how Rawlins got involved. Worked like a charm for a while—until months went by, and Gregory just vanished. That’s when I came to you about that note.”

“You never asked me, for I would have declined you. If only you had never involved me,” she lamented. “So much could have been avoided.”

“But it brought Lord Gregory back to the table, which is what we needed,” he argued. “So, it all worked out in the end. Now, I have enough to do what I want.”

“Which is?”

“You know that little inn you grew up in, the one where our parents met?”

“Yes,” she said, dread going in her stomach.

“I’m going to buy it.”

“You are not,” she said, her spine straightening.

“I am,” he said with a self-satisfied grin. “And you are going to run it.”

“Why would you want that, Jack?” she protested, desperation growing within her. It had been her dream to own the inn, to run it for herself. Running it for Jack would be even worse than not being involved in it at all, for he would cut every corner trying to save money and would destroy both the current inn and her memory of it.

“I heard you talking about it time and again, and it sounded like a good idea. Leave London for a quieter place where I could make a name for myself. You know what you’re doing. You’ll have a place to live with your baby. I can relax and enjoy life. It’s actually a good deal for a woman like you.”

She knew that was not exactly a compliment.

“I hate you,” she bit out, the anger rising in her chest.

“I do not overly care,” he shrugged. “Now, get in the carriage. We have to get moving as the sun will be setting, and we do not want to travel after dark.”

“How awful that would be,” she said sarcastically, but truthfully, she was getting rather hungry and wanted to get this over with. Perhaps she could talk Mr. Dale into not selling it to Jack when they arrived. If she explained what had happened, maybe he would wait just a little longer for her to be able to buy it from him and would help her out of this situation.

She felt that Jack’s offer of money was not legitimate anyway, so it would only put Mr. Dale in a bad position.

She climbed into the carriage with a now wide-awake Mabel, although the baby

wasn't crying as her eyes were wide, taking in the scene around her.

Adelaide took one last look down the road behind them for any sign of a person approaching, but it was as it had been.

Empty.

Perhaps Jack was right. Maybe there was no chance of Michael coming for her.

It had been fun when she was conveniently present, but now that she had left, would he even miss her?

She couldn't rely on him but could not fend for herself on the road.

When they were closer to Tunbridge Wells, she would have to find a way to escape Jack, to make it to the inn before him. Maybe Mr. Dale could help her.

There had to be a way through this, one way or another.

She would protect Mabel at all costs.

Even if she lost her heart along the way.

CHAPTER 20

Michael had been riding for just over an hour, but it felt like days by the time he finally saw his quarry on the road up ahead.

The dust was unsettled, a carriage ahead of him.

He had been pushing Patience hard, knowing he needed to rest the horse soon.

But if she was tiring, then the carriage horses would be too. Jack wouldn't know enough about where to change them or when, for Michael was sure he had never had to arrange his own transport before.

Prior to Michael leaving Mandrake Hall, Edward had placed his pistol in Michael's hand, although he had told him sternly that he shouldn't use it unless he absolutely had to. While Michael had learned how to use a pistol, Edward had inherited all the deadly accuracy to be found in the family.

Michael was lucky if he shot in the right direction of a target, let alone hit the target himself.

But Jack wouldn't know that.

"Come on," he murmured. "Almost there, girl."

He came even with the carriage, and Adelaide, of course, had her head out the window and her eyes on him the moment he pulled up parallel to them. If he knew

her, she was already planning her own escape, but he was happy to help her out.

Jack hadn't yet seen him, his eyes on the horses ahead of him, and Michael paused a moment too long next to Adelaide, for he lost himself in her eyes, which stared at him in such supplication. He wished he could read more into it, but he honestly wasn't sure if she was happy to see him, simply asking him for help, or uncertain about his unexpected presence.

Now wasn't the time to analyze it, however, for first, he had to remove her from the situation – from Jack.

He knew the moment the man noticed him, for suddenly there was a large cracking noise as Jack snapped the reins and urged his horses on faster, but it was a foolish move, for the tired horses pulling a carriage were never going to outrun a single horse with a rider.

Michael pulled up next to the carriage, brandishing the pistol.

“Stop, Jack!” he called out, but Jack only shook his head.

“Never for you!” he yelled back, reaching into his jacket and pulling out his own pistol. He tried to aim, and a snap rent the air, but the horses were moving too fast for him to aim properly – thank goodness.

Michael was still rattled, for even a poorly aimed gun could kill a man.

He would never actually shoot – he was just as likely to hit the carriage or the horses – but perhaps he could convince Jack that he meant what he said.

“Give me Adelaide and Mabel, and you can have what you want, Jack,” he shouted, wishing the man would have some sense and pull over.

He was trying to distract him so he could near one of the horses. He had to be careful, however, for he didn't want to do anything that might put the safety of the woman he loved and their child in jeopardy.

He reached a hand under the horse's bridle, grabbing on. The horse seemed uncertain, and Michael decided there was only one thing to do.

He might be a lousy shot, but he was a decent horseman, and in one move, he leapt from his horse and onto the carriage horse's back, wincing when he landed on the horse's harness.

He knew he was putting himself at risk of being shot once more, but it was a risk he would have to take.

He glanced over his shoulder at Jack's shout, but fortunately, the man was too occupied with keeping both hands on the reins and control of the horses to be able to aim his pistol and take a shot at him.

Michael grabbed hold of the bridle of the other horse, mercifully and gradually bringing both of them to a stop. He dismounted quickly, lifting his pistol back to Jack again, turning just in time to see Jack aim. Adelaide cried out, "Michael!" and he vaulted to the side; his heart raced at the near miss.

Jack jumped down from his perch on the driver's seat, advancing toward him, and Michael leaped toward Jack, tackling him to the ground before he could fire the pistol again, and thankfully, it went clattering to the ground.

Jack was a strong man, but anger and desperation fueled Michael to see Adelaide and Mabel safe.

It was unlike anything he had felt before, and he put all of his emotion into his every

action as he allowed his fists to fly upon Jack, his rage blinding him to the pain he was inflicting.

“Michael!” he heard Adelaide cry out, and her voice, along with the knowledge that both she and Mabel were watching him, was the only thing that caused him to stop.

He stared down at his hands, bloodied by another man, shocked that they belonged to him, for he had never been violent. He had always been a lover, never a fighter.

But it seemed that love had caused him to become something else entirely.

“I’m sorry,” he gasped, not entirely sure who he was apologizing to but needing to get it out. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s all right, Michael,” Adelaide’s soothing voice came behind him. “You saved us.”

He had. He had saved them, and that’s all that mattered. He took a few shaky breaths as his entire body pulsed with his leftover rage. He had been acting purely on instinct, and now that he took a moment to look around him, he blinked at the shock of it all. He had actually jumped onto a horse and brought this entire carriage to a stop, had overcome a man with a pistol, and had saved the woman he loved and his daughter.

It seemed that he could perform the miraculous when he was doing it for the right reasons.

“You are both all right?” he asked Adelaide, about to run his hands over her arms to check but holding back as he didn’t want any of the blood to dirty her.

“We’re fine, Michael,” she said, blinking rapidly. “Thanks to you.”

“I do not know what I would have done if anything had happened to you,” he said.

She apparently didn’t care about the blood as she threw herself against him, one arm wrapped protectively around Mabel, who was wide-eyed and staring, the other now round Michael’s back.

“I made a mistake, Michael,” she choked out, and he started at the wetness that hit the side of his face, realizing that they were her tears. “I made so many mistakes. I should have believed in you. I should have trusted you. I should have agreed to marry you and understood that we could take what came our way — together.”

Michael swallowed hard as he realized just what she was saying — that she wanted him, as much as he wanted her. That she was, quite possibly, choosing a life with him.

“You... you want to be with me?”

“I do, Michael, if you will still have me,” she said, leaning back and sniffing. “Would you forgive me?”

“Oh, Adelaide,” he said, a flurry of emotions rushing through him — relief, gratitude, love. “I will always forgive you, and I could never deny you. Never. But there is nothing to forgive. You were only looking after yourself and our daughter, which is all I would ever want.”

“Thank goodness,” she breathed out. “Because I love you too. I denied it to myself for so long, believed that you were going to leave me, that you would break my heart, despite your words. It’s what happened to my mother. She thought my father would spend his life with her, so she gave him everything, and then he left her broken-hearted. But I should have known the moment you offered me the role of your wife instead of your mistress that you would never leave me in the same situation.”

“We all make mistakes,” he said. “Look at me and how I was living my life. I don’t blame you for your concern that I would not be the man for you. You were justified in wondering if I could provide for you and Mabel.”

“No one should be judged for their past.”

“Perhaps, then,” he said slowly, “we start over now and move forward?”

“I promise I will always believe in you from now on,” she said, sniffing.

“And I you.”

They stared at one another for a moment before the smile started to grow on her face, causing that beautiful light to practically radiate around her, and he couldn’t help his own grin in return. Soon enough, they laughed with pure joy, and even Mabel joined in with her baby giggles.

“I do not believe I’ve ever known such happiness,” Michael said in amazement.

“Nor I,” she said, even as they looked around them at the stopped carriage, the agitated horses, and the man lying unconscious on the ground.

“We have a bit of a mess,” he said, biting his lip. “Edward said he would send a few servants with me, but I couldn’t wait so they will be following. I knew if I wanted to have any chance of finding you, I had to move quickly.”

“How did you even know which way to go?”

“Jones saw the carriage driving away.”

“Jones!” She gasped in shock. “Is he all right?”

“He is, yes,” Michael said. “A bit shaken, but he will be fine. Now, why do we not get you back in the carriage and return to Mandrake Hall once Edward’s servants arrive? I’m sure we could all use some comfort.”

She nodded and they stood together, walking back to the carriage as the sound of horse’s hooves came from up the road. Michael’s breath caught for a moment as he wondered if there was any possibility that Jack or Gregory could have had more men, but fortunately, Jones came into view with one of the footmen.

“Jones, it is good to see you,” he said as the two men stopped their horses and stared in shock and all that surrounded them.

“Did you do this?” Jones asked, his jaw open.

“Apparently,” Michael said, barely believing it himself.

“Well, I’m glad you are all safe and unharmed.” He peered closer at Michael. “You are unharmed, are you not?”

“It’s his blood,” Michael said grimly.

“Well, good, I suppose,” Jones said. “We’ll drape him over one of the horses best we can, and then John here will lead back the extra horses while I drive you home.”

“Thank you,” Michael said with appreciation. He hadn’t wanted to leave Adelaide alone in the carriage, even though he knew she would be fine. She could take care of herself, yes, but that didn’t change the fact that he still wanted to be the one to look after her.

Michael noticed Adelaide take a breath before they entered the carriage, as though she had to steel herself to re-enter. He realized that as shaken as he had been, she

probably had been even more so, except that she hadn't been able to take any action but had been forced to sit in wait.

"Would you rather ride? I could hold Mabel," he asked, and she shook her head.

"No," she said. "Let's all be together."

He liked the sound of that.

They sat on the same side of the carriage, and Michael wrapped an arm around Adelaide, pulling her close, his head on the top of hers as she snuggled in against him.

"We still have much to figure out," she said.

"We do," he said with a nod. "But why do we not let that wait until later? Let's just be glad we are safe and together."

"Agreed," she said before she lifted her head to look at him. "You never believed the note."

"No." He shook his head. "I knew that it wasn't you. That, even if you did decide to leave, you wouldn't have escaped without a word. That you would have looked me in the eye and told me your decision."

"I ran away from you once before."

"You did," he agreed. "But you explained your choice. Now I know what you want. What scares you. Besides that, you are a practical woman. There was no way you would have left so suddenly without any planning or preparation."

She laughed softly. “You are right about that.”

At that, she returned to rest in his arms, and, for the first time in a long time, Michael was completely at peace.

CHAPTER 21

Being pulled in different directions was nothing new for Adelaide, but this was the first time in a long time she wasn't feeling conflicted.

She knew that whatever they did next, they would choose their path together. Dropping the fear that Michael could decide to walk away had given her more freedom than running away from him ever had.

"I will never, in all my days, forget the image of you leaping off of your horse onto another," she said, shaking her head as they sat around the fireplace in Edward and Dot's small private study at Mandrake Hall. It was similar to the one in their London townhouse, for Edward liked nothing better than to sit here alone – but for Dot – with his book and a cup of tea.

But tonight, he made an exception, for they had welcomed back Michael and Adelaide with such relief and gratitude.

Even though the hour had grown late, Dot said she would never be able to sleep until she heard what had happened to them.

"You were always the better horseman, Michael, but that is something else entirely," Edward said, sipping his tea.

Michael shook his head in amazement. He held a cup of his own in one hand, but the other rested warmly on Adelaide's thigh, and he didn't appear to have any thought of moving it.

Adelaide didn't mind at all.

She had caught Dot's eyes flicking over to them a few times as though she was bursting to ask more questions, but she kept them to herself – for now.

“What happened to the men you hired to keep an eye on Jack?” Michael said, somewhat accusatory.

“He slipped their tail,” Edward said with a sigh. “He was more adept than we thought he would be. There was no way I could warn you quickly enough. We had hoped that our arrival would be before his, but we failed.”

“I appreciate you trying,” Adelaide said. “You did all you could.”

“Lord Gregory and Jack are now accounted for – somewhat,” Edward said, telling them what he knew now that they had finished their story. “We confined Lord Gregory on the estate in a room downstairs with servants acting guard and I have sent word to Lord St. James, telling him of his brother's crimes. As for Jack, Jones and the other servants took him to the magistrate, who will send him to Newgate in London.”

Adelaide sat up straighter, looking at the three others in the room with concern.

“Why would Lord Gregory also not be going to Newgate? His crimes were worse than Jack's.”

“They are, and chances are, if Jack shares what he knows about him, Lord Gregory will also face serious consequences.”

“Jack will likely hang. Lord Gregory will not?”

The outrage was growing again. Edward at least appeared chagrined as he answered

her.

“It is not for me to say, but there is less chance that he would be.”

“Because of his noble ties.”

“Correct.”

“That’s not fair!”

“Perhaps not,” Edward said. “But there is not much that we can do. If accused, Lord Gregory would go in front of the House of Lords. If he is found guilty, this is treason, so he could still be tried to the fullest extent.”

“Did you tell the magistrate about him?”

“I did. He asked me to contact Lord Gregory’s family. He didn’t want to become involved.”

Adelaide seethed as Michael stroked her arm with his other hand.

“We’ll do what we can to see him tried fairly. I promise you that.”

The sincerity in his voice somewhat soothed her, but she was still annoyed, for she knew the truth of the matter.

“What about Rawlins?”

“The other two are sure to give him up,” Michael said, “but I’d actually like to get to him first.” He leaned forward, looking her in the eye. “I want to go to London and find him, to convince him that it is in his best interests to be sure to claim that the

three of them – and only the three of them – were involved in this.”

“You are still worried that Jack will involve me.”

“Perhaps,” Michael said, but then Edward chimed in, his words much more blunt.

“Especially as he could make it seem that you left Michael to run away with him.”

“But—”

“I know,” Edward said, showing the surprising compassionate side that emerged now and again, usually for Dot, but today, that extended to Adelaide. “We know the truth and hopefully that explanation will help. But it is easy for truth to be turned through rumor into something else entirely.”

She was silent for a moment as she considered that after all she had been through, she could still be blamed for a crime she’d had no part in.

“There is another option,” Dot said, biting her lip. “I had refrained from raising it before, but it appears that perhaps circumstances have... evolved.”

Adelaide waited.

“Just as Lord Gregory is less likely to be tried to the fullest extent because of his connections, so would the wife of a nobleman.”

It took a moment for Adelaide to realize what she was saying.

“You are suggesting that Michael and I marry.”

“You must do what is best for you,” Dot said more cautiously. “I would never want

you to feel forced into anything. I am only suggesting it as an option.”

Adelaide looked over at Michael, whose eyes were warm yet wary.

“You know how much I would love to marry you,” he said, his voice deep, vibrating her very soul. “But I would only do so if it was what you truly wanted. You can take some time to consider it. We do not need to speak of it now.”

She nodded, woodenly. For it was not that she didn’t want to marry Michael. Hadn’t she told him earlier that she wanted him? It was just... she didn’t want to marry him under such circumstances.

“It has been a long day,” Dot said, standing with a sigh and rubbing a hand over her growing belly. “Thank you for staying awake to share with us all that occurred, but you should be getting to bed, as should I. We will talk more tomorrow.”

She walked over and wrapped her arms around Adelaide as best she could with her belly between them. “I am so glad you are safe,” she whispered in her ear, causing Adelaide to blink away her tears. After her mother had passed, she never thought she would find someone else who cared so much about her, but here Dot was. A possible sister-in-law. An aunt to Mabel, if nothing else. A friend.

“Thank you, Dot,” she said, hugging her back. “Thank you so much.”

Michael wrapped an arm around Adelaide as he escorted her up to their adjoining rooms. One of the maids had been sitting next to Mabel’s bassinet as she slept, and she left after Adelaide waved off her offer to help her undress.

In all her time living with Michael and his family, she had never become accustomed to servants looking after her needs, and while she had accepted some help with the baby, she had always denied any offer to help with her personal service.

Michael lingered in the doorway. "Sleep well, Adelaide. Let me know if you need anything at all." His eyes held hers a moment longer, offering promises that he didn't speak aloud, before he turned to head to his own chambers.

Adelaide readied herself for bed, her mind still swirling with the dramatic events of the day. Just as she was about to extinguish the lamp, she heard a soft tap on the door connecting her room to Michael's. Her pulse began to race at the noise, knowing just who would be there. She considered donning her dressing gown but decided at the last moment it was best left off, and she cracked open the door.

Her heart leapt at Michael standing there wearing only his breeches, hair tousled as though he had been running his hands through it, chest hard and strong. Adelaide's fingers itched to touch him, but she held back, waiting to see if his thoughts were following the same direction.

"I know you must be tired," he said slowly as her skin prickled with the tension stretching between them. "I tried to stay away, but I... I just needed to see you once more before retiring. To reassure myself that you're truly all right."

"I am, thanks to you," Adelaide replied softly. "Your bravery saved us all today."

"I could never bear to lose you." Michael's voice was low and fervent. He reached out to gently caress her cheek.

Adelaide's breath caught at his touch. Despite all they had been through together, his closeness still caused a yearning within her, which she now knew only he could fill. No other man had ever made her feel as he did, and no other likely ever would.

As if drawn by an invisible force, she stepped closer, tilting her face up to his. "Nor I you," she whispered. "You mean so much to me."

Michael made a low sound before he captured her mouth in a searing kiss. Adelaide wound her arms around his neck as he pulled her flush against him. They stumbled backward to her bed as all that she had felt pulling her toward him earlier, that they couldn't have put into action then, came tumbling out in built-up passion.

There were so many unanswered questions between them. Should they marry for the right reasons or wrong? Would she be blamed for any wrongdoing in this counterfeit scheme? Could they find a life forward together in London or at the inn she longed for?

But none of that mattered.

Not at the moment.

Adelaide melted into Michael's embrace as the kiss deepened. His strong hands roamed her back and tangled in her hair, holding her close as if he never wanted to let go. She clung to his broad shoulders, reveling in the firmness of his muscles beneath her fingertips.

He backed her up toward the bed, laying them down upon it in a tangle of limbs and heated kisses. Michael's weight settled over her, solid and reassuring. "My beautiful Adelaide," he murmured reverently, lips trailing fire along her jaw and down the column of her throat. "Every night, I dreamt of holding you like this again."

"As did I," she gasped, arching into him. "I should never have held myself back from you."

Her thin, silky nightgown and his breeches were hastily discarded between urgent caresses until, finally, nothing separated them. Adelaide drank in the sight of Michael's bared form, all sleek power. He gazed at her with raw adoration, large hands skimming her curves as if memorizing every dip and swell.

The first time he had seen her without any clothing had been before her pregnancy, and she couldn't help but wonder if he found her wanting now that her body had changed.

"Exquisite," he breathed as though he had heard her thoughts. "You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

Nothing had changed.

Adelaide flushed under his praise, warmth spreading from her cheeks down her neck to her chest. Emboldened, she reached up to draw him into another kiss, tongues tangling sensually. She poured all her passion and yearning into their connection, wanting to convey the depths of her feelings for this man who had so ultimately captured her heart.

Michael groaned into her mouth, the evidence of his desire hard against her thigh. His strong hands mapped every inch of her heated skin, leaving trails of tingling awareness in their wake. He palmed the weight of her breasts, thumbs circling the sensitive peaks until they tightened into aching buds.

"Michael, please," Adelaide begged, undulating restlessly beneath him. The ache at her core grew unbearable, empty and waiting for him.

He answered her plea, his fingers delving into her slick folds to stroke her. Adelaide's hips rose to meet his touch. She teetered on the precipice as he caressed her intimately, winding her tighter and tighter.

"That's it, love," Michael coaxed, voice roughened with need. "Give yourself to me."

Two thick fingers plunged into her channel and curled just so, sending Adelaide over the edge with a silent scream. Her inner muscles clenched around him in pulsing

waves as joy crashed through her. Michael worked her through the peak, prolonging her bliss until she collapsed back onto the mattress, boneless and sated.

But only for a moment. As she drifted down from the high, she lazily reached for Michael. He answered, nudging at her entrance, hard and ready for her. Adelaide widened her thighs in welcome, reaching down to guide him home.

They moaned together as he pushed inside inch by glorious inch, stretching and filling her. When he was seated to the hilt, Michael paused, trembling with the effort to hold back. He cupped her face tenderly, gray eyes blazing into hers.

“I love you, Addi,” he rasped. “So bloody much. I want to be yours in every way, now and always.”

Tears of joy prickled Adelaide’s eyes. “I love you too, Michael. With everything I am. Make me yours.”

Eyes locked on hers, he withdrew until only the tip remained before surging forward, sheathing himself fully inside her. Adelaide cried out, wrapping her legs high around his waist as he set a deep, driving rhythm that stoked the embers of her desire back into an inferno.

He took her with masterful strokes, angling his hips to hit that secret spot inside her that made stars explode behind her eyes. The sound of flesh against flesh and their ragged, mingled panting filled the room as they climbed together.

Adelaide clung to Michael desperately as he drove into her with increasing fervor, her nails scoring his sweat-slicked back. Each powerful thrust sent jolts of electric bliss radiating through her body, coiling the tension tighter and tighter in her lower belly.

“Michael,” she panted, voice breaking on a sob of pleasure. “Don’t stop. Please don’t

stop.”

“Never, love,” he growled against the sensitive skin of her throat. “I’ll never stop loving you.” He punctuated his words with a sharp snap of his hips, making her cry out.

One hand slid down to grasp her thigh, hitching it higher, opening her further to his possession. The change in angle allowed him to plunge even deeper, making light burst behind her eyes.

Michael suckled on one sensitive tip with his teeth, and Adelaide arched nearly off the bed. “Yes, Michael, just like that!” she panted, lost to him and the feeling he raised within her.

His free hand delved between their pounding bodies to find her sensitive bundle of nerves. He circled it deftly, sending bolts of liquid lightning through her already overwrought sense. Pressure built within Adelaide, her inner muscles fluttering wildly around Michael’s length.

“Let go for me, Addi,” Michael commanded, his voice a dark, honeyed rumble that shivered over her skin. “I’ve got you.”

It was all the permission she needed. With a cry softened only by her instinct not to wake the baby, Adelaide shattered, her release exploding through her in searing waves. She convulsed around Michael’s thickness, urging him to join her.

With a hoarse shout of her name, he obeyed, hips stuttering as he buried himself within her one last time before he pulled out of her at the last moment, his seed coming on the sheet beside them.

They clung to each other as the aftershocks slowly ebbed. Michael rolled to his side,

taking her with him, still intimately joined. He brushed damp tendrils of hair from her face with a shaking hand, his eyes glowing with adoration and awe.

“That was...” he trailed off, apparently robbed of speech.

“Incredible,” Adelaide finished, smiling up at him luminously as she stroked his cheek. “I do love you, Michael.”

“And I love you,” he said. “No matter what.”

CHAPTER 22

Michael had no care if they were found together in bed come morning, yet Adelaide had still shooed him out when dawn appeared.

They already had a child together outside of wedlock. What more scandal could they cause?

After they had made love last night, when they had voiced their true feelings for one another, he had wanted nothing more than to ask her once again if she would marry him.

But he didn't want to push.

Not when they had come this far.

"Adelaide," he said as they sat around the breakfast table, the baby held on her shoulder, "I will be leaving for London today."

"For London?" She stopped eating, setting her fork down next to her plate. "Because of Rawlins?"

"Yes," he said. "I need to find him; the sooner, the better, for it will not be long until the authorities will take him in, if they haven't already."

"When do we leave?"

“You do not have to accompany me.”

Truthfully, it would be best for her to stay here, away from any potential danger from Rawlins or authorities who might decide to come after her.

But the thought of separating from her again caused him great misery.

The look she gave him told him that she felt the same.

“I know I do not have to. You have never made me feel as though I have to do anything. But I want to.”

Edward and Dot entered the room in time to hear the last of their conversation.

“You are leaving?” Edward said as he pulled out Dot’s chair for her, and she settled in.

“I think it is best to see this through and finish it,” Michael said. “Otherwise, Adelaide will never feel safe.”

“I’m not certain that it is a good idea for Adelaide to return to London,” Edward said with a frown. “If she stays out of sight, she cannot be tried.”

“I cannot hide forever,” Adelaide protested. “If I do, I will always be living in fear of being found. I think Michael is right. Our best option is to have Rawlins speak for me.”

“Would you consider staying, Adelaide, just while Michael seeks him out?” Dot asked gently, and Michael looked at her, giving her the choice.

Their eyes met as they spoke without words.

“I think I should stay with Michael,” she said, her lips then curling as though she held a secret. “After all, we would not want a husband and wife to be separated.”

He blinked a couple of times, his face blank.

“Could you repeat that, please?” he said.

“I said that a husband and wife should not be separated.”

He pointed a finger from himself and then back to her.

“Do you mean... you and me?”

“Do you have someone else in mind?” Her slight smile had turned into a full-on grin as she laughed. “Yes. IF you’ll still have me.”

Michael let out a whoop of glee that he quickly subdued when he saw how it made Mabel jump.

Dot wisely took the baby from Adelaide before Michael swooped in and picked her up out of her chair, swinging her around in glee.

“Oh, Adelaide, you do not know what that means.”

“I think I do,” she laughed, and Michael wasn’t sure that he had ever felt such joy, even with the threats that still hung over their heads.

“Are you sure?” he asked, finally setting her down. He almost didn’t want to ask it for fear that she might change her mind, but he also didn’t want to raise his hopes only to have them dashed once more. It almost seemed too good to be true.

“Absolutely,” she said, her arms still looped around his shoulders. “I know that, come what may, I cannot live without you, and my impression is that you feel the same.”

“You know I do.”

“I don’t know that I will ever completely understand your complete and sudden willingness to offer me everything you have to give, but I think I have finally come to accept it.”

“That is a very easy question to answer,” he said, his gray eyes staring intensely into her. “Because I realized there would never be another woman like you, and I couldn’t risk the chance you might walk away from me.”

“But I did anyway,” she said softly.

“You did. But you returned to me, and that is all that matters.”

“I love you.”

“And I you.”

They had both forgotten that they had an audience until Mabel let out a little squeal, and Edward cleared his throat before Michael could kiss Adelaide again.

Michael looked over at Edward, finally acknowledging his brother’s presence.

“How soon can we marry?”

“I believe the banns need to be read for three weeks.”

“Do you not have some connections to make it sooner?”

Edward shifted from one foot to the other. “I suppose I could make some inquiries.”

He jumped suddenly when Dot smacked his arm.

“Where were those connections when we were to be married?”

Edward rubbed his arms. “We did not need to expedite our marriage. I would not have wanted to bother the archbishop. Besides, if I had used that favor for our marriage, I couldn’t be using it now for Michael and Adelaide, could I?”

Dot frowned as she looked at him over Mabel’s head but finally gave him a nod.

“I suppose that makes sense.”

“I’m glad you agree,” he said with a smile. “Now, allow me to send that message and then we will help you prepare – for London and for this wedding of yours.”

“I have been in a carriage more in the last month than I have my entire life,” Adelaide said as they settled on the plush squabs to return to London.

“If Mabel sleeps, I can think of some ways we can pass the time,” Michael returned with a suggestive wiggle of his eyebrows.

“In here?” she said, her eyes widening until Michael began to laugh.

“There are many options besides a bed.”

“I know,” she said, feeling the flush steal up her cheeks. “I had just never really considered how that might work.”

“I am happy to show you anytime you would like,” he said with a cheeky grin. She

loved that grin, especially the dimples that appeared when he was truly happy.

As it appeared he was now.

“What is our plan, then?”

“To return to London, announce our wedding, and find Rawlins.”

“And when you find him?”

“I will convince him that it is in his best interests to ensure that you are exonerated.”

“What if he doesn’t agree?”

Michael’s features settled into a hard look that she had only seen after the confrontation with her brother. “I should have killed Jack.”

“Michael!” she couldn’t help but gasp, and he ran a hand over his face.

“I know it’s awful to say, but if I had, then he would not be a threat upon you any longer. You would never have to worry about what he might do or say.”

“But then you would have that on your conscience. Would you be all right with that?”

He frowned as he considered her query for a moment. “I suppose not.”

“It wouldn’t have been worth it,” she said, shaking her head. “As much as it might have eased our fears, it would have stayed with you for the rest of your life.”

“Having you with me the rest of my life is the most important thing.”

“I agree,” she said, closing her eyes and leaning back against him, never having felt so content before. “With all of my heart.”

Michael worked as quickly as possible once they returned to London.

Edward had asked the hired men to watch over Adelaide and the baby. Adelaide was rather put out at her inability to move about London as much as she wished, but she understood, thank goodness. Even if she were not interested in looking after herself, she would never put Mabel at risk.

In the meantime, Michael set about trying to find Rawlins. He asked around at a few taverns and from men he knew he could rely on but was met with little information. No one had seen him. The Red Lion was closed, with Jack now sitting in Newgate.

Michael next went to the print shop, hoping to talk some sense into Rawlins’ partner, if he couldn’t find Rawlins himself.

When he knocked on the door, it finally opened a crack, a wary voice within.

“Can I help you?”

“I am looking for Rawlins.”

Michael managed to wedge his boot in the door just as the printer tried to slam it shut.

Finally, a head emerged around the door. “I do not know anyone by that name.”

“No?” Michael said, raising a brow. “I have evidence showing otherwise.”

He lifted the written page with Rawlins’ name, and the man opened the door and pulled Michael into the shop before he even realized what was happening.

“Where did you get that?”

“Does it matter?”

“I cannot be associated with that man anymore,” the printer said, cursing, and Michael rolled his eyes. Why did people think it was fine to act but they would never be caught?

“Then you must help me find him,” he said. “I have no ill will toward him. I am just trying to protect someone, and I need his help.”

“Well, I cannot help you,” the printer said, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning back against the counter. “I haven’t seen him in a couple of weeks.”

Michael reached into his jacket and pulled out a card.

“If you see him, can you have him call upon me? Please tell him that I can make it well worth his while.”

“Very well.”

Michael handed over five guineas to the surprised printer before letting himself out of the dark room and back into the sunlight.

His next stop was Rawlins’s home. He had been trying to avoid it, not wanting to put the man’s family at risk, but he had no choice. All of his happiness centered on finding this man.

He took one wrong turn, and he wished he had Adelaide still with him to guide the way, but soon, he located the coal yard and then the house he remembered, noting the peeling green shutters that covered the doorway.

He knocked, surprised when a nervous young woman opened it with a baby on her hip.

“Can I help you?” she said, looking behind him and down the street as though she was afraid of who might have accompanied him.

“I am looking for a man named Rawlins,” he repeated, and she bit her lip.

“That would be my husband.”

“Splendid,” Michael said, pleased he had found who he was looking for.

Then her face darkened. “I’m looking for him as well. He has not been home in two weeks.”

Michael’s elation fell.

“Do you think something has happened to him?” the young woman asked, concern etched into her features.

“I couldn’t say,” Michael said, even though he had a sick feeling in his stomach that Rawlins was gone – in one way or another. “Do you have any idea what he was involved in?”

It wasn’t his place to share the information with the man’s wife, but he no longer had the luxury of addressing such concern.

“He owns a print shop.”

“I see,” Michael said, tapping his finger against his chin. She likely knew far more than she would ever say, but he didn’t blame her for her omission.

He reached into his pocket, finding another card before holding it to her.

“If you hear from him, please ask him to call upon me? I promise, I only have a favor to ask him, and I am willing to reward him handsomely for carrying it out.”

“Very well,” she said, taking the card with trembling fingers before darting back inside.

Michael sighed as he started back toward home.

It seemed they would have to rely on luck and any commitment Jack felt toward the woman he called his sister.

Neither were opportune.

But it seemed they didn't have much other choice.

CHAPTER 23

“N o luck?”

Michael’s shoulders slumped as he shook his head.

“We’ve been in London a week, and I still haven’t been able to find him,” he said.

“The man has disappeared, leaving no clues behind.”

“Do you think he’s dead?” Adelaide whispered the last word as she bounced Mabel up and down, as she always did to try to lull her to sleep. While others might think it was foolish to hide any worrisome conversations , for the baby couldn’t understand her, Michael found it endearing that Adelaide was already trying to protect Mabel from such things.

“Hard to say,” Michael said. “The timing of his disappearance does coincide with the few days before they arrived at Mandrake Hall.”

“True,” Adelaide bit her lip.

“What do we do now?”

They both jumped when another voice interrupted them.

“You get married.”

“Edward!” Michael exclaimed, happier to see his brother than he had ever been. He

crossed the room and shocked Edward by wrapping his arms around him and clapping him several times on the back before releasing him, leaving a stunned look on his brother's face. "Am I glad to see you."

Even though Michael had vowed never to ask his brother to solve problems for him again, his appearance still gave him the sense of a weight lifting from his shoulders. Somehow, Edward always knew what to do, and Michael was more at ease knowing he was here to help.

"We had to return to London soon, as Dot would like to have the baby here with her midwife, Magda, nearby, but our timeline changed when I heard back from the archbishop. You have your marriage license and can be married whenever you wish."

Adelaide and Michael exchanged a look. Any concern he had that she was still questioning her decision to marry fled at the warmth that filled her eyes.

"Where shall we wed?" he asked her, but it was Edward who answered.

"I would suggest that you marry at St. George's."

Michael shook his head as Adelaide wrinkled her nose in distaste.

"I do not believe either of us would be comfortable with that," Michael said before Adelaide thoroughly explained her objection.

"St. George's represents the nobility, and while I know that is what I am marrying into, it does not represent us, Edward."

"I understand," he said, his hands clasped behind his back. "But unless you have solved the problem of clearing Adelaide's name" —he waited until Michael admitted he had not— "then I think it is your best option. The more people who understand

that Adelaide has married into our family and is now the sister-in-law of a respected lord, the better.”

Adelaide narrowed her eyes ever so slightly at him.

“Just how many people are we talking about?”

“A full church.”

“I think not!” Michael exclaimed. “Edward, when did you last see St. George’s full for a wedding? I am the second son of a viscount, not the prince regent.”

Edward shrugged. “I am telling you what I believe is the best way to keep Adelaide safe. If our family protects her, then she is far less likely to be accused of conspiracy to create counterfeit, which, as you know, is a crime against the crown. So, what do you say? Do I plan a wedding for you?”

Michael ignored Edward for a moment as he directed his gaze at Adelaide. This would have to be her decision.

“What do you think?” she asked him in turn.

“I want to be married to you,” he said. “All else is but trifling clamor. It is your decision.”

She nodded, slowly yet resolutely. “Very well, Edward,” she said, although her eyes remained on Michael. “Plan the big wedding. We will be there.”

When Adelaide had imagined her wedding, she had never pictured it quite like this.

Every pew was filled, following Edward’s idea of spreading the news of their

wedding far and wide.

She would forget them all, however, and focus on Michael and the few people who mattered.

Edward and Dot were their main witnesses, while Dot's entire family, including Lord and Lady Fitzroy and their newborn baby, had warmly welcomed them into their clan and sat proud in front pews. Even the Duke and Duchess of Dunmore, Lord and Lady Fitzroy's closest friends who hardly ever attended large social functions, had traveled from their home outside of London for the occasion.

It never hurt to have a duke in attendance.

Adelaide felt a kinship with said duke, even though she had never met him. He had no wish to be part of the ton, and instead, he and his wife lived a sheltered life at his estate outside of London.

Sheltered, but not lonely.

For they had one another and their baby.

She would remember when it came time for her and Michael to decide on their own future.

But first, the present.

She walked up the aisle alone. Edward had offered to accompany her, and while she appreciated the gesture as well as everything he had done for her since she became pregnant with Michael's baby, it was much more important to her to symbolize the journey she had taken by herself.

She wore one of the few things she still had from her mother – a small locket clasped around her neck.

She had come so far, and now she would give a part of herself away to this man – but she was proud of herself for only doing so when she was ready and knew that she truly wanted to be married to him.

Michael stood at the front of the church, impossibly handsome in his navy frock coat and ivory brocade waistcoat, the crisp white of his cravat a perfect contrast to his sun-warmed skin. His dark hair, always a touch too long, curled rebelliously over his forehead. And when his storm-gray eyes met Adelaide's, a quiet intensity stole her breath, reminding her that no matter how many pairs of eyes were currently trained upon her, likely questioning how a woman such as she had ever captured the attention of a man such as him, this moment belonged to no one but the two of them.

As if reading her thoughts, one side of his mouth slowly turned up, the dimple appearing in his cheek, and she knew this smile was for her and her alone.

It was everything.

When she finally reached him, he leaned in and took her hands, his eyes seeing into her very soul.

“I love you,” he murmured.

“And I love you.”

A happy cry had them both turning to the front row, where Dot held Mabel, who was smiling and clapping her hands at the two of them as though she understood the proceedings.

They both smiled at her before Adelaide finally allowed her eyes to wander over the first two rows, which held all of the people she had come to know and love, including the six unmarried Fitzroy sisters, who were looking fondly at her. She appreciated their support for welcoming her into their fold, despite the fact that she had been a stranger who had basically turned down their way of life.

This was what it meant to have family. To be accepted, no matter who you were and where you came from. To have people who would be there for you, stand up for you, and do whatever it took to make sure that you were not falsely accused and sent to prison – or worse.

Perhaps that last one was rather unique to her current position, but still.

She smiled at Edward and Dot before returning her attention to Michael and the rector, who cleared his throat to continue the ceremony.

Adelaide meant every word of her vows to Michael and appreciated that he didn't release her hand the entire time they stood at the front of the church, even though the rector dipped his eyes to their joined hands a few times.

Soon enough, it was over, and when they turned around, they were both surprised by the elation of those gathered.

It seemed some people enjoyed any love story, no matter who it involved.

Her heart warmed as they walked down the aisle and she spotted familiar faces in the crowd of people who had helped her along her journey.

Abraham winked at her from the back pew while Mrs. Coleman and a few other young ladies from the shelter were busy with their babies next to him.

Adelaide closed her eyes to hold in a tear and a sniff.

How far her life had come in such a short time, and she was never certain what was coming next.

She knew that with this man by her side, they could face whatever came together.

They walked through the church doors to the bright sunshine, looking at one another in delight, laughing as they practically sprinted to the waiting carriage, which would return them to Edward's house for the wedding breakfast.

For that, at least, only a few people were invited – Edward and Dot, of course, Lord and Lady Fitzroy and all of Lord Fitzroy's sisters and his mother, as well as the Duke and Duchess of Dunmore.

Which was perfect.

Michael helped her into the carriage meant for them and them alone.

It took some time to settle in, as her skirts held far more fabric than usual, but Michael helped her, still finding room to sit beside her.

"I can hardly believe it," Adelaide said, blinking. "I know that, in truth, not much has changed. We were already living in the same house and have a daughter together. Yet somehow..."

"Everything has changed?" he finished for her.

"Yes. Exactly."

"It's because we know now that our lives will always be tied together," he said,

reaching out and sliding his fingers down her cheek. “They might have been anyway, with Mabel, but now we know that, whatever we strive to achieve, we will do so together.”

“I so appreciate you.”

“And I you.”

His eyes took on that mischievous glint that she had come to know so well.

“I’m going to show you how much.”

“What do you mean?”

He slid off the seat and was lifting her voluminous skirts before she realized just what he intended to do.

“Michael! We are in a carriage.”

“I promised you that I would show you all the different ways and places we could make love.”

“Yes, but Mandrake House is so close.”

“Then we best be quick about it,” he said before he disappeared entirely.

She waited a beat in anticipation, and then she practically jumped in the air with a cry as his mouth found her.

Adelaide gasped as Michael’s talented tongue lapped at her most sensitive flesh, sending jolts of electrifying pleasure radiating through her body. His strong hands

gripped her thighs, spreading them wider to allow him better access as the carriage jostled and swayed along the cobblestone streets.

She tangled her fingers in his thick, dark hair, holding him close against her as he worshipped her with his mouth. His tongue swirled and flicked, teasing her mercilessly before delving deep. Adelaide arched her back, pressing herself more firmly against his face, chasing the delicious friction.

“Oh, Michael,” she moaned, head lolling back against the plush velvet seat. “That feels incredible...”

He hummed in response, the vibrations against her sensitive pearl making her toes curl in the dainty silk slippers that had felt so foreign as opposed to her usual boots. With each pass of his tongue, tension coiled tighter and tighter, low in her belly, like a spring being wound to the point of snapping.

Through the haze of bliss, she distantly registered the clip-clop of the horses’ hooves and the occasional calls of people on the street just outside the carriage walls. The thought that anyone could discover them in such a compromising position only heightened her arousal.

Michael seemed to sense how close she was. He redoubled his efforts, licking and suckling with an almost feral intensity. Adelaide fisted her hands in her skirts, panting harshly as she teetered on the edge of climax.

“Yes, yes, don’t stop!” she cried. “I’m almost...I’m going to...”

With a final flick of his wicked tongue, the coil snapped, and rapture crashed over her in wave after wave of excruciating bliss. Adelaide cried out, seeing stars behind her tightly clenched eyelids as she shook, reduced to nothing but pure sensation.

Slowly, she floated back down. Michael placed a few final gentle kisses on her still-quivering center before emerging from beneath her skirts with a very satisfied, almost smug expression. Adelaide reached for him with trembling hands, drawing him up into a searing kiss.

“You are a scoundrel, Mr. Redgrave,” she murmured against his mouth.

He grinned roguishly.

“Ah, but I’m your scoundrel now, Mrs. Redgrave. Forever and always.”

Adelaide smiled, her heart so full of love and joy that she thought it might burst. “Forever and always,” she agreed.

Just then, the carriage rolled to a stop. They had finished their interlude not a moment too soon as they arrived at Mandrake House.

She looked at him and laughed, even as heat climbed up her neck to her cheeks when the driver opened the door, unable to look either of them in the eyes.

Perhaps she had been louder than she had thought.

She winced.

It had still been worth it.

Michael led her up the front walk, holding her arm close against his side.

“We will live wherever you please, wife, but one way or another, we are going to need our own accommodations sooner rather than later,” he said, “for the way that you cry out?—”

When he stopped so abruptly, Adelaide lifted her head from where she had been tracking the path beneath them.

“The way I—” she repeated before her own words stopped.

For there, standing in front of them, was a distinguished gentleman dressed in a dark, finely tailored frock coat, a crisp white cravat, a powdered wig, and an air of stern authority.

“Michael,” Adelaide said as their steps slowed, “who is that?”

“That, I believe,” he said quietly, though angrily, with tightly gritted teeth and pursed lips, “is the chief magistrate of London.”

CHAPTER 24

Even worse than the simple presence of the magistrate was the fact he was surrounded by three other officers, all staring at them with grim expressions.

Adelaide's heart plummeted into her stomach as she realized why they were likely there. Michael gripped her arm even tighter.

"I will not let them take you," he said fiercely, and while she believed his intention, she doubted that he would have much choice in the matter.

"Miss Adelaide Stone?" the chief magistrate said, his voice booming across the front garden.

Adelaide nodded mutely, her throat closing with dread, but Michael stepped forward to stand slightly before her.

"You have been incorrectly informed," he said. "She is Mrs. Adelaide Redgrave. My wife. I am Michael Redgrave, brother to Lord Mandrake, although you likely know that last bit of information."

The magistrate opened and closed his mouth a couple of times.

"I see," he murmured. Edward had been right that this information might have changed things.

"You have... well, you have been named a conspirator in abetting your brother's

counterfeit scheme,” he said. “You will come with us immediately to be questioned.”

“Where are you taking her?”

The chief magistrate paused, and Adelaide realized that they likely would have taken her had her name not suddenly changed.

“I had nothing to do with my brother’s crimes,” she said, finding her voice. “He is not truly my brother, either, as it happens.”

The magistrate rocked back and forth from his heels to his toes. “Mr. Tate named you as a key accomplice. We have signed witness statements attesting to your involvement.”

“Jack being the witness, I assume?” she said with a sigh and rolled her eyes. “Of course it was him. It means nothing.”

The sound of wheels traveling over the cobblestones reached them before Edward, Dot, and Mabel, still in her arms, stepped out of the carriage.

“What is the meaning of this?” Edward demanded, correctly assessing the situation as he stalked toward them.

“My lord,” the chief magistrate said with a slight bow toward him. “We were just telling your brother’s... wife, that she has been named as an accomplice in a counterfeit scheme.”

“By her lowlife of a brother, no doubt,” Edward said, to which the chief magistrate only slightly inclined his head. “You realize by now just who you are threatening,” he continued, his voice stern as though he was chastising a young man. “Not only that, but this is their wedding breakfast, and I am due to have guests arrive shortly. This

will wait until another time, do you understand?"

"I cannot simply allow this to go unaddressed."

"I understand that," Edward said, his eyes flicking to Adelaide as though requesting her forgiveness. "I shall see to it that she remains confined to the house until your return to interrogate her."

"You will what?" Adelaide said incredulously, but Edward furrowed his brow at her in silent conversation.

"It is better than Newgate," he muttered, to which she could only reluctantly agree.

"Very well," the chief magistrate said hesitantly, and despite having been among these people for more than a year now, it still shocked Adelaide just how much power the nobility held over all aspects of society. "I will return tomorrow. I would like to deal with this matter as quickly as possible, for we have one man in Newgate, another under house arrest, and a third in the wind. It is not an ideal situation."

"Trust me, I understand very well," Edward said in that stoic way of his. "Tomorrow, then."

He nodded, the chief magistrate leaving with his men only moments before the other carriages arrived.

"Are you all right?" Michael asked Adelaide as the three of them surrounded her.

"I cannot say this will be as celebratory as it should be," she said, forcing a small smile. "But I suppose this is better than being alone."

"We will protect you, Adelaide," Michael vowed. "I will not allow anything to

happen to you.”

“I know you will do everything in your power,” she said, as she couldn’t stop herself from reaching out and taking Mabel from Dot. She needed the baby’s presence, likely more than the baby needed hers at that moment. “But what am I to do on his return?”

“You tell the truth,” Edward said simply. “That is all that you can do.”

“What if it’s not enough?” she said, turning worried eyes upon them all, becoming even more concerned when none of them seemed to have any way to reassure her.

Michael reached out a hand in comfort but jumped when the hedge beside them shook, moving as though possessed.

Until it deposited a figure on the ground.

“Ouch,” the man said, rubbing his head. “Didn’t think they would ever leave.”

They all gaped at him in shock as he pushed himself to his feet, placing his hands on his hips.

“Heard you’ve been looking for me,” he said. “Bert Rawlins.”

Michael could have embraced the man.

“Rawlins,” he said. “You are right. I have been looking for you.”

“Why do we not take this inside?” Dot suggested, urging them all through the front door, past a shocked butler and into the house. “You can talk in Edward’s study while I await our guests.”

“Thank you, Dot,” Adelaide murmured as Michael placed a hand on her lower back to lead them through the house.

The first part of the plan had worked. They had found Rawlins – or, rather, Rawlins had found them. Now, Michael just had to convince him to help them.

When they were settled around the small table in Edward’s office – Michael, Adelaide with the baby, and Rawlins, Edward leaning against his desk looking on – Michael leaned forward, appreciating his brother for allowing him to take the lead.

“We need your help,” he began, and Rawlins sat back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest.

“With what?” he asked warily.

“Do you know who Adelaide is?” he asked, waving toward her, and Rawlins slowly shook his head.

“I’d remember a face that beautiful,” he said, his lips curling up, as Adelaide scoffed.

“You’re a married man.”

His smile instantly fell. “How do you know that?”

“I met your wife while looking for you,” Michael said. “You should tell her that you are well. She’s worried.”

“My wife is my concern,” Rawlins said, his gaze darkening. “Now, what do you want from me?”

“Adelaide is Jack’s sister, in a sense,” Michael explained. “He has named her as an

accomplice in your counterfeit scheme, even though she has no involvement. I need you to clear her name.”

Rawlins snorted. “Don’t know what you are talking about.”

“I thought you might feel that way,” Michael said before crossing to Edward’s desk and picking up the package that he had assembled. “However, I have much evidence that says otherwise.”

Rawlins looked at him incredulously. “What kind of fool do you take me for? I am not turning myself in for a stranger.”

“I am not asking you to do so,” Michael said. “If you do not provide a written statement that Adelaide had nothing to do with this scheme, I will use what I have to prove your involvement further. They already have your name from Jack. What I give them will only be sure to convict you.”

“You want me to write a statement and then do what?”

“Then you vanish with your family,” Michael said, waving his hand out before him. “Yes, you broke the law, but you don’t strike me as a dangerous man like the other two. That was clear when you chose not to join them in kidnapping my wife and trying to kill me. Instead, you ran. Keep running.”

Rawlins looked down, chagrined. “I would, but I cannot afford to do so with my family. Not unless I use the counterfeit, which is just as sure to get me killed. I will not risk it with them.”

“I will give you enough to make a new life for yourself.”

Both Adelaide and Rawlins looked at him in shock at that statement. Only Edward

had been privy to his intention.

“Why would you do that?” Rawlins asked.

“If you would help ensure that my wife is free to live her life, then I am happy to do so,” he said, sitting back, waiting. “Will you?”

Rawlins snorted. “You’re not exactly giving me a choice.”

“I am not going to force you at gunpoint, but it is not much of a choice, no. You can face the authorities, hide as best you can, or take the option I am giving you.”

Rawlins took only a couple of moments before he nodded. “Very well. I will do as you ask.”

“Glad to hear it,” Michael said with a grin as Edward walked over and handed him parchment and a pen and ink.

“What should I write?” Rawlins asked, lifting the pen.

“The truth.”

Rawlins nodded and placed the pen on the paper. Michael was impressed by his penmanship, but the man was a printer, so he should be skilled enough at such endeavors.

Michael reached over and placed his hand on Adelaide’s leg. She looked up at him, warmth in her eyes, and nodded her thanks.

“There we are,” Michael said, checking that Rawlins had signed the statement. Edward passed him the packet of notes he had prepared, and he gave it to Rawlins.

“Here you are,” he said. “Enough to start a new life.”

“Do not leave your wife behind,” Adelaide said sternly, breaking her silence.

“I would never,” Rawlins said, lifting a hand. “I swear. I only left her without any information for this time because I thought she would be safer without me.”

“Very well,” Adelaide said. “But if I find out that you have left her behind to fend for herself, I will take all of this to the authorities and hunt you down myself.”

Fear briefly and appropriately flashed over Rawlins’ face, for Michael knew she meant it with every ounce of her being.

“Well, it was good doing business with you, Rawlins, but I have a wedding breakfast to attend,” Michael said as they all stood. “I wish you the best and suggest that you keep yourself out of such business.”

“I will,” he said, passing a hand over his face. “I was desperate, and when Lord Gregory approached me, I... well, I allowed the greed to take over.”

“Trust me,” Michael said, clapping a hand on his shoulder. “We all make mistakes. I know that better than anyone. But I also know we can overcome them and make a new path for ourselves.”

They watched Rawlins walk away, and Michael placed an arm around Adelaide and the baby. “Well?” he said. “Are you ready to greet our guests?”

“More than ready,” she said, smiling up at him. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For all that you did for me. The money you gave him, the amount of strategizing you did.”

“You did not believe Edward did all that?”

She tilted her head as she studied him. “He could have, but I don’t think he did. For one, that blurred some lines that Edward would never cross. It probably killed him not to take the lot of them and follow the exact legal path. But he let you do what you thought best. For what it’s worth, I agree with your approach. Rawlins shouldn’t have broken the law as he did, but I also do not want to see him hanged for trying to look after his family.”

“What about Jack?”

“Jack deserves whatever is coming to him,” she said, her face darkening. “I cannot say that I want to see a man dead, but the law can deal with him as it should. He threatened my child. Our child.”

Michael nodded in agreement, rubbing a hand over her back. “We will protect our family, no matter what.”

“No matter what,” she agreed, nodding her head.

“Now,” he said with a grin, “let’s go enjoy ourselves.”

CHAPTER 25

“Tell us more stories from the tavern,” one of Eliza’s sisters – she thought it was Sarah – said as they sat around Adelaide, fixated on her.

“Apologies for my sisters,” another one of them, Georgiana, said as she rolled her eyes. “We are a sheltered bunch. Your life seems like one of great adventure.”

“Adventure, yes, I suppose,” Adelaide laughed. “Though it has included plenty of struggle as well. I cannot say that I would recommend working in a tavern, but it did provide a great deal of entertainment.”

“Like the group of sailors who visited one night?” one of the younger ones said.

“Yes,” she said, tapping a finger against her lips. “That was quite a night. Did Eliza tell you about it?”

“She did,” Henrietta said with an interested expression. “But she didn’t give us any details.”

“That’s because I never shared them,” Adelaide said with a grin, looking over to the side of the room where Eliza and Siena sat holding their newborns, their husbands standing beside them, staring at them adoringly.

She hoped they would forgive her for telling the story to impressionable young ladies, but she figured if they were never told the real ways of the world, they would be in for a shock when they discovered them.

“The sailors came in one night, fresh off their ship after months at sea. They were rowdy, laughing and singing as they burst through the door. I overheard tales of distant lands, giant squids, mermaids, and fierce battles, as I served their ales. The more they drank, the louder they grew, arm wrestling and dancing jigs. They even sang a couple of sea shanties.”

“Were they scandalous?” Even Sloane, who never seemed particularly interested in anything, seemed captivated.

“Even I was scandalized!” Adelaide laughed. “Then, a rival group of sailors stormed in, and the tavern turned to chaos. Fists flew, chairs smashed, and I took cover as mugs and bottles shattered. Just as it seemed the brawl couldn’t get worse, a shrill whistle cut through the bedlam. I expected to see the harbormaster or someone in authority. But it was a woman.”

“A woman?” Henrietta asked.

Adelaide hadn’t thought the young ladies’ eyes could widen even further. She had been wrong.

“Yes,” she said, nodding enthusiastically. “It seemed that this was the real reason they were brawling. She was the mistress of the leaders of both sailor groups, and she told them that they could both still enjoy her company or neither of them could.”

“What happened?” Henrietta said, her mouth falling open.

Adelaide laughed. “They made up quite quickly.”

Adelaide sensed Michael’s presence before she saw him, and she straightened, wondering how much he had heard and what he would think of her telling such stories to impressionable young ladies.

She turned to look at him, prepared to defend herself, but she found him smiling.

“You have a knack for storytelling,” he said, raising an eyebrow. “I’d love to hear some of these stories myself.”

“And I would love to tell them.”

He reached down a hand. “The Duke of Dunmore would like to make your acquaintance if I can steal you away.”

“Of course.”

Adelaide had met the duchess when she had come to visit Dot once or twice while Adelaide had lived at Mandrake House, but she had never met the duke.

A scar stretched down one side of his face from beneath an eyepatch, and she could tell from the wary look he gave her that he was waiting for her judgment.

But she had scars of her own. They all did, in one way or another.

“Your Grace,” she said, dipping into a curtsy. She had learned more about formality in the noble set over the past year than she had thought was possible.

“No need to be rigid with me,” he said gruffly. “We’re among family here now.”

“Hard to believe that we are all united, after the way Fitz and Edward started, isn’t it?” Michael said with a grin, and the duke lifted a brow.

“From what I remember, you and Fitz are more alike than Lord Mandrake would likely ever admit,” he said, and Michael’s mouth dropped.

“Do you think that’s why he didn’t like him?”

The duke shrugged. “We’ll never know, now, will we?” He turned to Adelaide. “Your daughter is lovely. I know now what it means to have children, and I am forever grateful also to have the opportunity.”

His wife, Siena, joined them, and his features softened entirely. It was amazing what love could do to a person.

Adelaide knew that now as well as anyone.

“Thank you,” she said. “And the same to you.”

They continued to make pleasantries with their guests, and Adelaide felt fulfilled by the time everyone departed.

And yet, their departure left no emptiness.

For she had her husband. And she now had family.

Which meant more than she ever would have considered possible.

“I have a gift for you,” Michael said as they lay in bed later that night. His room was larger, so they had moved her few meagre belongings and Mabel’s small crib into his bedroom. Dot had offered to share the nursery, but Adelaide preferred to keep Mabel close.

“Another one?” Adelaide said incredulously. “You have already given me more than I could ever ask for.”

“It is not enough,” he said. “Not yet. Nor will it likely ever be. You have given me

you and Mabel. I can never match that. I can, however, spend the rest of my life trying.”

He untangled himself from Adelaide and the sheets, padding over to the dresser as quietly as possible to not wake Mabel. He found what he was looking for tucked in the back of his wardrobe, where he had hidden it.

He lit a lone candle beside the bed so she could see what was on the paper.

“For you,” he said, his heart pounding as he wondered what she would think of this. “Though, truthfully, it is for both of us.”

She met his eyes before lowering them to the paper in front of her. She broke the seal, turning it over and leaning on him so she was closer to the light. He loved that she allowed them to be skin to skin, even though it was unnecessary.

He felt her swift intake of breath before he heard the gasp.

“Michael,” she said, scrambling back and turning toward him. “This is a deed.”

“Indeed it is,” he said, pleased with his pun.

“For the inn in Tunbridge Wells.”

“Yes.”

“But... we hadn’t come to a decision.”

“No, we hadn’t. And if you do not want it, I am happy to sell it or find someone to run it. But I know this is what you always wanted, that you do not want a life in London.”

She sat back, her eyes cast downward.

“You are correct,” she said. “Yet, still, I want you to be happy, and everything I said before still applies.”

“Perhaps,” he said. “But there is no reason I cannot hire a servant in Tunbridge Wells if that is what I truly need. I do not have anything here except for Edward and Dot, and they now have their own family. We will see them whenever we’d like, for they are not so far away. I told you before that I’ve been searching for purpose for a long time, and I have found it now, with you and Mabel. Having this together will only add to the life we are creating together. But I leave it up to you. I can be happy wherever you are, but I would be much happier knowing that you were following your life’s dream.”

“Oh, Michael, this is everything I could ever want. But only if you are certain.”

“With everything I am.”

“I had been saving. I will give some of it to you. Where did you get the money?”

“Apparently, Edward had an account held in trust for me when I married. He just never told me about it, as he didn’t want me to marry for the wrong reasons. I hate to admit it, but he was right to wait. Keep your money to save for Mabel.”

“Very well,” she said, biting her lip. “I have something for you as well.”

“I told you that you have given me more than enough.”

“That may be so, but it is still important to me that you have this.”

She went to the vanity, and while Michael couldn’t see what she was doing in the

room's shadows, she returned with a small bound book.

"I will always regret that I took from you the opportunity to be part of Mabel's life for her first few months," she said.

He held up a hand. "I do wish I had been there for more, but the truth is, most noblemen hardly ever see their children, so it was not exactly anything out of the ordinary."

"That may be, but I still took the choice away from you," she countered. "Anyway, I know it doesn't make up for it, but I would like to give you this." She passed him the small book and he unwound the twine closing it and opened it to find pages full of her handwriting, with a few small mementos taped within it – a piece of Mabel's hair, an imprint of her foot, and even a small article she had cut out of a paper on the day of her birth.

"I am keeping a journal of her first year," Adelaide said shyly. "I wrote out everything – about Mabel, what she was doing, what I thought of her, and how I felt. I will admit that I never thought I would share it with anyone except perhaps her when she was old enough to understand it, but I would like you to read it. For us to continue it together."

"Adelaide," he said in shock, knowing what it meant for her to be so vulnerable before him, "I do not know what to say."

"Just say that you will try to let it help repair the past," she said, and he set the book down, leaning forward and cradling her face in his hands.

"The past is in the past," he said. "All I care about now is the future – and the present."

He leaned in, took her lips, and proceeded to show her just how much he cared.

Michael gazed into Adelaide's deep brown eyes, losing himself in their endless depths. Her hair fanned out across the pillow like an auburn halo, the silky strands caressing his fingers as he brushed a lock from her cheek. He traced the strong line of her jaw, marveling at the softness of her skin.

Adelaide's lips parted as she sighed his name.

"Michael..." she said in a breathy whisper full of longing until he claimed her mouth in a searing kiss, pouring all of his love into it as their tongues danced together.

He trailed reverent kisses along her graceful neck, inhaling her sweet, lavender scent.

"You're so beautiful, Addi," he murmured against her racing pulse. "I want to worship every inch of you." His hands roamed over her curves, mapping the dips and swells he now knew by heart.

Adelaide arched into his touch, responding to his every move. "Please, Michael," she whimpered as he cupped her breasts, thumbing the sensitive peaks. "I need you."

That was all it took for the desire to break free within him. He kissed a fiery path down her body, lavishing attention on her smooth skin until she was quivering beneath him. Settling between her thighs, he joined them as one, burying himself to the hilt.

They moved together in perfect rhythm, giving and taking as they did through their lives together. The bed hit the wall behind them, but neither of them cared. Adelaide lifted her hips to meet his thrusts, and her eyes fluttered closed as she began to tighten around him.

“That’s it, love,” he encouraged gruffly. “Let go for me.”

With a moan, she came around him so intensely that it triggered his release, and with a hoarse groan, he spilled himself inside of her, holding himself up for a moment until finally rolling over beside her.

Gathering Adelaide close, Michael rolled to his back and tucked her against his side. She pillowed her head on his chest, their racing hearts calming as they basked together. He tenderly stroked her hair as he murmured into her ear.

“I should have asked if you were willing to risk becoming pregnant again.”

She turned, meeting his eyes.

“I am happy to accept whatever comes our way, as long as it is with you.”

“I agree.”

“I love you, Addi.”

“And I love you, Michael.”

CHAPTER 26

Adelaide had been so wrapped up in her post-wedded bliss with Michael that she had nearly forgotten about the chief magistrate until he showed up on the doorstep shortly after noon the next day.

She was in the drawing room with Dot, Mabel on a blanket on the floor before them as they tried to encourage her to crawl.

“That’s it!” she said, as Mabel rocked back and forth from her position on all fours. “Come see Mama!”

Adelaide was lying on the ground in front of the baby when Jones stopped in the doorway.

“My lady? Mrs. Redgrave? The chief magistrate has returned.”

Dot and Adelaide exchanged a glance.

“Where is Michael?” Dot asked.

“I believe he went to speak to Edward in the study,” Adelaide replied, her brows furrowing.

“Please show the chief magistrate into Edward’s study to see our husbands,” Dot said. “We will join them shortly. And please ask Mrs. Adams to come look after Mabel.”

The butler nodded as Adelaide lifted the baby in her arms, giving her a quick kiss on the nose before passing her to Mrs. Adams, who was in great spirits to see her.

Dot squeezed Adelaide's hand as they entered the study, finding the chief magistrate sitting at the table in the corner, the gentlemen with him.

The fact that he was alone and had not brought any other men with him was a positive sign, she had to hope.

Perhaps this was how one dealt with others when one was now part of high society.

"Mrs. Redgrave," the chief magistrate greeted her before clearing his throat. "I would like to ask for forgiveness of my intrusion yesterday. I was aware that you were to be married but did not know that yesterday was your wedding day."

"Nothing to forgive. How could you have known?" Adelaide said with what she hoped was a welcoming smile. She had to stay on this man's good side.

"I would usually have heard the banns or read about it in the papers."

"We wanted to be married more quickly so that we could leave in due course for we just purchased an inn," Michael interjected. "Now, let us get to it. What are your intentions here today?"

"I must still question your wife," the chief magistrate said, his leg bouncing up and down. "I am also suspicious of the timing of your marriage, despite your explanation. It is a difficult situation. I?—"

"If I may," Edward said, placing a letter before the chief magistrate. "We received this from Bert Rawlins, the third man implicated in the counterfeit scheme. He made it clear that Adelaide was not involved in what they were doing."

“Where did you get this?” the chief magistrate demanded, jumping to his feet. “We are looking for the man, and if you know anything of his whereabouts?—”

Edward lifted a stately brow. “Are you threatening my sister-in-law?”

“No, of course not. My apologies, my lord, but as you can imagine, I am rather desperate to find him.”

“Well, unfortunately, we cannot help, for this was delivered to us by a messenger. However, I believe this proves that my brother’s wife is innocent. Her brother named her in a vindictive scheme because he was jealous of where she is compared to how he has fallen. Tell me, what has happened to Lord Gregory?”

The chief magistrate swallowed hard. “Lord Gregory and his family have agreed that it is best Lord Gregory leave the country. I am uncertain which colony he has settled upon, but his brother has guaranteed his departure. If he stays, he will have to be tried.”

“And this is a man whose guilt you are assured of. As for Mrs. Redgrave, do you have any evidence showing any wrongdoing?”

The chief magistrate shifted back and forth. “Not besides her brother’s word.”

“Which we know means nothing. Therefore, I would appreciate it if you would drop this line of inquiry and focus on other issues more deserving of your time.”

Adelaide blinked a couple of times before glancing over at Dot, whose lips were upturned in a satisfied smile. She enjoyed this side of her husband. Adelaide supposed she could understand why.

Finally, the chief magistrate sighed, seeming to come to a conclusion. “If I find any

evidence that indicates otherwise, then I will return, but you are correct in that I would never convict anyone based on the word of another alone, especially with a counter testimony. I would ask should you hear from Rawlins that you please contact me. Now, Mrs. Redgrave, I wonder if you have any information on your brother that might help in the case against him. Perhaps you saw or heard something you didn't understand then but now makes sense?"

"I cannot think of anything at the moment, but if I do, I will be sure to share it."

"Very good. I did have the opportunity to speak with a man named Abraham, who provided me with more information."

"Did Abraham have anything to say about me?" she asked, knowing he would never have implicated her.

"No, he did not."

"You could have led with that," Michael interjected, earning a look of warning from Edward.

"I could have," the chief magistrate agreed. "But then I would not have received any further information from you."

"What will happen to Jack?" Adelaide couldn't help but ask.

"He will be tried, and his punishment will then be served accordingly," the chief magistrate responded, and she nodded.

She had said that he deserved the punishment coming to him, which he did, but at the same time, it didn't seem fair if he had to give his life while Lord Gregory, who had driven this entire scheme, was able to start a new one.

“If you need to contact us for any reason, you can find us at the inn in Tunbridge Wells.” Michael said, and the chief magistrate thanked them for their time before excusing himself.

“Shall we go to the drawing room?” Michael said. “I think I might need a drink.”

They left the darkness of Edward’s study for the drawing room, requesting a round of brandy for everyone except Dot to be poured. They sat and stared at one another for a moment as the liquid burned down their throats.

Michael was the first to break, as the grin spread over his face. Adelaide laughed, and soon enough, they had all joined in, drawn together by their love for one another as well as all they had been through.

“A toast,” Edward said, lifting his glass. “To Adelaide, who fits into our family better than anyone else ever could, and to Michael, who has proven what a loving father and husband he can be.”

Michael smiled. “To Dot, who began to heal our family, and to Edward, who, in fixing all of my past mistakes, led me to the best mistake I have ever made.”

They raised their glasses once more as Adelaide leaned into Michael, enjoying his firm, hard chest against her back.

She would never have imagined that he would be her rock, nor that she could be his. But here they were, tied together by so much more than their marriage vows, by the love and family they would forever share.

“When do you plan on leaving?” Edward asked, causing Dot’s expression turned to sadness.

“I had thought to leave within the week, but Adelaide had another idea.”

“I would like to wait until your baby arrives, Dot,” she said. “I cannot imagine leaving without meeting the little one.”

“Oh, that would make me so happy,” Dot said, a smile forming on her lips. “Thank you for staying with me.”

“I cannot help you as you did me,” Adelaide said with a laugh. “But I will do whatever is needed.”

“You will be a comforting presence,” Dot said, patting her hand. “Thank you ever so much.”

Adelaide felt the sadness herself as she realized that by leaving, she would miss this. Time with Dot, moments together as a family. But Michael was right. It was not goodbye forever, and they would always be welcome here, as Dot and Edward would be with them.

Adelaide had spent her entire life trying to find where she belonged and had left Michael because she thought he would unintentionally hold her back from her dreams.

But that hadn’t been the case at all.

As it turned out, sometimes a pause or even a few steps backward was all that was necessary to find the momentum to begin again.

He was what she had never known she needed.

They had started their lives together with nothing more than a spark of desire, one

that had grown into a well-tended flame.

Separately, they had been struggling to find purpose and belonging.

Together, they were better than either of them could ever have imagined.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:55 pm

ONE YEAR LATER

“ I do not think I will ever become used to the beauty of this place.”

Adelaide turned to look at her husband, his profile just as beautiful as the setting sun behind him.

The last of the guests had retired for the evening, the glow of lanterns flickering in the soft summer breeze as the noise of the day was reduced to gentle murmurings around the inn.

The mineral baths at the back of the inn, which had been brimming with guests all day, now sat still in front of them, reflecting the pastel-colored sky.

The scents of lavender and rosemary lingered in the air, carried on the breeze from the herb garden that Mr. Dale had planted and Adelaide now cultivated around the side of the building.

Adelaide had been standing on the terrace, a light shawl wrapped around her shoulders as she enjoyed the stillness of the warm summer evening while she watched over Mabel, who was now toddling around the grass behind the inn.

Michael joined her and completed the moment, especially when he pressed a gentle kiss on her temple before wrapping an arm around her waist. She leaned against him, a smile gracing her lips.

“The hills are beautiful, are they not?” she said, looking over the rolling countryside

beyond.

“No more beautiful than the woman beside me,” Michael said, his voice a low rumble, and she swatted him.

“You are ever the charmer.”

“Only for you.”

Which was true. Since they first came together, he had never had eyes for another. All of the words that she had thought were just that – words – were, apparently, so much more.

“It hardly feels real, does it?” Adelaide murmured, her voice full of wonder. “This place, this life we have built?”

Michael chuckled softly. “There were certainly times I never thought I’d see such peace. But here we are.” He tilted his head, glancing at her with a smirk. “Do you miss the excitement of the past?”

Adelaide smiled as Mabel walked toward her. She bent, sweeping her daughter into her arms and inhaling the sweet scent of her hair before looking up at Michael.

“Not in the least. This — our inn, home, family — is the greatest adventure I could have imagined.”

Michael exhaled as if releasing the weight they had endured to reach this moment. “I agree.” He brushed his fingers against Mabel’s soft curls. “Not to break up the moment, but Edward told me about Jack.”

“Oh?” she stiffened slightly at her brother’s name.

“He was tried and found guilty, but the punishment is transportation to Australia. His role seemed to play a factor in that, for he was the courier, not making or distributing the counterfeit. But that’s not all.”

She prayed he hadn’t escaped.

“He died during the transport.”

“I see,” she said, waiting to feel emotion, any emotion – relief, guilt, or otherwise – but found that when it came to Jack, she had nothing left for him.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes, I think so,” she said in some wonderment. “I did what I could for Jack, but he made his own choices. I have to be at peace with that. Was there any news of Rawlins or Lord Gregory?”

“Lord Gregory made it to Canada, as far as anyone is aware. Rawlins has not been heard of.”

“Hopefully, he can make a new life for himself and his family and stay out of trouble,” she said.

“I agree.” Michael was silent for a moment. “What comes next for us?”

Adelaide raised a brow. “You are not content simply enjoying what we have?”

“Of course. Tunbridge Wells already draws many people from London, and the inn welcomes all those seeking the spa life. But I also see potential in what more we could offer.”

Adelaide laughed, shaking her head. “You have become quite the ambitious businessman. But I must admit, I like growing what we have. You have the connections to invite more nobility here, and you know what would make them comfortable. You have already added to the staff.”

As Adelaide had predicted, Michael missed having some of his needs seen to by servants. The one valet he hired was significantly reduced from his previous comforts, but they had also hired more staff as the inn prospered.

Michael lifted a sleepy Mabel from Adelaide’s arms and took her hand, leading her inside, past the dimly lit hallways, and into their private chambers. Fire crackled in the hearth, its warm glow casting dancing shadows upon the walls. Mabel had fallen asleep on their walk up the stairs, and he laid her down in her bed in the adjoining room to theirs, pressing a tender kiss to her forehead before returning to Adelaide, who waited with a soft smile on her face. She loved seeing her husband like this, so completely devoted to both of them.

“You have worked tirelessly today,” he murmured, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “It is now your turn to be pampered.”

Before she could protest, he guided her toward the copper bathtub, which he had requested to be filled with warm water, rose petals, and chamomile. Steam rose delicately, carrying the fragrance of the herbs. Adelaide sighed as he slowly untied the ribbons of her gown, his fingers lingering against her skin.

“Michael,” she whispered, turning to face him.

“Shh,” he said, his voice husky. “Tonight is for you.”

He took her hand as she stepped over the ridge of the tub and sank into the water, her body instantly relaxing under the warmth. Michael knelt beside the tub, running a

cloth along her arms and shoulders, his touch reverent, sending tingles throughout her body.

“Do you remember when we first came here?” she murmured, eyes half-lidded as she enjoyed the sensation.

“Of course,” he said with a smile. “You were determined to transform this place, even when the idea of turning an inn to a spa resort seemed impossible.”

“But you believed in me,” she whispered.

Michael leaned down, pressing a soft kiss to her damp forehead. “I will always believe in you, Addi.”

Her heart swelled, and as she gazed at the man she had married, the father of her child, the partner in all her dreams, she knew no adventure could ever compare to the life they had created together.

As the fire crackled, the night stretched on, filled with love, whispered promises, and the certainty that whatever came next, they would face it together.

CHAPTER ONE

“It is not a true romance if it does not have a happy ending.”

Cassandra’s bold statement was met with the expected chorus of opinions. In a room of women who are all passionate about their preferences in their romance novels and never hesitated to share their true thoughts, her view would not go unchallenged.

But she maintained her position as she sat in the center of the room and placed her hand over her heart as though making a lifelong vow.

Although she supposed in a way, she was.

“Why did we just put ourselves through such tragedy for entertainment?” she continued, her spine straight in her perch on the middle cushion of the crimson French sofa, which was beginning to show all of its decades. “I apologize, Faith, for I know the book was your choice, but I was so invested in their love, and then for it all to end in such a tortuous manner... I simply cannot go through that again.”

“Cassandra,” Faith said, tilting her head to study her friend. “You are being overly dramatic. It is still a romance because they fell in love. Yes, they allowed external forces to come between them, but the story is still worth reading. Did we not learn something from it?”

“We did,” Cassandra said with a firm nod of her head. “Never trust a gentleman who is more in love with a ghost than his wife.”

Persephone, who they affectionately called Percy, started to snicker at that, while Faith rolled her eyes. Faith's sister, Hope, sighed, and Cassandra knew that she likely agreed with her. The fair-haired, blue-eyed Hope lived up to her name, always seeing the best in everyone around her, while Faith was far more suspicious of anyone who entered her life.

One could tell their personalities by their choice in books – which made Cassandra all the more worried about what Madeline might pick the following week.

Percy held up a hand to halt a new argument.

“Before we delve deeper into this conversation, perhaps we should pour ourselves a drink.”

“An excellent idea,” Cassandra said, smiling wickedly as she walked to the sideboard, where her brother, Gideon, kept his alcohol. She had a feeling he knew that she and her friends often helped themselves to his supply, but each woman took a turn providing sustenance for their meetings so that there was never enough missing for him to have reason to accuse them.

She reached underneath and found five short glasses, lining them up in a row on the chipped wood of the counter above. She generously poured each one, and then served them to her friends before sitting back in her own place on the sofa, closing her eyes and taking a deep sip, welcoming the fiery warmth as it slid down her throat – just as the door opened, startling all of them.

“Gideon, I—oh, excuse me.”

The deep, bass voice echoed through the room and straight into Cassandra's soul. It was a voice she knew well, one that she usually attempted to avoid.

For it brought nothing but trouble.

She shot to her feet so quickly that the remnants of her drink spilled out and splashed over her dress, but she disregarded that as she locked eyes with the dark, unreadable ones of the man in front of her – the man she had allowed to get under her skin, not to mention a few other places he should never have been – one too many times.

His broad, full lips curled into a smirk as his eyes wandered from her face down the entirety of her body to the kid slippers that covered her toes and back up again. His scrutiny was more fiery than the liquid that was dripping over her and she shivered from the intensity of it.

“Having ourselves a good time, are we ladies?” he asked, although he kept his eyes on Cassandra.

“We are having a private meeting,” she said, straightening her shoulders and meeting his gaze full-on, refusing to cower before him. “One to which gentlemen are not invited. I believe Gideon is hosting a gathering of his own – one that you are likely welcome at – in the drawing room. This is the parlor.”

“So it would seem,” he said, his eyes sweeping around the room, missing nothing, including the books that each of them held in their laps. Cassandra gripped hers tightly in her hand as she moved it slightly behind her back so that he wouldn’t comment upon it. She had nothing to fear from the man, she reminded herself. The worst he could do was tell Gideon what they were doing in here, and the truth was, she didn’t think her brother would overly care.

“Lord Covington,” Hope said belatedly, standing with a slight bow, one which they all followed – even Cassandra, as much as it aggravated her to do so.

She could tell he was completely aware of her feelings as his grin stretched wider and his eyes turned darker.

“Lady Cassandra,” he replied, slipping his hand into his jacket and producing his

handkerchief with a flourish, “I believe you might be in need of this.”

Cassandra’s hands balled into fists as she wanted to deny it – deny him – with everything within her. But she could feel the close gaze of her friends and she knew that she was best to simply take it from him and then hope he would leave.

“Thank you,” she said through gritted teeth, crossing the room toward him and practically ripping it from his fingers before lifting it up to her body. Then she realized that two could play this game.

Ensuring that no one else in the room – except Lord Covington or Devon as she had always known him – could see her actions, she smiled coyly as she brought the handkerchief to her neck, slowly wiping away drops of the drink from her collarbones and then down to her cleavage. She dipped his handkerchief, noting it was embroidered with his initials, D.A., into the valley of her breasts, watching his nostrils flare as she did so.

She fixed an innocent look upon her face as she lifted the handkerchief and held it out toward him.

“Here you are,” she said, annoyed by the breathy tone of her voice as she realized that her plan had unintended consequences when warmth washed over her, her teasing affecting her as much as she had meant to affect him.

His ungloved hands brushed against hers when he accepted it back, causing a most unwelcome tingle to rush up her arms and down her spine. He crushed the handkerchief in his hand as he nodded to her and then the rest of her friends before he turned on his heel and swiftly left the room.

Leaving quite the shocked air behind him.

Cassandra’s shoulders stiffened for a moment, knowing what she would be facing

when she turned around to her friends.

“Well,” Percy said with wide eyes. “That was... interesting.”

Madeline, the only one of the women who knew the full story of Cassandra’s history with Devon, was wearing a knowing smile as she crossed her arms over her chest, waiting for Cassandra’s response. Some help she was.

Cassandra cleared her throat.

“Shall we return to our discussion?”

Faith lifted a brow.

“Perhaps you should first tell us of what just transpired between you and the earl.”

Cassandra should have expected this, although she wasn’t entirely sure how to explain. Behind closed doors here in their book club room they were not the most proper of women, but they were still, for the most part, innocent young ladies who would be rather shocked if they knew the full truth.

“Lord Covington is my brother’s closest friend,” she said, lifting a hand as though it didn’t mean anything.

“Of that we are aware,” Faith said. “But I can hardly see how him being the friend of your brother could lead to such... tension.”

Cassandra walked over to the sideboard and repoured her brandy before taking her seat, giving herself a moment to collect her thoughts by sipping from the glass.

“He and my brother spent much of their youth torturing me,” she said, hoping her tone was nonchalant. “I have never been particularly pleased with the part he played

in encouraging Gideon.”

“How long did this torture last?” Percy asked, clearly understanding there was, perhaps, more to the story.

“It has never ended,” Cassandra said, allowing her ire at the man to flow into her words. “Although I haven’t seen him in some time. I have tended to avoid him since I... returned.”

“Sometimes they say mocking is a form of flirtation,” Hope said in her soft voice. “He could have a particular penchant for you.”

“That is a lovely way to look at it, Hope, but I can assure you that he most certainly does not.”

Hope shrugged as she took a small sip of her drink. Cassandra knew Hope would never admit to another soul outside of this room that she enjoyed it, preferring her lemonades when drinking in public. But then, she was as sweet of a woman as one could ever find and would never want to disturb her mother nor cause any discord.

“Lord Covington is nothing more than a nuisance, and a nuisance that I would prefer to avoid,” Cassandra said, picking up her book to note to the rest of them that she was finished with their current conversation. “Now, can we discuss how much better this book would have been had the hero not been killed in the end?”

They seemed to accept her explanation – or at least respect her obvious preference to not discuss it any further – for now, at least. It wasn’t until the women had concluded their book discussion for the day and departed, leaving just Madeline and Cassandra, that Cassandra knew she would have to face the truth.

“So tell me,” Madeline said, as she settled back against the sofa, her brown eyes flashing in amusement as she looked at Cassandra impishly, “just what are you going

to do about Lord Covington?”

“There is nothing to do about him,” Cassandra said, walking around the room and collecting their glasses. Of course the maids would be in to clean, but Cassandra didn’t want them knowing exactly what she and her friends were doing in here. It was one thing to discuss books that none of them were supposed to be reading, and quite something else for them to be drinking brandy while doing so.

Her mother was aware of their book club, but as far as she knew, they were reading *An Enquiry Into the Duties of the Female Sex* and discussing just how they should be conducting themselves in order to attract proper husbands.

“Cassandra, the moment he stepped into the room, the air was filled with an obvious edge,” Madeline said. “Perhaps what was between you was never completely resolved.”

“It was ,” Cassandra said with vehemence in her voice, more so to convince herself than Madeline. “It was a mistake. One that should never have happened.”

“One that left you ruined.”

“No one knows that.”

“Except you. And him.”

“What does it matter?” Cassandra asked, lifting her hands. “Only my mother and Gideon were aware that I made an immoral choice. Although they never discovered the full extent of it, they ensured I paid for it. No one else knows anything for certain, so therefore, no slight on my honor.”

“The man you marry might find out.”

“It would be too late by then,” Cassandra said through gritted teeth, for it was a battle that she had fought within herself for far too long.

That was the very thing which had held her back from marriage – the knowledge that she would have to hide the truth from her husband until her wedding night, and once he found out, there was no consequence that could turn out in her favor.

It would hardly be a way to start a marriage, and for that reason, she had resisted for a long time. Of course, it had been rather difficult to explain to her mother just exactly why she had refused any suitor who showed interest in her.

She was the daughter of a duke, the sister of a marquess who would one day be one of the most powerful men in the country. And here she was, avoiding any gentleman interested in her.

“There is one other thing you are forgetting,” Madeline said, lifting one of her dark eyebrows, with that expression that terrified most men, intimidating them from coming too close.

“Which is?”

“That you cannot help yourself from being attracted to him, that no other man has ever been good enough for you.”

“That’s not true,” Cassandra said staunchly.

“It is,” Madeline said, though her voice held nonchalance as though she had no desire to argue with Cassandra about it. “I don’t understand why the two of you did not just marry and be done with it.”

“Because we can hardly stand being in the same room together, let alone in front of an altar,” Cassandra said. The truth was, she had barely spoken to Devon after... it...

happened, as she had refused to allow him close to her once more. “And I could never trust him again,” she finished softly.

She had told herself to move on, had assumed that she would in due time – that soon enough, another man would enter her life, one who was appropriate, who she could tolerate, who would be her friend and her husband.

But no other stirred her soul. Not like Devon had, even if it was not always in the way she would prefer.

She just had no idea what she was supposed to do about it.