



Kissed By a Scoundrel

(Rogue Hearts #4)

Author: *Anna St. Claire*

Category: Historical

Description: Their paths were never meant to cross until tragedy struck.

Marriage is the one thing he avoids...

Lord Sebastian Soren, known as Slice to his friends, earned his nickname on the battlefield during his illustrious military service. Now a successful security expert, Sebastian is content traveling the world and indulging in carefree liaisons with charming widows. As the second son of a duke, he sees no need for the parson's mousetrap called marriage. But when he agrees to protect his friend's sister during her London Season, his life takes an unexpected turn.

Marriage is the one dream she lost...

Katie Latham has spent the past year mourning the tragic death of her fiancé during a robbery. Overwhelmed by guilt and grief, Katie becomes a recluse, fearful of the outside world. When her family finally persuades her to re-enter Society, she realizes she must conquer her fears. Who better to teach her self-defense than the man known as Slice?

From the moment their eyes meet across a glittering ballroom, Katie and Sebastian are drawn to each other. As danger threatens to destroy everything they hold dear, they discover the true depths of their feelings.

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September 1824 ~ London, England

“ The play was fabulous, Wendel ,” Katie Latham enthused as her fiancé, Mr . Wendel Colborne , ushered her from the Drury Lane Theatre . “ It’s been a perfect evening. When we are married, promise me we will make time for monthly outings—no matter how many children we have.”

Wendel gave a good-natured chuckle. “ Anything for you, my dear,” he said. Craning his neck at the line of carriages, he tugged her hand, leading them towards the street corner.

“ Is something wrong?” she asked in concern. Wendel suddenly seemed anxious—something her usually even-tempered betrothed rarely showed.

“ Not at all,” he murmured, his neck stretching left and right. “ Our carriage must be farther up, towards the front of the line. I specifically instructed Timmons to be out front early, but he must have misunderstood and thought I meant the front of the line of carriages.”

“ No matter. The walk will do us good. Perhaps Frankie and Thomas will have time to catch up with us. I saw them stop ahead of us to chat with some acquaintances.” Katie couldn’t help but hear the frustration in her fiancé’s voice and see the taut lines deepening around his mouth. “ Wendel , I can tell when something is wrong. And something is wrong. What is it?”

“ Nothing , my sweet.” He smiled tightly and pointed toward the front of the line. “ Timmons must be up ahead. We should hurry.” He glanced up at the sky. “ Those

heavy clouds overhead bode rain, and I want to get you home before the deluge hits,” he said, guiding her with gentle pressure on her back.

Looking around, Katie noticed the crowd and carriages had thinned out. No doubt most of the theatergoers were on their way home by now. Why had she not insisted they ride in Thomas and Frankie’s carriage? Her brother and sister-in-law had offered several times, but Wendel had wanted to take his conveyance. “ I can hardly see a thing, it’s so dark,” Katie said, beginning to feel unsettled.

“ Looks like the streetlamps on the corner might be out, but our carriage should be there.”

Katie knew Wendel preferred to leave before the crowds departed the theater. Had she not stopped to speak to a friend, they would have been out sooner. The closer they got to the darkened street corner, the more unsettled she felt.

Arriving at the corner, Katie realized that not only was their carriage not there, but the area seemed completely deserted. A sense of dread twisted in her chest at the sound of footsteps approaching. In the dark, she couldn’t tell which direction they were coming from.

In an instant, three shadowy figures surrounded them. Wendel drew Katie closer to his side. “ Keep quiet, I’ll handle this,” he whispered in her ear.

“ Well , looky ’ere! Just like ye told us, boss,” a lanky young man said in a nasally cockney voice. “ Breaking that streetlamp did the trick, it did.”

“ Shut yer gob, or I’ll shut it for ye,” a deep raspy voice snapped back. A hulking brute dressed in a ragged, dark-brown coat and black trousers stepped forward to stand menacingly in front of them. Clearly the leader of the rag-tag trio, he flashed a long, jagged blade.

“Katie, stay behind me,” Wendel whispered, pushing Katie behind him.

“We’ll ’ave all yer coin, guvnor,” the leader continued. “Just hand it over to Doogan, ’ere.”

“Aw! Why’d ye use m’name fer?” the nasally young man moaned.

“Just do yer job. And do it quickly,” the leader retorted sharply.

Doogan grumbled as he moved to stand before Katie and Wendel, holding his tattered hat out.

Beside him, a short, squat man in a frayed black coat broke into a squeal of laughter.

“Shut up, Gummy.” Doogan scowled at his partner in crime. “Or I’ll knock out the only rotten tooth ye got left.”

“Yer coin, guv,” the leader repeated, taking a threatening step forward.

Wendel withdrew a small leather purse from his pocket and emptied it into Doogan’s outstretched hat. “That’s all I have,” he said in a clipped voice.

Gummy stuck his hand in the hat, sifted through the contents, and began counting the money.

Disregarding Wendel’s order, Katie moved to stand beside him.

“What are you doing?” Wendel said in a low voice. “I told you to stand behind me.”

“There are three of them and only two of us,” she whispered. “At the very least I can help keep an eye on them in case one of them makes a move to attack.”

Wendel's jaw clenched, and Katie could see the flare of anger in his eyes. Wendel never got angry. But she refused to budge.

“ Just a few quid, boss,” Gummy said.

The leader uttered a curse as he eyed the contents of the hat. “ I think we can do better'n that.” He turned and strode up to Katie . “ Them's pretty baubles 'round yer pretty lady's neck. Toss 'em into the hat,” he ordered, the tip of his knife touching the delicate strand of pearls.

Katie gasped and stepped back, clutching the pearls.

“ I told you to stay behind me. Now they've gotten a good look at you,” Wendel said in a harsh whisper. “ Hand over the pearls.”

“ No ! I - I can't,” Katie cried in a panic. “ These were m-my grandmother's.” Katie was named after her father's mother, the late Viscountess Kathleen Latham . Lady Latham had gifted Katie the necklace at her coming out. She cherished the pearls.

“ We have no choice,” Wendel hissed.

Her eyes blurred with tears. “ P -please, Wendel . It's all I have l-left of N -nana.”

“ Allow me, m'lady,” the leader said, reaching out for the strand around her neck, a leering grin on his face.

Katie slapped his hand away.

“ At was a mistake,” he rasped. In a swift motion, he closed the space between them and pressed the tip of his blade to her throat.

Katie gasped and closed her eyes, feeling the heat of his foul breath laced with spirits on her face. Where was their carriage? Why hadn't Timmons found them by now?

“Leave her alone!” Colborne shouted, but Doogan and Gummy had already grabbed hold of his arms.

The leader barked out a laugh. “I'm thinkin' twill be far more fun to take 'em from ye, with yer toff watchin'.” In a swift movement, the brute pulled her hard against his chest. “Maybe I'll even take ye home wit' me. Give you a taste of a real man between yer thighs,” he growled, rubbing himself against her as his teeth bit into the side of her neck.

“Stop ! Please stop!” Tears flooded Katie's eyes and she began to tremble.

“Get your filthy hands off her,” Colborne shouted, breaking free of the men holding him, he rushed forward, barreling into the leader, the force of his momentum knocking both men to the ground.

“Someone , please help! Help us!” Katie didn't know what to do. She wanted to help Wendel , but he was wrestling with the brute on the ground.

And then Katie saw the flash of metal in the brute's hand and Wendel's grunt of pain.

“No !” Katie screamed as she watched the thief stab her fiancé twice in the abdomen and roll him over.”

Katie tore the pearls from her neck and threw them at the thieves. “Here , take them! Take them! Just please leave us in peace!”

She fell to her knees beside Wendel . “My darling! It will be all right. I promise.”

“Katie,” he whispered. “Run. Get away.”

“No, I won’t leave you,” she said, taking off her cloak and covering Wendel’s shivering form.

“Ye said no one wud be hurt,” Doogan grumbled.

“Shut yer trap,” the leader ordered, cuffing him. “Stupid toffs. Value money more’n their lives. Damn woman pushed me too far—made me lose m’temper.”

“Let’s get out of here before we get caught,” Gummy said. “We’ve enough coin fer a fine night at The Rooster, and I’ve a hankering for Sweet Molly to warm m’lap,” he guffawed.

The thieves ran off, their laughter floating back to mock her.

Katie pressed her trembling hands against Wendel’s abdomen. Even through the wool of her heavy cloak, she could feel his life’s blood seeping through her fingers.

“Forgive me,” Wendel whispered.

“It’s all right, my darling.” She smoothed the hair from his face, unable to stop the deluge of tears washing down her cheeks. “It’s going to be all right.”

“Only wanted to protect...you.”

“Hush, my dearest. Save your strength.”

“So cold...”

Katie wished she had another cloak to cover him. Leaning down, she kissed his brow.

She didn't know how long she sat there, pressing her hands against Wendel's wound. It could have been seconds, minutes, or even hours. She barely took heed of the carriage stopping a few feet away and her brother's shouts as he ran to her side. She hardly noticed the flash of lightning illuminating the night sky nor the crash of thunder that echoed around her. She scarcely heard the shouts of Wendel's driver and footman, who'd arrived just after Thomas . She numbly watched as the men lifted Wendel into her brother's carriage. She barely felt Frankie's gentle hands guide her to the door of the conveyance or her brother's strong arms as he helped her inside. She vaguely remembered the carriage ride back to Thomas's townhouse and the rain that finally unleashed from the sky...

All she could think about was how everything was all her fault. And nothing would ever be the same again...

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Chapter One

Late October 1825 ~ London, England

“Katie, you must come to the Duke of Clarence’s with us,” her sister-in-law, Frankie, coaxed. “It could be fun. If you’re not enjoying yourself, we can always leave early. I will use my pregnancy as an excuse.” Her blue eyes twinkled with puckish humor.

“Frankie, you haven’t let pregnancy deter you from any of the Season’s events.” Katie smiled. She adored her sister-in-law, who always managed to lift her spirits. “Why would anyone believe you now?”

“Probably because this child is growing so fast! Even though Thomas only allows me a waltz or two, it gives me a little exercise,” Frankie said cheerfully.

“Besides, this will be my darling wife’s last event for the Season,” her brother Thomas, Viscount Latham, said with a chuckle as he strode into the drawing room. “I’m insisting on it. I’m determined to leave for Sussex in the next few days. But I agree with Frankie, dear sister.” His handsome face reflected concern. “It’s been too long since you’ve allowed yourself any enjoyment. You must attend with us. It’ll be good for you.”

“Quite right,” the Dowager Viscountess Latham agreed, entering the drawing room behind Thomas. “I allowed the pretense of a headache last week for the Siebert’s ball, but our absence will disappoint the Dowager Duchess of Clarence, and she is one of my dearest friends. I insist on your attendance. Now, please go and get

dressed.”

Frankie looped her arm conspiratorially through Katie’s . “ It’s always the ton’s favorite event. We simply cannot miss it, Katie ,” she said. “ How about this? I’ll help you pick out a gown if you help me select a pair of comfortable shoes. Even if I cannot see the shoes on my feet, at least I’ll know they aren’t pinching!”

“ I can help you, wife,” said Thomas , coming up beside Frankie and waggling his brows. “ If your feet are swollen, I’ll just carry you everywhere...like now.” He swung her into his arms and twirled her about the room.

“ Husband , I do not need that kind of help. You should put me down.” Frankie giggled, her auburn curls bouncing as she gave him a playful swat.

Katie’s heart twisted and her smile faltered. The teasing banter between Thomas and Frankie reminded her of what her own life could have been, if only...

She blinked back tears—it had been a little over a year since Wendel’s death and even though the gut-wrenching grief had subsided and she could get through the day without bursting into tears, the guilt still festered, and always would. How many times had she gone over that horrible night in her mind? How many times had she wished she’d just given the damn pearls to the thief?

The thought of attending the Duke of Clarence’s ball was the last thing on Katie’s mind. If she were being honest with herself, it wasn’t just about going to a ball without Wendel , it was about going anywhere at all.

Ever since that fateful night, Katie would practically break out in hives at the thought of going out—whether it was shopping on Bond Street , lemonade at Almack’s , or even just tea with her best friend Lucy and her cousin Paula . Hives , heart palpitations, and dizziness were just a few of the symptoms Katie experienced every

time she had to venture outside the safety of her family's townhouse in St . James .

The evil men who attacked her and Wendel that night had never been caught. Katie had not been able to recall enough details for Thomas and the private detective he'd hired to investigate. All she could recall was that there were three men. For so long, whenever she closed her eyes, all she saw was Wendel bleeding everywhere. There was so much blood . Two months ago, just before the anniversary of Wendel's death, she had started having bad dreams.

In one of her dreams, Wendel appeared to her, covered in blood, lying in the middle of a busy street. She ran to his side and fell to her knees. In her dream, she couldn't understand why people and carriages went by without stopping. He moved his lips, as though he were trying to tell her something. She leaned down but all she could hear was gurgling. She'd woken up screaming and shivering. Since then, she had begun to remember bits and pieces of what happened. Mostly vague and foggy images. It was as if her mind was telling her something, but what? So confused was she that she began keeping a diary. Although she'd noted everything, nothing had made much sense to her, so she'd kept it to herself. What could I tell?

Perhaps her bad dreams had more to do with the knowledge that those horrible men were still out there and that something like that could happen again. In the past fourteen months, Katie had gone through a litany of "if onlys" —if only she hadn't insisted on stopping to chat with a friend. If only they had ridden with Thomas and Frankie , if only she had listened to Wendel and stayed behind him, if only she hadn't resisted giving up her pearl necklace. If only she could have helped Wendel fight them off. If only. If only. If only ...

" Please , my dearest, will you not come with us?" her mother pleaded softly, her eyes awash with tears.

Katie couldn't stand to see her mother cry. She looked at the faces of her family, so

full of love and concern.

The Duke of Clarence's ball was one of the biggest events of the Season . Two years ago, Katie and Wendel had become betrothed shortly after the Clarence's ball. Last year, no one in her family had gone because of Wendel's death. Even though Katie dreaded attending this year, she could not let her family down. They had been so supportive of her, and they were right. She'd have to face Society again at some point. And she knew there was gossip among the ton about her and her late fiancé. But there was always gossip, and there always would be. Frankie's idea could be a perfect compromise. Katie preferred moving forward on her terms and resigned herself to going.

For the sake of her family, she pasted a smile on her face. " Very well, I'll go." She turned to Frankie and Thomas . " Do you promise we can leave if—" she swallowed—" If I don't feel well?"

" Of course! We would never push you past your limit," Frankie soothed. " I completely understand how difficult this must be for you."

" I'm so proud of you, dearest," her mother said, kissing her cheek. " I think the Clarence ball will be an excellent opportunity for you to re-enter Society . Lucy and Paula will be there to support you."

Katie nodded. Her friends would be there, but so would the rest of the ton . She hoped she could keep her anxiousness from overwhelming her.

" Viscount Thomas Latham , his wife Viscountess Frankie Latham , the Dowager Viscountess Marianna Latham , and her daughter Miss Kathleen Latham ," the butler announced from the ballroom entrance at the top of a grand staircase.

A noticeable hush descended upon the crowd as curious eyes turned toward the

Latham family.

Captain Sebastian “ Slice ” Soren , hearing his friend’s name announced, turned as well. He imagined it was the appearance of the lovely viscountess, who was visibly pregnant, that created the stir, but for him, it was the dark-haired beauty who walked in behind her.

So that’s Latham’s little sister .

Sebastian knew his friend had a sister, but no description he’d heard did her justice. Her thick, chocolate brown locks pulled back in a low chignon seemed to glitter under the shimmering lights of the chandeliers. He’d seen enough ladies of Society to notice the style of weaving crystals or even real gemstones into their hair. But in Miss Latham , the finest diamond paled in comparison to her piercing azure gaze that sparkled even from this distance.

Sebastian reached for a glass of champagne from the tray of a passing footman and took a deep gulp. He normally didn’t indulge in champagne, preferring his cognac, but he suddenly felt the need to fortify himself as he beheld the stunning beauty of Miss Kathleen Latham .

Her deep rose silk gown threaded with diamond crystals along the hem was a striking contrast to her luscious locks. Her slightly daring décolletage, though modest compared to most of the women present, drew him in like a moth... Lord ! She was breathtaking. No wonder every man’s head was turned in her direction.

She’s the sister of your friend, you dolt!

Besides , he made it a rule, to avoid debutants. And generally preferred widows. His experience taught him that widows were not only delectable playmates in bed, but they were also quite content with the freedom that widowhood provided them.

As the second son of the Duke of Montagu , Sebastian felt no hurry to marry and was under no obligation to produce a progeny of male heirs for the ducal line. That was his older brother's duty. He was simply the spare and given the hearty health of his father and older brother, he had no worries of being burdened with the title of Duke and all that it entailed.

Money was not a concern for him, either. His parents, who were loving and loyal, had bestowed significant trust funds and a small estate to each of their children. Even so, as the former Chief of Security for the Eastern Star Shipping Company , co-owned by Latham and Slade Mason , the Earl of Drake , he'd amassed a substantial fortune. He'd left the company when he'd had his fill of traveling from port to port, around the world. In the past several years, he'd established a firm offering private security for notable persons of the ton , including Prinny and prominent members of Parliament .

It was a natural fit, given his background and experience. At the age of one and thirty, Sebastian was a master swordsman and a sharpshooter—a product of his military training. Despite his six-foot, four-inch, broad-shouldered frame—which gave him an advantage in brute force and the pugilistic style of fighting and was an obvious deterrent to the criminal element—he was also an expert in martial arts, including karate and kung fu.

Which was the main reason for Sebastian's attendance at the Clarence ball. Latham was worried about his sister and suspected the attack on her and Colborne a year ago may not have been by chance. The Clarence ball was Miss Katie Latham's first foray into Society since the incident at Drury Lane , and he promised her brother to keep a close eye on her. The perpetrators had completely disappeared, the trail having gone cold almost immediately. And no other robberies in the area had reported similar characters. It was as if the three men had vanished into thin air. Latham didn't want to take any chances, and given Sebastian's experience as a security expert, he could spot something suspicious that would be overlooked by most. Sebastian agreed and

offered to help his friend.

“ Speak of the devil,” commented Sir Jonathan Nelson , one of his closest friends. Jonathan and Sebastian , who’d been at Eton together, had maintained a close bond since childhood. Nelson owned En Garde , a prominent fencing club. He and his brother, the Earl of Shefford , had opened it a handful of years ago in honor of their father, who had insisted they excel at swordsmanship. Nelson’s skills and those of his brother had made it one of England’s favored places for training. Prinny routinely utilized En Garde to train his highly placed military leaders and knighted Nelson for his contribution years ago.

“ I’m glad he made it,” Sebastian said. Having arrived at the ball more than forty minutes ago, the men had been discussing if Latham would even show up. “ Now , I can observe Miss Latham without her becoming aware of my presence.”

“ You must be joking?” Nelson chuckled. “ Everywhere you go, you stand out.”

Sebastian elbowed his friend. “ I mean, I can keep an eye out to see if anyone in the ton is acting suspicious around the girl.”

“ Ouch !” Nelson grinned as he rubbed his arm. “ She’s no girl.”

Sebastian took a long sip of his champagne, as he watched Miss Latham make her way down the staircase with her family. Nelson was right on that score. Miss Latham was not a girl, but a beautiful young woman. He cleared his throat—hoping to clear his head at the same time. “ This would be her second or third Season , right?”

“ Officially , her second, I believe. She became engaged before the end of her first Season , two years ago. It seemed a match made in Heaven ,” Nelson said. “ Tragic what happened.”

“ Yes , most tragic,” Sebastian said, unable to take his eyes off the brunette beauty. He’d been out of London on and off over the past few years since launching his private security firm. Sebastian had taken on various assignments that sometimes called for him to travel around England . A week ago, Latham had sent him a note to meet in a private room at En Garde . Nelson and his brother Shefford had been there as well, having been fully apprised of the situation.

“ She’s been having bad dreams lately, and although she hasn’t said anything specifically about them, we know she’s been suffering,” Latham had told him.

“ It could be a shock; we witnessed similar occurrences on the battlefield,” Sebastian had said.

“ I’m not certain,” Latham had replied. “ Katie has always been so self-possessed, even after the attack, she was never prone to becoming hysterical. She has never been able to describe the men in detail. From what I gather, the dreams are full of Colborne and blood. Colborne was a good man but not a fighter. I’d even brought it up to him at one point and offered to give him a few lessons, but I fear I only embarrassed the poor fellow. Still , he was brave and died protecting my sister. I will never forget that. Nor can I rest until those bastards are caught. But I don’t want my sister to wither away, sitting in the parlor, reading romantic novels. I want her to venture out, but I need to ensure she is safe. If she knows I’ve asked you to watch over her, she will balk and never forgive me...”

Sebastian had agreed he would be the soul of discretion. Besides , by watching over Miss Latham from afar, he could observe those who came into her orbit. The fact that he hadn’t been immersed in Society for several years gave him greater clarity.

“ I can see why Latham asked you to step in instead of me,” Nelson said, drawing him out of his thoughts.

“ And why is that?” Sebastian arched a brow at his now smirking friend.

“ Because you typically go for buxom blonde widows, not willowy brunettes of a marriageable age.”

Sebastian growled at his friend. “ Stubble it, Nelson , would you?” He drained his glass and set it on the tray of a passing footman. Truth be told, Nelson was right, but there was something different about Miss Latham . He’d noted an unmistakable look of vulnerability on her lovely face. The stoic expression she wore as the Latham family was announced at the ball had seemed to slip when the Dowager Duchess of Clarence approached the family. Sebastian’s mother had commented in the past on the dowager’s protectiveness for those she liked, which clearly included this young woman. He wished his parents were in town, his clever mother could have been of enormous help. But his parents were visiting his grandparents on his mother’s side in Sussex .

“ Tell me what you know about Miss Latham ,” he said to his friend.

“ She’s a sensible young woman who is engaging and easy to speak with,” Nelson supplied.

Sebastian looked at his friend. “ You know a lot about her. Are you interested in her?” Damn and blast! Where did that come from? He sounded like a love-sick swain. She’s not your cup of tea, he reminded himself. No matter how mesmerizing she is, you’re doing this as a favor for a friend. Nelson would make him pay with the foils for goading him.

Nelson choked. “ What ? No . She’s beautiful. One can readily see that, but I have a mistress.”

“ Ah , yes. The luscious Mrs . Berryhill , the actress,” Sebastian replied, grinning at

his friend. “ This is the longest you’ve been in a relationship.”

Nelson shrugged. “ It’s a very satisfactory one. So much so, I might delay ending it.”
He nodded towards the Lathams . “ Be careful.”

“ You know me better than that.” Sebastian paused. His eyes followed Miss Latham ,
watching as she made her way to a small group of young women.

“ Before I forget to ask, would you like to meet at the club tomorrow morning?”
Nelson asked.

Sebastian nodded. “ I’ll probably need the exercise after spending an evening with the
ton .” Before he could say anything else, the tap of a cane on the floor made them
both turn.

“ Duchess !” both men said in unison. The Dowager Duchess of Clarence was a
favorite among their set. Sebastian had known her forever. His father and the late
Duke of Clarence had been childhood friends, as were he and his brother with the
current duke.

“ You two gentlemen shouldn’t be huddled in the corner! Two of the most handsome
and eligible bachelors at the party should be mingling with the rest of the guests.
Flirting with the young ladies.” The dowager’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “ Besides
, you have a job to do,” she whispered.

Sebastian held up his hands, imploring. “ We promise to mingle.”

“ And dance?” she persisted.

“ And dance,” Nelson agreed with a sly grin. “ If you will promise me a dance.”

Smiling , she handed him her dance card. “ What a lovely idea. I’ll save you a waltz.”

“ It’ll be my pleasure,” Nelson replied. He leaned over her hand and lightly kissed it before signing and returning her card.

“ Lord Soren , if you haven’t promised all your waltzes, I have someone I’d like to introduce to you later. I’m giving her time to adjust to the ball first,” the dowager said.

“ Certainly , Duchess ,” Sebastian replied.

“ I’m wounded,” Nelson said, holding his hand over his heart.

“ You boys make me feel like a young girl again,” she teased. Looking around the room, she whispered conspiratorially, “ I like to keep it interesting. You know how I enjoy being the object of juicy gossip.” Smiling broadly, she thumped her gilded cane on the floor before walking toward the Duke of Clarence , who appeared in a hearty discussion with a well-known adversary in Parliament on the other side of the room.

If he had the good fortune to live to the age of the Dowager Duchess of Clarence , Sebastian hoped he would be as lively and dynamic. She was one of a kind.

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Chapter Two

The moment a liveried footman announced her name at the Duke of Clarence ball, everything began to feel strange. Katie watched her brother and his wife make their way down the steps to the ballroom ahead of her, but she struggled to move her feet. She noticed Lucy and Paula across the room accepting glasses of champagne from a footman and wanted to be with them, but her feet felt like lead. Her heart was pounding so hard that it pulsed in her ears, and she fought to keep her vision from blurring. Sweat beaded on her forehead and the room began to sway.

Focus on something...someone...anything...

Her gaze swiveled around the ballroom, taking in glittering candles, giggling debutantes, and glasses clinking, and then she saw him .

There was no way to miss him. He was speaking to the Dowager Duchess of Clarence . The man towered over the elderly lady by almost two feet—he towered over everyone in the room. Broad shoulders tucked into a tailored black coat, muscular thighs straining against snug buff breeches, and thick and wavy dark brown hair that shone under the light of the chandeliers—but it was his sable dark eyes that took her breath away. He was the most handsome man she had ever seen in her life.

Guilt twisted in her chest. She should not be looking at other men, should she? She would have been a married woman by now if not for... She swallowed as she tried not to think about that night. She'd spent an entire year thinking about that night. For an entire year, She blamed herself for being foolish, silly, and na?ve. Shaking off the heavy gray cloud that began to envelop her whenever she thought about Wendel and

how he died, Katie made her way over to Paula and Lucy , who were standing next to a floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the duke's famous gardens.

Her dear friends had been all that was supportive and kind throughout the most difficult year of her life. She didn't know how she would have gotten through her grief if it hadn't been for Lucy and Paula .

As she approached them, Katie happened to glance over her shoulder and a gasp escaped her as her eyes met those of the tall, handsome stranger who was speaking to the dowager duchess a few minutes ago. The man's dark eyes stared at Katie intently, making her feel completely discombobulated. Uncanny . It was as though he knew what she was thinking.

The mystery man was standing next to Sir Jonathan Nelson . She wondered how they knew each other. Sir Jonathan ran a successful fencing club that was frequented by most of the younger men in the ton, including her brother, Thomas . Katie , feeling her face flush with heat at being "caught" looking at him, broke eye contact with the stranger and turned to greet her friends.

" Darling Katie , you look beautiful. I'm so glad you came tonight," Lucy said, wrapping her arms around Katie in a warm embrace.

" I agree. We'll have lots of fun. You'll see," Paula said, hugging her tightly.

" Thank you both. I'm so glad to see the two of you. You must think me a silly goose for not venturing out until tonight."

" Not at all," Paula said. " You had a terrible thing happen, and the shock of it took time to work through."

Tears misted Katie's eyes, but she forced them back. She would not make a cake of

herself. She could get through this, and then, things would be better.

“ I must say, it seems as though everyone in the ton is out in full force this evening,” Lucy said. “ I’ve never seen such a crush before. I went to the lady’s retiring room earlier and it was packed with gossiping women. A few of them turned and gave me the look —” She scrunched up her face as if she had smelled something horrible, before laughing. “ All I wanted to do was tinkle, but I wager they thought I was going to retch like I did two Seasons ago. Two . And they are still talking about it.”

Paula and Katie giggled. Her dear friend Lucy had unfortunately lost her accounts at the Clarence ball in their very first Season after being served too much champagne. Lucy had had a challenging time since then, and certain members of the ton had made it even more difficult for her.

“ Their memory is long, and gossip is what women of the ton do best,” Paula said.

“ Yes , it’s unfortunate, but gossip seems to be the only pastime for many,” Katie said.

She’d avoided the worst of it, having spent most of her time in the safety of her home for the past year.

“ It certainly makes one rethink the entire marriage mart,” Lucy added in a self-deprecating tone. “ I’ve gained quite the reputation among eligible bachelors, it seems.”

“ Speaking of bachelors, there are two over there,” Paula said, nodding toward two men standing in front of a Romanesque column near the ballroom stairs. “ They are both handsome, but something is intriguing about the one with the hair like dark copper. He’s tall, but he’s standing next to a giant,” Paula whispered loudly, nudging Katie from her thoughts. “ I don’t believe I’ve seen him before.”

“ Just before you arrived, I saw him sign the Dowager Duchess of Clarence’s dance card. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her dance,” Lucy added. “ Oh dear, there’s one of the gossiping mamas from the retiring room. She keeps staring at me and clutching her pearls.

“ Poor sweet, Lucy ,” Paula said. “ Oh my, that handsome fellow just looked at me. What a brazen smile! The very cheek!”

“ I think that’s Sir Jonathan Nelson ,” Katie began. “ He’s a friend of my brother’s.”

“ Sir Jonathan Nelson ?” Paula said with a huff. “ I heard a rumor he keeps several mistresses.”

Katie was about to suggest Paula stop listening to gossip when a woman’s scream from nearby made her gasp.

Katie and her friends turned to see the matron who had been gossiping about Lucy had broken her strand of pearls and the beads were bouncing and scattering on the ballroom floor.

“ My pearls, my pearls!” the matron screeched as people rushed to her aid.

“ Oh no— ” Katie gasped.

“ Katie , are you all right?” Paula asked, reaching for Katie’s hand. “ Cousin , you look pale. Shall I fetch Frankie ?”

“ No ...no, please don’t bother them. I’m fine. Truly ,” Katie whispered, weakly. “ My shoes are pinching my feet,” she lied.

But she wasn’t fine. Her forehead was beading with sweat and her vision was

beginning to dim, despite the hundreds of candles in the crystal chandeliers above them. Fragmented images of the night of the attack— Wendel's face, the blood, and another face she thought she should recognize flashed in her mind.

Her breath was now coming in short, sharp gasps, and the room began to spin.

“ Girls , it seems that I'm not feeling quite myself,” Katie said. “ I think I need to sit down.” Her voice sounded shaky and wispy to her ears.

What is happening?

Her dizzy spells had been fewer and far between in the past few months, and she had hoped she was overcoming them. But the woman's scream and the string of pearls snapping must have triggered something inside her. She didn't understand, but nor could she surrender to this extreme nervous distress.

Not here. Not in front of the entire ton .

“ My goodness, Katie ! You are so pale. And your skin is like ice,” Lucy said, gently cupping Katie's face.

Lucy possessed a gentle and calming nature and could usually make Katie feel better just by holding her hand. But tonight was different. Tonight , she was feeling so overwhelmed in the crowded ballroom, the heat from hundreds of people and candles, and the shock of that woman, that she was having trouble even standing.

Hold onto me,” Paula whispered, concern threading her voice. “ There's a row of chairs against the back wall near the refreshment table. Lucy , run ahead and fetch a glass of lemonade. We'll make our way over there and we can sit for a while.”

“ Yes , a glass of lemonade will soon have you restored,” Lucy added as she hurried

away.

Katie nodded and pasted a smile that she didn't feel on her face. She allowed Paula to lead her forward. Katie felt her legs growing wobbly. If it wasn't for Paula propping her up, Katie might have tumbled to the floor .

Please , legs, don't fail me now .

She prayed she could make it to a chair without sinking to the floor in a puddle and making a cake of herself. But her legs were shaking uncontrollably, and the gray haze was pushing in on her.

She'd felt this way before, and it usually preceded a fainting spell.

Oh God , please don't let me faint. Please don't let me faint. She was worried she would stumble and drag her cousin down with her.

Her panic escalating, she glanced around the room, desperately searching for her brother. She saw him in a group with the dowager and several other people she didn't recognize. Thomas is too far to help me. “ Paula , I don't think I can make it,” she said in a breathless voice that sounded far away to her ears.

“ Allow me to escort you to a chair, my lady,” a calm, deep voice said beside her.

She looked up into the handsome face of the tall stranger, the mysterious man whose dark eyes had nearly mesmerized her when their gazes met across the ballroom floor earlier.

“ I — I f-feel a fainting spell c-coming on,” she said in a raspy voice.

He nodded as though he understood completely. A kind smile curved his lips upward

as he tucked her arm through his. He glanced at Paula and nodded, and she let go of Katie's other arm. "I promise I won't make you fall or faint."

"How?"

"I want you to look into my eyes and listen to my voice."

Katie barely managed a nod. She leaned against his arm, and it was as though she could feel a pulse of awareness—something she had never felt before—flow through her body at his very touch.

His brow furrowed with concern. "Keep your eyes on me, Miss Latham."

The rich, velvety sound of his voice enveloped her. "You know my...?"

He nodded. "Keep looking at my face and smile as if we are having a pleasant conversation. We shall walk to the chair slowly."

"This is—highly irregular," she managed to croak.

He smiled broadly. "Not to worry. I know your brother very well. I don't think he'll call me out."

At the thought of her brother calling out this Goliath, Katie managed a genuine smile.

"That's better." He gave her a gentle pat on her arm. "I saw the expression on your face change as you were talking to your friends and I recognized what was happening immediately," he added in a low whisper.

"A woman screamed—her pearls..."

“ Yes , her friends all rushed to her rescue when her necklace broke apart,” Paula added in a dry voice.

The gentleman turned to Paula and smiled. “ Miss Gowans , would you be so kind as to take my other arm to appear that we three are having a genial conversation as we make our way over to those chairs?” Then , in a louder voice, he added, “ Allow me to escort you ladies to the refreshment table.”

Paula nodded and did as he asked. Katie thought her cousin looked almost as dazed as she felt. The mystery man knew Paula’s name as well.

“ I - I’m afraid you have us at a disadvantage,” Katie said as their rescuer gifted her with another brilliant smile. Goodness , I’m sure I could gaze at his face all day.

“ My apologies.” He inclined his head. “ Allow me to introduce myself. I’m Lord Sebastian Soren . My father is the Duke of Montagu .”

“ Pleased to meet you, my lord,” Katie said.

“ Yes , thank you for helping us,” Paula added.

“ My pleasure,” he said as they neared a cluster of empty chairs. “ Miss Latham , please allow me to help you to a seat,” Lord Soren whispered. He assisted her to an empty seat next to a potted palm.

Katie had already started to feel better as Lord Soren escorted them across the ballroom, but she sighed with relief as she sat down.

“ Katie , sip lemonade,” Lucy said, hurrying over to them with a glass.

“ Thank you, Lucy .” Katie took a few sips of the cool, sweet drink, grateful for her

friends.

Lord Soren introduced himself to Lucy , who blushed prettily and curtsied.

Paula edged closer to her. “ Katie , you’re still pale. Perhaps we should get Frankie .”

“ No . Please , I’m feeling better. It was just—” Katie stopped talking as she spotted Frankie and Thomas walking toward them.

“ Katie , are you all right?” Thomas asked, his face etched with concern.

“ Yes , just the heat of the room.” She gave them a wobbly smile.

Thomas looked as though he didn’t believe her. He turned to Lord Soren and said, “ Slice , thank you for your assistance.”

Katie peered up at her hero, confused. Slice ?

“ You are most welcome, Latham . I have just had the pleasure of meeting your sister, Miss Latham , and her cousin, Miss Paula Gowans , and friend, Miss Lucy Jeffreys . I hope you can forgive my social gaffe. I hastily introduced myself to your sister when I realized she appeared to be in distress,” Lord Soren returned. “ And with the help of Miss Gowans , I merely assisted her to a seat.” He turned to Katie and smiled sympathetically. “ I am pleased to see the color has returned to your face, Miss Latham .”

“ Thank you for your assistance, Lord Soren . I — I’m not quite sure what I would have done without it.”

" I would like to thank you as well,” Paula added.

“ You swooped in and rescued her just like a hero from a grand romantic novel,” Lucy said with a sigh.

Katie couldn't help but smile at Lucy's comment. Paula rolled her eyes.

“ Perhaps we should get you home,” Frankie suggested. “ Paula , maybe you can fetch Katie's mother,” she said, turning to Katie's cousin. “ I saw her on her way to the ladies' retiring room with your mother just before Thomas and I made our way over here.”

“ Of course,” Paula said with a quick nod.

Katie shook her head. “ No . I'm feeling much better,” she insisted. “ Please , I don't want Mama or Aunt Jane to worry. Besides , I've managed to draw enough attention to myself.” She didn't need hundreds of eyes on her as she left the ball so soon. Luckily , the orchestra began warming up the first notes of a dance.

“ If there is anything I can do to repay your kindness, I will try,” Katie said, looking up at Lord Soren .

“ There is. I wonder if you would do me the honor of a dance, once you feel a little rested, Miss Latham . Perhaps the next waltz. The pace is much calmer than some of the other dances, and it might allow us to become better acquainted.”

The thumping of a cane on the polished wood floor alerted them to the approach of the Dowager Duchess of Clarence . The elderly woman was being escorted by Sir Jonathan Nelson , the handsome young gentleman who was talking to Lord Soren earlier.

“ Lord Soren , it seems you have beaten me to the introductions and stolen my thunder,” the dowager said in a mock-austere voice.

Katie could swear she saw a twinkle in the elderly woman's eyes.

“ Miss Latham , Miss Gowans , and Miss Jeffreys , allow me to introduce you to Sir Jonathan Nelson .”

Lucy smiled at the handsome gentleman, whereas Paula's greeting was north of chilly. Katie wondered if her cousin was still bristling from the “brazen smile” Jonathan had tossed her way earlier or perhaps the rumor about his many mistresses.

Katie took another sip of her lemonade. She was truly feeling better. It was the first time she had gotten through an episode without needing to lie down for an hour. The only reason for the difference, that she could think of, was the presence of Lord Soren , who despite his gallantry, seemed just as mysterious to her as he had from the moment her eyes had met his across the ballroom floor.

The strands of a waltz began, and people began moving around them, making their way to the dance floor.

“ I believe this is our dance," Sir Nelson said to the duchess. “ Ladies , Soren , Latham . He grinned as he turned to everyone present.

Katie couldn't quite put her finger on it, but she could have sworn Sir Nelson's smile turned almost mocking as his eyes seemed to clash with Paula's cool-eyed glare.

She'd have to ask her cousin about it later.

“ You are quite right, kind sir,” the dowager said. With unexpected deftness, she deposited her cane next to the chair and took Sir Nelson's extended arm.

“ If you feel more yourself, Miss Latham , I should like to claim that dance,” Lord Soren said, holding out his arm.

“ I am feeling quite restored, and I would like that very much.” To her amazement, Katie was looking forward to this dance.

Sebastian gazed down at the beauty in rose pink as he carefully twirled her across the dance floor. While the first few strains of the dance had passed in silence, he sensed no reticence on her part. To his surprise, she seemed much more relaxed than he imagined only minutes ago. If he wasn't careful, he could get lost in those blue eyes. They were an aqua blue—the color of the water near the Isles of Scilly , his favorite place. Chocolate -brown hair pulled back in a loose chignon with crystals woven through the silky strands framed her lovely face. He'd known she was extraordinarily pretty when he saw her arrive with her family, but up close, her beauty put all other English roses to shame.

“ T -thank you...” Katie began, with a wobbly smile. She licked her lips, an action he'd seen many experienced older women use as a tactic to gain his attention. But in Miss Latham's case, it was done so innocently and without guile that he had the urge to claim that luscious pink mouth in a passionate kiss.

“ Thank you,” she said again. “ For saving me from what could have been an embarrassing disaster.”

“ You are a strong young lady, and your cousin and friend were most solicitous...”

She shook her head. “ You are being too kind. I fear I would have toppled to the floor and dragged my cousin down with me had you not rushed to my aid, something I can never thank you enough for doing.”

“ Given my background in the military, I'm familiar with what happened to you.” Sebastian yearned to take away the pain and shame he saw reflected in her lovely eyes.

“ I’m grateful for your intervention. This is the first—” She paused and took a deep breath. “ The first time I’ve attended a Society function since... Lord Colborne .”

Sebastian realized how vulnerable she was and how trusting to someone who only an hour before had been a stranger. “ It’s been my experience that when people witness tragic and shocking events, it takes time to heal. This is something I have seen many soldiers go through on the battlefield. Unfortunately , Society has no idea how to deal with the reverberations of it. And the triggers can be difficult to anticipate.”

“ What you tell me does make sense, although I could never fathom what a soldier goes through in battle. You are incredibly astute in your application of your theory.”

“ I thank you, Miss Latham . However , I am not the first who has recognized this reaction to a traumatic event.” He twirled her around the dance floor. Despite the fainting spell she’d had earlier, Miss Latham moved with the grace of a swan.

“ Who is Slice ? Thomas called you that.”

He grinned. “ It’s a nickname I inherited during the war, but please don’t ask me to explain it because I’m afraid you will put me to the blush, as you ladies say.”

Her smile was impish, and he couldn’t help but draw her a little closer as they danced.

“ Ah , but now you have piqued my curiosity, you must tell me what it means. Most nicknames have meaning.”

“ I gained it in the military for my swordsmanship,” he replied, saying no more than that. The gruesome and shocking details of his experience in battle were not for the ears of a gently bred young lady, especially someone as sensitive as Miss Latham , who had witnessed the murder of her fiancé barely over a year ago. She looked like

she had seen a ghost earlier when he'd offered his assistance. Lady Whiner's pearl fiasco appeared to have triggered Miss Latham's dizzy spell, but did it also trigger a memory?

She gazed up at him. "So, you know how to fence. You must be very good at it to gain a nickname like that."

Warmth shot through him, and Sebastian realized that, once again, Miss Latham had no awareness of the double meaning of what she'd said. His nickname had also been used by his friends and fellow soldiers to tease him about the mistresses he'd had over the years.

"I do. I'm fairly skilled, I suppose one could say." He swallowed at the double meaning in his reply, but the beauty in his arms continued to regard him with wide-eyed innocence. The waltz was nearing an end and Sebastian felt a wave of disappointment that he would have to escort Miss Latham back to her family. He wanted to keep dancing with her, but two dances in a row would have been unseemly. He thought the rules and mores of the ton were ludicrous when one considered the brutality of war.

Keep your eyes on the prize, man! Latham wants you to keep an eye on his sister for her safety. My God, she's a complete innocent.

Sebastian had a job to do, and he would do it. He would keep watch over Miss Latham until the perpetrators of the attack were found.

"Would you mind if I called upon you soon?" he asked. "I will, of course, ask your brother for his permission. But I wanted to make sure you would be amenable to seeing me again before I approached Latham." The question came out before he could stop it. Damn! He sounded like a love-sick suitor. Not the smooth approach he'd intended to come across.

Miss Latham's mouth curved up in a bright smile, making her even more beautiful if that was even possible. Nevertheless, her smile made his mouth dry as he once again wondered what it would be like to kiss those luscious lips.

"Thank you. I think I would like that," she said in a soft voice.

When the dance ended, Sebastian escorted Miss Latham back to the chair just as Nelson was returning with the dowager. He leaned down and gently kissed the back of Miss Latham's gloved hand. "Should you ever have need of my assistance, you have only to send for me." He told himself he was helping his friend Latham, but in truth, Sebastian wanted to do anything he could to help her.

She nodded. "That's very kind. I will keep that in mind."

"Thank you for the dance, Miss Latham." He wished he could have danced at least once more, but the ton had ridiculous rules. The last thing he wanted to do was to make her the recipient of more gossip.

"Thank you, Lord Soren."

Sebastian was lost in thought as he left Miss Latham with the dowager.

"Be careful," Nelson said, intruding on his thoughts.

"There's nothing to worry about. My interest is strictly professional. I'm merely doing what Latham asked of me."

"Ah. Are you certain?" Nelson persisted.

"I am," Sebastian affirmed. "I behaved toward her as I would any debutante I danced with at a ball."

But is that true?

He had asked to call on her, something he was certain Latham hadn't expected of him. He'd have to explain to Latham his reasoning for it. But first, he'd have to explain it to himself.

I'm not smitten , he told himself. I'm simply concerned about the welfare of a young lady, the sister of a good friend.

He kept telling himself that for the rest of the night.

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Chapter Three

The Next Day

“Milady, your mother wishes for you to join the family in the breakfast room,” her maid said, opening the curtains to let in the morning light.

Katie had spent another restless night full of bad dreams and poor sleep.

“Do you have a preference for what you’d like to wear today?”

“I think the rose pink,” she murmured.

“An excellent choice,” Millie said. The maid laid her dress on the white damask chair in front of the fireplace and placed the matching shoes beneath the chair on the blue-toned Aubusson carpet.

“Thank you, Millie,” Katie said as she rose from the bed. “Let Mama know I’ll be down in a few minutes.”

“Yes, milady. I’ll be back in a few moments to help you dress,” the young maid said, closing the door behind her.

Katie hoped to avoid discussion of the Duke of Clarence’s ball. Even though she’d managed to get through it, despite her near fainting episode. Thanks to her friends and the mysterious Lord Soren. She couldn’t help but think of him as mysterious even though she now knew who he was.

Her breath had caught in her throat from the first moment she'd laid eyes on him at the ball. Yes, Lord Soren was extremely handsome, tall, and broad-shouldered, but she'd never experienced such a visceral reaction when his eyes had met hers.

Then, later on, when she was in the midst of that fainting spell, he appeared by her side, and she felt a sense of calm wash over her as well as a keen awareness at the same time. Smoothly and without drawing attention to her, he'd tucked her arm through his and escorted her and Paula to a seating area so that she could recover from her dizziness.

And then he asked me to dance...

The waltz had been both exciting and unnerving, and she didn't know what to make of it. As he twirled her around the ballroom, the energizing heat of his touch made her tingle from the top of her head to the tips of her toes.

Being in his arms made her feel safe and protected on one hand but also exposed and vulnerable on the other. Was Lord Soren's potent effect on her due to her anxiety and nervousness at being back out in Society after a year of grieving Wendel's death or was she experiencing a true attraction that was completely new and unique?

But even after what turned into a magical outing, the bad dreams returned. In last night's dream, she'd recalled ripping the pearls from her neck and throwing them at the thieves. Perhaps it was the shock of seeing Lady Whiner with her broken pearl necklace. She'd also seen brief snatches of faces that flashed through the dream. Was she seeing the faces of the thieves?

She'd awakened before dawn, weeping, her nightgown drenched with perspiration, unable to recall those faces clearly. This time she did not weep tears of helplessness, this time she wept tears of anger. Why had the dreams come back and who were these faces?

Katie washed her face and went to her desk and pulled out her journal. Determined not to forget her dream, she wrote down the details she could recall, trying to describe what she had only seen in quick flashes.

The pages and pages of notes from previous dreams had not offered much nor helped find the men responsible. But last night felt different. It was as if her mind was forcing her to recall something.

Sitting in front of her fireplace, she leaned back in her chair and thought back to that night. There had to be a connection to her dream. She needed to overcome this paralyzing fear, or she could never live a normal life.

Are my dreams trying to tell me something that I missed before?

She did recall that the attack had not felt random. It felt as though the thieves had been waiting for them, even though she couldn't remember their faces. But no one had believed her when she suggested it. Even her brother had dismissed the notion when she'd approached him a few weeks after the attack.

“ Do you know how many people are robbed and assaulted in London each year?” Thomas had said in response to her suggestion. “ Thieves lie in wait, looking for an opportunity to pounce. Wendel exercised poor judgment when he led you to that darkened street corner. He left you both vulnerable to just such a theft. He should have known better.”

Thomas had paused and sat down beside her on the settee and held her cold and clammy hand in his. “ Katie , you know as well as I do that Wendel was not a man of action, nor did he have the skill to defend himself against three men.”

“ Stop it! Please stop saying those things,” Katie had shouted. “ You're being unfair to Wendel . It was my fault! It was all my fault. I didn't want to part with Nana's

pearl necklace and Wendel bravely protected me. He died protecting me!”

“Katie, please do not distress yourself,” Thomas had soothed, wrapping his arms around her. “What happened was not your fault. Please do not blame yourself for Wendel’s death. And you’re right, he did die bravely. It was a courageous act that he did all that he could to shield you that night.”

Katie had sobbed into Thomas’s shoulder, unable to shake her guilt over Wendel’s death.

She couldn’t burden her family with her latest dream, not after the year she had put them through. Thomas and Frankie were expecting the birth of their first child. Frankie was near her time. Thomas didn’t need this additional stress. She would work through this herself.

Katie had taken longer than a few minutes to make her way down to the breakfast room. She’d just greeted her family and sat down when a light knock on the door sounded. The butler entered, carrying a note on a silver salver.

“Miss Katie, this card is for you. It was delivered with a bouquet.”

“Thank you, Dalton,” Katie said with a smile.

“How wonderful!” Frankie commented.

“The delivery boy handed the note to me separately. He said I was to give it directly to you.”

A footman stepped in behind Dalton with a bouquet of pink roses in a vase and set them down on the buffet.

“ They are beautiful!” her mother and Frankie exclaimed at the same time.

Words caught in Katie’s throat. The flowers were stunning. She accepted the card, feeling a mixture of nerves and excitement. It had been more than a year since she’d received flowers after a social engagement.

Wendel had always sent her white roses after every one of their outings, whether it was a simple ride in Hyde Park or the most anticipated ball of the Season . Wendel had always been thoughtful and romantic that way. She missed those sweet gestures. She missed Wendel . He’d been her best friend as well as her fiancé. Truth be told, she’d considered Wendel a friend long before she’d had any romantic feelings about him. Their relationship had been slow to build and evolve. Their friendship had increased and strengthened over time to the point where it had seemed natural that they would marry.

As bittersweet as those memories were, Katie could not help the spark of delight stirring within her as she opened the note.

Thomas stepped inside the room and bent to kiss his wife on the cheek. “ What’s this? Flowers ?”

“ Yes ! Katie received flowers,” their mother said. “ Who are they from, dear?”

Katie cleared her throat. “ They are from Lord Soren .” She stood and walked to the buffet, touching a delicate pink petal of one of the exquisite blooms.

Katie wiped away a rogue tear. “ I confess, they are beautiful. It’s just a change seeing flowers and being reminded that Wendel didn’t send them.”

“ Darling ,” her mother said, rising from the table and walking over to her. “ I know this is difficult. But I believe Wendel would want this for you.” She hugged Katie

close.

“ He would be happy for you,” Frankie added, dabbing at her own eyes. Thomas sat beside his wife and reached for her hand, placing a kiss on the palm.

“ He would,” Katie croaked. “ And they are lovely flowers.” She turned away and wiped another stray tear. “ I should get my chocolate.”

“ I , for one, am famished!” Thomas declared. “ I expect to need additional nourishment for my exercise practice at En Garde later this morning, and I delayed breaking my fast so I could spend time with my lovely wife.”

Frankie smiled up at her husband as she lightly touched her stomach. “ I think we are famished as well.”

“ Well , that comes as no surprise, my dear. You are eating for two!” Mama said, sipping her tea, her lips curving up into a smile. “ I cannot wait to meet him...or her.”

Katie was grateful for her brother’s adroit change of topic which gave her a quiet moment to enjoy the flowers and re-read the note with no one commenting. Biting her bottom lip, she contained a smile as she read:

My dear Miss Latham ,

I enjoyed our waltz at the Duke of Clarence’s ball, and I look forward to spending time with you soon.

Your servant,

Lord Soren

Katie folded the note and tucked it into the pocket of her skirt. Pouring a cup of steaming chocolate, she rejoined her family at the table.

Thomas had piled a platter with rashers of bacon, ham, and scrambled eggs. “ It’s a good thing I fence every day at En Garde ,” Thomas said, patting his stomach. “ Otherwise , I’d probably gain half a stone every Season .”

Frankie giggled as she spread red currant preserves on a thick slice of toasted bread. “ Even if you did, I would still love you madly.”

“ Katie’s interest piqued as she sipped her chocolate. “ The press has been favorable in their articles about the club. It’s become quite the thing among the younger gentlemen of the ton .”

“ Yes , it has, thanks to Sir Jonathan Nelson ,” Thomas said, slicing into the ham. “ He and his brother, the Earl of Shefford , have made it one of the premier clubs in England .”

“ All I know is, that I am happy you don’t come home with bruises—something that doesn’t happen when you visit Gentleman Jackson’s pugilism club,” Frankie added with a shudder. “ I still don’t like the idea of wielding knives at each other.”

“ Swords and foils,” Thomas interjected with a smile. “ We use swords and foils, not knives, darling.”

“ Whatever they are called, they are still sharp,” Frankie said.

“ Boys and their swords,” Mama said with a chuckle.

“ To be honest, I quite admire that Nelson makes a point of training boys how to fence,” Thomas added. “ It’s important to teach them from a young age. It builds

strength, agility, and confidence. I plan on teaching our sons as well.”

“ What about teaching our daughters?” Frankie countered.

“ Their brothers can protect them,” Thomas said.

Katie almost choked on her chocolate as a thought suddenly came to her.

What if I learned to wield a sword?

Her brother had said Nelson taught boys. Surely as a grown woman, she was as capable as a boy. Perhaps she too could benefit from learning. The more she thought about it, the more sense it made.

Ever since the attack last year, Katie had felt vulnerable as well as anxious that it could happen again. And if it did happen, what would she do? She hated feeling this way. Weak and defenseless. It was a feeling she had never experienced before the attack. She had never even thought about being able to defend herself. Perhaps if she had, Wendel would be alive today.

I need more information. Could she ask Thomas ? Would he even be amenable to her idea? Her brother was very protective. But he could not be around every hour of every day. He had his own life and responsibilities to his growing family, his title, and the estate...

“ Have you finally decided on a list of possible names?” their mother asked, drawing Katie from her thoughts.

Frankie and Thomas exchanged twinkling glances. It was common knowledge in the household that the married couple were keeping their ideas for names under the utmost secrecy. They had been open to suggestions, but the actual list of possible

names was kept under lock and key. Which only made their mother even more determined to drop hints whenever she could.

“ We have several names in mind,” Frankie said, arching a delicate brow.

“ We just aren’t ready to share them,” Thomas added.

“ Meaning you are still debating?” Katie said, her lips twitching with humor.

“ Frankie has very strong opinions,” Thomas quipped with a grin.

“ I know it must seem trivial to some,” Frankie said. “ But I feel the name of a child is important.”

“ Not trivial at all, Frankie ,” Katie’s mother replied before turning to Thomas . “ It’ll be a grand surprise! Nevertheless , I do hope you’ll share it with us soon,” she added with a wink.

“ Maggie is certainly excited about becoming a big sister. It’s all she can talk about,” Frankie said. “ She is consumed with painting pictures of what she thinks her baby brother or sister will look like.”

“ Oh , how lovely,” Mama said. “ I cannot wait to take Maggie on walks when we get to Latham Manor . She is so talented at drawing and painting, and she’ll have so much to inspire her in Sussex .”

Katie smiled at her mother’s enthusiasm. They all adored the five-year-old child, who was Frankie’s stepdaughter from her first marriage to Lord George Gallwey . Katie had spent many hours reading to Maggie and playing with her in the nursery. The sweet and emotionally intuitive child had been instrumental in helping Katie get through the past year. Thomas and Frankie doted on Maggie . They were wonderful

parents and Katie knew they would be equally so with their new baby.

“ She is quite the artist,” Thomas said proudly. “ Whenever I visit the nursery, another portrait has joined the others. Maggie has them lining the wall beneath the windows. It won’t be long before we see how close she comes to what her brother or sister looks like.”

“ Perhaps we should take bets,” Katie offered. “ Isn’t that what they do in your club, Thomas ?”

Thomas guffawed. “ Yes , it is done—shamelessly, I might add. How did you know about that?”

“ Wendel told me,” she said without thinking. She swallowed the sudden lump in her throat. She and Wendel had often talked about children and having a big family. While she wasn’t jealous of Thomas and Frankie , Katie couldn’t help but feel an emptiness within her. Her perfectly planned life had been destroyed. Wendel would have been just as excited as her brother about an upcoming child. He told her once that if they had a little girl, he would want her to look just like Katie , with wavy, dark brown hair and sparkling blue eyes, the color of the sky. Katie had often pictured a golden-haired little boy with an amiable smile, just like Wendel .

But those children would never be, all because of her unwillingness to give up a pearl necklace. How foolish she’d been. How silly and naive. Absently , Katie touched her throat, remembering how she’d gripped the pearls, so desperate to hang onto them. She recalled the feel of the knife touching her throat and a shiver of fear skittered up her spine.

She’d had nightmares about him, too. That evil man who’d menaced her, pushing himself against her. Had she been thinking clearly that night, she would have handed the pearls over without hesitation. But no. She didn’t. And because of her, Wendel

had died a painful death. And now she had to live with the consequences.

I'm tired of it. She was tired of feeling anxious, guilty, and angry with herself.

With startling clarity, Katie realized the truth—more than anything else, she was tired of feeling outside herself, as though she had not only lost Wendel last year, but she'd lost a part of herself too.

I can't change the past, but maybe I can change my future, or at the very least, no longer feel like a scared little mouse.

Her throat suddenly dry, she took a sip of water. "Thomas," she began, in as casual a voice as she could muster, "is fencing a sport that requires brute strength?"

Thomas looked up from his plate. "That's an interesting question, Katie. It focuses on agility, flexibility, and endurance. Not so much physical strength as mental alertness and acuity."

"Is it something that only men can do?" she persisted. "You mentioned that Nelson was teaching boys how to fence."

"Why all these questions about fencing, Katie?" her mother asked.

"Forgive me, Mama, I'm just curious," Katie replied. She got up and made her way to the buffet, scooping up a spoonful of scrambled eggs onto a plate. "Is it hard to learn?" she added nonchalantly, over her shoulder.

"In a word, yes," Thomas said. "But I enjoy it. Father was my first teacher before he eventually hired a master to take over." Thomas winced. "I wasn't the best student at first, and frequently found myself on the ground looking up at a foil pointed at my nose because my head was in the clouds." He chuckled. "But eventually, I learned."

“ I’m certain those skills came in handy when you were abroad,” Frankie put in.

Thomas nodded. “ Yes , darling. That’s an excellent point. Many a time, I was grateful for having had an excellent and persistent teacher and a father who fenced with me as often as he could. “ Why all the questions about fencing, little sister?”

Katie set her plate down on the table and resumed her seat. Darn , she should have been more careful. She didn’t want to cause her family even more worry. They already had a lot to think about with the new baby on the way. Not to mention, it would likely cause her mother to insist on Katie going with them to Sussex . And she didn’t want that. Not yet. Not when she’d only just decided to reclaim her life. She’d keep her idea about fencing to herself for the time being. “ No reason. Just making conversation,” she said, scooping up a bite of the fluffy eggs.

“ Good . I suggest we discuss something else,” her mother said, setting down her water glass. “ Has everyone finished packing their personal belongings?”

“ All done,” Frankie said.

“ I’m anxious to get back,” Thomas admitted. “ I want to get those buildings in the village that were damaged in the fire last week repaired as soon as possible. The lumber shipment is due to arrive in the next few days?—”

“ And we need to complete the renovations for the nursery, dear,” their mother interrupted. “ Katie , have you decided to return with us or stay with the Dowager Duchess of Clarence ?”

Katie had made up her mind. She was more certain than ever that she wanted to remain in London . Perhaps the dowager would be able to help her in her quest to learn how to wield a sword. She was certain Paula would stay as well. Aunt Jane , Paula’s mother, was going to Sussex with her family to help Mama and Frankie with

the preparations.

Although Katie felt a twinge of guilt for not going with them, she pushed it away. If she could regain her confidence, she would be far more helpful to her family and cause them far less worry.

Staying in London and learning how to fight seemed the best idea she'd had in a long time.

And there's another reason perhaps...a very tall, very handsome reason why you wish to remain in London—her inner voice reminded her. Meeting Lord Soren had strangely begun to shift something inside of her as well. Katie had never even pondered the idea of actively learning to fence until this morning. Perhaps meeting Lord Sebastian Soren had awakened a little voice inside her that made her want to get back to being the person she used to be—but even stronger and more self-assured.

She realized that time was of the essence. She'd spent an entire year wallowing in self-pity, hiding away from the world. Yes, she'd mourned Wendel's death, but in the process, she'd given up on herself.

“Mama, I wish to take the duchess up on her offer to stay with her. I'd like to attend more of the Season,” Katie said. “Of course, I will come to Sussex to be with you all for the birth of my niece or nephew.” She smiled. “I would never miss that.”

Her mother set down her teacup. “So, you have decided this is what you want?”

“Yes, Mama. And if Paula is amenable, I think it will all work out well. I think the dowager duchess will enjoy our company.”

“Very well, I will send word to the dowager immediately.”

“ Thank you.”

For the first time in a long time, Katie had something to look forward to. Hopefully with the dowager’s help, Paula , and perhaps even Lord Soren , she could reclaim her life.

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Chapter Four

That Same Day

“ S lice , stop daydreaming and pick up the pace,” Nelson chided.

“ What are you talking about?” Sebastian countered with a thrust.

Nelson parried with a riposte. “ I think we’ve fulfilled any exercise requirement you needed,” he said in a wry tone.

Sebastian lunged. “ Well , we don’t all have a luscious redhead lying abed whenever we feel in need of a little physical exertion.”

Nelson chuckled as he dodged. “ What happened to that curvaceous blonde you were bedding?”

“ That ended a while ago. A friendly parting of the ways. She was bound for the continent and I for home.” Sebastian lunged.

“ Ah , then it must be the lovely Miss Latham that has you off your mark,” he winked as he countered and blocked with a thrust. “ You do agree that she is lovely, don’t you?”

“ Of course, she’s lovely,” he said a bit too emphatically as he parried with a riposte.

“ Remarkable . Not blonde, nor buxom.” Nelson laughed and parried. “ A willowy

brunette.”

Sebastian ignored his friend’s teasing tone as he lunged. Point of fact, he’d found Miss Latham enchanting. Since last night, he couldn’t stop himself from thinking about her...the feel of her in his arms, how graceful she was, even on the heels of her dizzy spell. The softness of her skin, the startling beauty of her extraordinary blue eyes, the violet scent of her dark hair...

“ One cannot deny her bountiful attractive traits,” Nelson persisted.

“ Nelson ,” Sebastian warned, with a block. “ I merely assisted a young woman in distress. I am not some love-sick swain at his first ball, tripping over my feet and falling for the first pretty young girl who smiles at me.”

“ I’d pay for front-row seats to see that happen. Which is why I’m suggesting you be careful. The heart always wins, my friend. I’ve seen it happen time and again. Even the strongest of men cannot resist the lure of an enchanted beauty. My brother, Colin , found that out.”

“ Enchanted ? Shefford ?”

“ Who else?” Nelson laughed and lunged. “ Colin and his countess are completely besotted with each other. I have no idea how those two fell in love, given they were constantly bickering and forever at odds.”

“ How did your brother and Miss Honoria Mason meet?” Sebastian asked, easily parrying with a riposte. Despite his reluctance to marry, he was curious about how Shefford and Miss Mason went from foes to falling in love. He’d seen them at various functions since his return, and it was obvious they were made for each other, so utterly devoted they were.

“ She was running an orphanage in this very building. Her uncle wagered the deed to the building at a gaming table and lost it. After Colin acquired it, we had grand plans. So , we decided to move Honoria and the orphanage so that we could renovate the building and turn it into this fine establishment you see today. As you know, everything turned out well. Colin and Honoria are now married with a growing family.” Nelson gave a last thrust, knocking the foil from Sebastian’s hand and pinning him. “ Surrender now, my friend,” he said with a grin. “ It’s only a matter of time.”

“ Game . You win, but don’t get used to it,” Sebastian said, exhaling from the exertion. He stood and dusted off his pants. “ For the record, I have no plans to marry.”

“ Famous last words,” Nelson said with a chuckle.

“ Speaking of famous, you’re still the finest swordsman I’ve ever encountered, my friend.” Sebastian held out his hand to Nelson to congratulate his win.

“ Thank you, Slice ,” Nelson said, shaking his hand. “ You’re a fine swordsman, but in truth, I would never want to be on the other side fighting you in hand-to-hand combat. I should get some pointers from you on that front.”

Sebastian nodded. “ If you ever want a lesson, I’d be happy to show you a few tips.” Sebastian had gained a reputation for his bare-handed fighting skills that he’d initially learned from his older brother. His ability, honed over years on the battlefield and various assignments, had gotten him out of many a dangerous situation.

“ In celebration of my win, I’ll take you to my brother’s townhouse for a hearty breakfast.” He grinned, slapping Sebastian on the back.

“ How generous of you,” Sebastian said in a dry tone. “ But please, no more goading

about Miss Katie Latham , especially not in front of your family.”

Nelson held up his hands in a defensive gesture. “ I’m on your side, Slice . There are too many luscious ladies willing to be mistresses out there to limit ourselves to one that could see you caught in the parson’s mouse trap. Be careful.”

Sebastian pondered his friend’s advice. Nelson seemed as happy as a clam with his circumstances. He’d been that way too. Until last night. Since the ball, he’d been engaging in mental fencing matches trying to parry and deflect his traitorous thoughts. Perhaps that was why he was not on his game today. Always keep your wits about you, man! He’d learned that as well from taking on dangerous assignments. Losing focus for one moment could lead to a deadly mistake.

Two hours later, after a hearty breakfast with the Shefford family, Sebastian was sitting in a comfortable leather upholstered chair in front of a roaring fire at Whites with his legs leisurely propped up, sipping his favorite cognac.

One of the footmen at Nelson’s club had handed Sebastian a note on his way out of En Garde . The note had been from Latham and simply asked Sebastian to meet him at Whites . He wondered if it had something to do with Latham’s sister or a matter concerning Eastern Star Shipping . Even though he no longer worked for the line, he still had shares in the venture.

“ My lord. I have a message for you,” a footman said, extending a silver salver with a note. The missive, which had the Latham crest on the seal, made him wonder if Latham had changed his mind about meeting. On the other hand, the delicate scent of violets was definitely not indicative of his friend. Curious , Sebastian broke the seal and began to read:

My dear Lord Soren ,

I pray you do not think me forward in writing this missive, but you mentioned at the Clarence ball that should I ever have need of you, I should send word.

And so, I am.

Would you be able to call on me at your earliest convenience?

Yours Sincerely ,

Miss Katie Latham

“ Slice , my good man,” a deep voice said from behind.

Sebastian stood and shook hands with his friend. “ Latham . I took the opportunity of ordering a decanter.” Sebastian poured the fine, burnished gold liquid into the other glass on the side table and handed it to Latham .

“ Thank you. There’s a definite nip in the air and this will surely hit the spot.” Latham settled in the leather club chair angled across from Sebastian , enabling them to converse comfortably while enjoying the fire. He took a sip of cognac and sighed. Setting the glass down beside him, he stretched out his legs.

“ Nice touch, Slice .”

Sebastian arched his brow in question.

“ The roses, I mean. To my sister.” He smiled. “ Is there something I should be concerned about?”

“ Merely a gentlemanly gesture,” Sebastian replied, taking another sip of his drink.

“ I understand,” Latham said with a nod before sipping his cognac. “ Frankie is nearing her term, as I’m certain you discerned last night, and last evening’s ball was the last Societal event for her. We’re returning to our estate in Sussex for the birth of the baby,” Latham said. “ And so that I can deal with some estate matters.”

“ Will your mother and sister go with you?” Sebastian asked. He felt relieved Latham hadn’t questioned his plans with Katie .

“ Mama and my aunt plan to return with us, but Katie discussed staying, although I’m not sure how I feel about that.”

Sebastian felt an odd tightening in his stomach at the mention of Katie’s plans. He’d begun to think of her as Katie in his thoughts. Somehow it felt right to do, although he couldn’t fathom why. “ Why are you not sure?”

Latham took another sip of his drink. “ The Dowager Duchess of Clarence has graciously invited Katie and our cousin Paula to stay with her in London . On the one hand, I’m relieved that Katie is feeling better about going back out into Society , but on the other hand, I’m worried because we won’t be here.”

“ You’re worried about her staying with the dowager?” Sebastian asked. “ She’s more formidable than any general in His Majesty’s army.”

Latham chuckled. “ I agree with you there. I know Katie will be in good hands with the dowager, who is as concerned about Katie as the family is, but I would feel better if you could keep an eye on my sister on her outings. That is if you have time.”

“ Of course I will,” Sebastian answered without hesitation. He was doing this to help and nothing more, although he couldn’t help but wonder if this had something to do with Katie’s message asking to see him. “ But I sense there’s something more here.”

“ You’re damn good at what you do, but I often wondered if you read minds.” Latham paused and scrubbed his hand through his hair. “ As you know I was unable to catch the bastards who attacked my sister and her fiancé last year. Wendel’s uncle is a judge for God’s sake, and even he could not find the killers. It’s as though they completely disappeared.”

“ I understand how maddening that has been for you. I regret not having been here at the time, I would have offered my assistance.”

Latham nodded. “ That is why I wanted to speak with you today. Not just to ask you to watch over Katie , but to share something that has been roiling in my gut for months. You see, I don’t think this was a simple case of a robbery escalating to violence.”

“ You think Colborne was targeted specifically?”

“ Yes , and perhaps my sister as well.”

“ Why do you think she and Colborne were targeted?” Sebastian persisted.

“ The scene was too coincidental...almost too perfect for the crime,” Latham said. “ It reeks of having been a planned assault. Except , I don’t know why...or by whom.”

“ Perhaps the common denominator is you.”

“ Me ?”

“ Any enemies or adversaries that you’ve made over the years?”

Latham blew out a breath. “ None that I can think of—not here, at least. Yes , there have been rivalries with other shipping lines and altercations at the docks and other

ports, but why target my sister and her fiancé?”

“ Perhaps for that very reason. If this was a planned attack, perhaps it was aimed at bringing pain and suffering to your family.”

“ I hadn’t even considered that,” Latham said.

“ Has your sister recalled anything recently?”

“ Nothing but the horror of seeing Colborne killed. Her nightmares plague her, and she wakes screaming about the blood on her hands. Saying it out loud is difficult, even now. We have tried to help get her past the tragedy,” Latham said. “ The fact that she went to the Clarence’s ball was a good sign, but then she had that fainting spell and that worries me.”

Sebastian’s chest constricted at what Katie must have gone through. What she continued to carry in her mind and heart. He’d seen enough on the battlefield and in his work as a security agent to know how one could be scarred for life by witnessing such violence.

“ I think it would be a good idea to review all the investigative notes again—from all angles,” Sebastian suggested. “ Perhaps the runners uncovered something but didn’t realize it at the time.”

“ That makes sense,” Latham said, downing the rest of his drink. “ I’ll have time on the journey back to Sussex to peruse the investigation report. If I come across anything, I’ll send word to you.”

Sebastian nodded. “ Please do so.”

The next day

“ You’re awake, milady!” Millie said, entering the room. “ Your mother asks that you join her and the Dowager Duchess of Clarence in the parlor. I brought your chocolate and biscuits and came to help you dress.” She set down the tray on a small table next to the white upholstered chair in front of the fireplace and nodded towards the changing screen in the corner.

“ The dowager is here?” she asked.

“ Yes , milady. She just arrived.”

Katie nodded and glanced at the dresses. They hung from two corner hooks on a screen covered in fabric featuring blue butterflies and yellow wrens. She had always loved the cheeriness of the material. The hooks were an idea of her mother’s and had caught on with Katie’s friends and their mothers, as well. It gave Millie a place to lie out the dresses when she was still abed. It also kept them from wrinkling. She nodded approvingly at Millie’s choices.

Millie smiled. “ It’s such a cheery, bright day. I was thinking the pink and white stripe would look lovely. But you might enjoy the olive-green floral print one. Both compliment your coloring.”

Katie nibbled her bottom lip. Would he like her in pink or green? She could decide that later. For now, she wanted comfort. “ You’re right, Millie . Today calls for the rose pink one. It’s my favorite shade of pink.”

“ An excellent choice. I’ll pack the green after we get you dressed for the day.”

A half-hour later, Katie entered the parlor and found the dowager and her mother deep in conversation.

“ If we leave, are you certain you will be up to escorting Katie to the various social

functions? It seems a lot to foster on you,” Katie heard her mother ask as she entered the room.

“ My dear. Are you truly asking me such a question after having known me all these years? Of course, I’m up to the task and will treat Katie as the daughter I’ve never had. I plan to cherish every moment and will take good care of her,” the duchess said in her unassailable voice. “ I am, after all, her godmother.”

Her mother merely grinned and gave a quick nod. “ I had to ask.” She reached over and patted the seat on the settee next to her, showing for Katie to sit.

“ Hello , Duchess ,” Katie said, taking the seat. “ Does this mean everything is set for me to stay?” She turned to her mother. “ I do hate to miss everything, Mama . So , promise me you will send for me when Frankie is close to the delivery.”

The viscountess patted her daughter’s hand. “ I will. I fear your brother will need your calm influence. But until then, you will be in the duchess’s capable hands.” She gave Katie a pointed look. “ You and Paula will both be staying with her, as my sister plans to go to Sussex with us. Don’t make me regret this decision, missy.”

“ I promise, Mama . I have put my toe back in Society , and I fear if I flee to the country now, I might not feel the momentum to see it through. And I do so want to shake the melancholy, as I vowed.”

Her mother squeezed her hand. “ I trust you, Katie . But I will miss you so.”

The dowager cleared her throat. “ I understand Lord Soren plans to call on you this week. I am thrilled! We cannot wait to hear of your outing.”

“ He never told me what we might do. But I hope we can take a ride. The weather is perfect.”

“ It does. And in that vein, I brought you a special gift.” She picked up a white lace parasol from the floor beside her and handed it to Katie . “ This is not an ordinary umbrella. It is one that I had specially made after speaking with your mother. So , it’s not being given without her approval.”

Katie looked questioningly at the parasol and picked it up.

“ When you push up on the underside, it opens into a parasol. But when it’s closed and you press the little button, the handle withdraws from the silo. It is a foil.”

Katie gaped. “ Really ?” She stood, pressed the button, and pulled out the foil.

“ We expect,” drolled the duchess, “that you will continue to pursue your notion of gaining fencing lessons.”

“ I heard you, daughter. I want you to heal from that horrible experience. If you have interest in fencing—as long as you pursue it safely—you have my blessing.” Her mother gave a slight shudder. “ But please, be careful.”

To Katie’s astonishment, the duchess stepped up, and with her cane, pressed a button. She tugged on the end and withdrew a foil. “ My father gifted me with this when I was younger. While I have never had to resort to using it, it has comforted me to know I have it.”

“ You know how to fence?” Katie gaped. “ I shall never look at your cane the same way again!”

The dowager chuckled. “ Yes . Although , it is not something I think I could do today, as I have not practiced in many years. But I could probably perform a few moves in my defense. I suppose that astonishes you.”

“ It does,” Katie and her mother said together.

“ In all the years I have known you, you have never shown me that. No wonder you understood Katie’s need to learn self-defense so readily.”

“ Indeed , I do.” She inserted the foil back into the cane. “ I won’t bore you with an old woman’s details.” She looked at her friend. “ I promise to watch over Katie , and I assure you both— I can keep up with her.” The older woman rubbed her hands in glee. “ I’ve never had a daughter, so I hope you will indulge an old woman in some things I’ve never been able to do—like picking out a ball gown or two. If not that, perhaps fripperies here and there.”

Katie smiled, though her eyes were misted with unshed tears. “ This is such a thoughtful gift. And to know Mama approves makes it that much more special. Thank you, Duchess . And thank you, Mama .”

The duchess chuckled. “ I am glad you like it. Now then. I have a few ideas about the lessons if you will allow me to guide you.”

Her mother’s brow raised. “ Are you sure you want to take this on? I had hoped Thomas would find time later.”

“ My dear Marianna . The apple never falls far from the tree. Your beautiful daughter is much like you. And once you get a bee in your bonnet, you must take care of it. So , I expect Katie will be much the same. And I know who can help.”

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Chapter Five

The Next Day

“ This is the first time I’ve not been with my mother during a London Season ,” Paula said. “ Too bad Lucy couldn’t stay. It would have been like we were back at Lady Brinkley’s Finishing School .”

“ Yes , but you know how Lucy is with her animals,” Katie said. When Lucy’s grandmother had written to say two of her dogs were about to give birth, Lucy had been beside herself with both excitement and distress. She and her mother had left immediately for the family’s country estate.

Katie couldn’t blame her, after Lucy’s horrible debut two years ago, the poor dear had been the subject of much gossip and ridicule among the ton . Katie admired her friend’s buoyant spirit but also understood Lucy’s reticence about Society . Lucy was a lovely and giving young lady with so much love to give that it would be a shame if she did not marry and have children. Yes , she had her animals, but Katie suspected that deep down, Lucy also wanted to fall in love.

Wasn’t that what they all wanted—to love and be loved in return?

Perhaps reclaiming my life also means making room in my heart for love.

Sebastian’s handsome face flashed through her mind...

“ We will have a wonderful time together, ladies,” the dowager said, tugging Katie

away from her thoughts. “ What say you to a shopping excursion tomorrow? That new shop on Bond Street carries the most exquisite gloves.”

Katie looked at Paula and back at the dowager. “ We’d love to go!” she said enthusiastically. A shiny black carriage pulled in front of the townhouse, drawing Katie’s attention. Paula squealed and rushed to the parlor window. “ He’s here!” she announced over her shoulder.

“ He’s here? Katie squeaked, placing a quelling hand on her stomach, hoping to calm the fluttering butterflies.

“ That’s what I just said,” Paula said with a giggle.

“ Calm yourself, my dear,” the duchess said, gently touching her hand. “ You don’t want to appear too eager. Would you mind if I stayed for a moment and asked a question of the young man?” the duchess said with a wink.

“ What do you plan to ask him?” Paula asked.

Katie winced. Her cousin often blurted what was on her mind without thinking first.

“ You have nothing to worry about. My question will be in good taste. I merely wish to ask him to pay me a visit tomorrow.”

The dowager pulled on the dark blue cord by the door. The butler appeared a moment later.

“ Franklin , have Millie come down,” the dowager said.

“ Very good, Your Grace .”

A few moments later Franklin returned to the parlor.

“ You have a caller, Miss Latham . Lord Sebastian Soren is here to see you.”

“ Please , show him in Franklin ,” Katie said, glancing between the dowager and Paula .

Lord Soren stepped into the room, although he barely cleared the doorway in the parlor. Katie bit her lip to keep herself from giggling, although it would not have been funny had he hit his head. It was just that he was so tall. She’d always thought herself taller than most ladies, but when close to him, she noticed she barely reached his shoulders. Although that wasn’t a bad thing, she thought, remembering their waltz and how she enjoyed gazing up into his deep brown eyes.

Lord Soren greeted the dowager and then Katie and Paula with a smile and a slight bow. They exchanged a few pleasantries and then he pulled a small bouquet of violets from behind his back and handed them to Katie . “ I saw these flowers this morning and thought you might enjoy them.”

“ Oh ! Thank you, my lord.” Katie held them to her nose and drew a deep breath. “ They have such a delicate scent.” She drew another breath. “ Violets are a favorite of mine.”

“ I’m glad to hear I made the right selection, Miss Latham .”

“ I can take them, milady,” Millie said, entering the room. “ I have the perfect vase for them. Would you like them in your room?”

“ Yes , please, but I’d like them in here for a little while so everyone can enjoy them,” Katie suggested.

Millie returned with the vase and set the flowers on the Chippendale table next to the window.

The parlor was decorated in the duchess' favorite colors, yellow and white, which always made the room appear larger than it was, at least to Katie's thinking. A tall Chippendale secretary was to the immediate left upon entering. To the right, a white damask sofa hugged the wall, across from which was a large picture window framed by soft yellow drapes. A cherry wood tea cart sat to the right of the sofa. Next to it sat a wingback chair—which was notably the dowager duchess' favorite. It was covered in matching yellow and white striped fabric and sat next to the small Chippendale table. Even though it was decorated with colors that enhanced its size, the room seemed to have shrunk in size from Sebastian's commanding presence.

“ I wondered if you might enjoy a ride through Hyde Park , Miss Latham ,” Lord Soren said. “ The day is crisp but not cold. I have warming bricks in the coach and lap blankets, for your comfort.”

“ Yes , that would be lovely.” Katie turned to the dowager, who smiled.

“ I will wait in the carriage, milady,” Millie said, stepping out of the room.

The dowager stood and tapped her cane. Katie smiled as she recalled the foil that was hidden inside.

The older woman gave a wry laugh. “ I wonder, Lord Soren , if you might have time to pay me a brief call tomorrow. I have an important favor to ask of you.”

Sebastian gave a brief nod. “ Certainly , Your Grace . It will be my pleasure.

“ Shall we say ten of the clock?” the dowager asked.

“ I will be here, Your Grace .”

“ Very good,” the elderly woman said with a mysterious smile. “ Enjoy your outing, my dear,” she said to Katie , then turned to Paula . “ Come , my dear, I promised to show you my hat collection, and so I shall.” The dowager walked out of the room, tapping her cane as she went.

Paula excused herself and gave Katie a quick wink as she followed the dowager down the hall.

Minutes later, Lord Soren helped Katie into his carriage and climbed in after her. Millie set a warm blanket across Katie’s lap and sat back as the conveyance smoothly merged into the thoroughfare.

“ I thought we might stop at Gunter’s for chocolate after we ride through Hyde Park ,” Lord Soren suggested.

“ I would like that very much. She noticed even though they both occupied the same bench, it was wide enough that they didn’t touch. “ Your coach seems larger than most. Or am I imagining it?”

He laughed. “ I’m a big man, so I ordered mine a few inches wider. It makes it more comfortable—for me and my guests.”

“ I didn’t realize that was an option.”

The conversation turned to the Clarence ball. “ I had hoped to dance again with you,” Lord Soren said.

“ I would have liked that as well. But surely that would have set the tongues wagging,” Katie said, enjoying the light, happy feeling she was experiencing. A

feeling she hadn't felt for a long time. And yet, she also felt conflicted because she was experiencing it with another man—something she hadn't even considered would be possible after Wendel . They had fit together like a glove—best friends and confidants. A small part of her heart twisted at the thought of him. Wendel would always have a place in her heart, but for her peace of mind, she could no longer live in the past. Her family was right. She had to work harder to move forward with her life. Perhaps by doing so, she could conquer the bad dreams and dizzy spells and finally let go of the guilt that had weighed on her shoulders for the past year.

“ A penny for your thoughts.”

She turned and realized Lord Soren had been watching her, his eyes like brown velvet.

“ I was just woolgathering,” she said with a nervous smile. “ I wanted to thank you again for your gallantry at the ball. I was frozen. Terrified . I could barely walk. But you came to my rescue. Calm . Focused . Just hearing your voice and looking into your eyes helped me get through my distress.”

“ You are very welcome. I'm glad I was there to render assistance.” He smiled. “ And perhaps we can dispense with titles? Please call me Sebastian . May I call you Katie ?”

Katie's smile widened. His voice sounded like velvet too if that were even possible. “ Yes . I would like that.”

He inclined his head. “ Do you mind if I ask you a question?”

“ No , I don't mind Lor — Sebastian .”

“ Do you believe they are still out there? They , being the thieves.”

She took a deep breath. “ I do,” she admitted. “ Do you?”

He shrugged. “ I truly don’t know. But I think you do. And that’s what matters.”

She closed her eyes, and a tear escaped. “ Yes . I wish I could remember their faces. It was all such a blur. Everyone is determined I move past it. I want to as well, but it is not a simple thing to do. I can certainly distract myself during the day, but at night, I have dreams. It feels like I know something, but I don’t know what that is.”

Sebastian was silent for a moment. “ But what if your dreams are trying to tell you something? Have you tried to draw the images that you dream—the faces, place, and whatever you are seeing—when you awaken?”

“ I’ve written things down in a diary, but unfortunately drawing is not a talent of mine.” She nibbled her lip. “ But Paula has a true gift for sketching, and I am certain she would help me if I asked.”

Sebastian touched her gloved hand. “ Good . If she can draw what you see in your dreams, maybe we can get a clearer picture of who these people are.”

“ Do you mean you’ll help me?”

“ Of course, I will help. In any way I can.”

For the first time in a year, Katie felt a glimmer of hope. She knew there were no assurances. But she owed it to Wendel’s memory to try. Just thinking about it made something shift inside her heart and she realized she felt a little lighter of spirit. “ I want to do this.”

“ Excellent ,” Sebastian said. “ I see Gunter’s ahead. I hope you and Millie are ready for some refreshment.”

Katie wanted to ask about fencing lessons but decided she needed to let the dowager speak with him first in case that was her intention. But she felt lighter inside for the first time in a long time. “ We would enjoy that, wouldn’t we, Millie ?”

“ Yes , ma’am. Very much so.” Millie smiled, and her brown eyes danced.

Possibly because of the chilly weather, they could not find a place where Millie could sit apart from them so they could talk in private. She felt compelled to tell him about her dream. “ I had mentioned discussing something with you earlier,” she started, hoping he would attach these comments to the note she had sent him. “ Perhaps we could speak another time?”

“ I agree. That sounds like a good idea.” He smiled. “ There are some things one cannot discuss in public.”

Two hours later, they returned to the townhouse, and Katie felt replete. The hot chocolate had warmed her, and she could still taste its rich flavor. Sebastian assisted Katie and Millie from the carriage.

“ I trust you had a pleasant time?”

“ Yes , truly, it was a delightful outing.”

He regarded her for a moment in silence, his eyes as dark as the chocolate she’d enjoyed at Gunter’s . A part of her wanted to lose herself in that dark, intense gaze, and a part of her didn’t know what to think or do, so befuddled she was.

“ Take me to En Garde ,” Sebastian told the driver when he returned to his carriage.

As his carriage lurched forward and pulled away from the dowager’s townhouse, Sebastian loosened his cravat, hoping that would ease some of the twisted emotions

he felt inside.

God's teeth! He had done it again. There was something about Katie . She was certainly different from other young ladies. Could it be because he hadn't been with a woman in six months? No , he'd gone longer than that when he was at sea or in battle.

No , it was Katie herself. She was everything good and kind, guileless as she was. She was also intelligent and charming. But there was another quality to her that called out to him. A fractured soul that wanted and needed to heal. He'd felt much the same way many times when he was a young soldier on the battlefield.

Although Katie had been engaged, she was still an ingenue—and even more vulnerable, given her virtual self-isolation over the past year because of what she'd gone through. That , of course, brought out his protective instincts... Even so, he could already see the glimmer in her eyes when she looked at him.

He wasn't arrogant; he was just experienced. He'd gone through it before on assignment. There had been a diplomat, a widower with a seventeen-year-old daughter. She'd had extreme romantic notions and developed an almost instant affection for Sebastian . One evening, she sneaked into his private quarters, removed her gown, and slipped into his bed, naked.

He walked into his bedchamber that night after having spent the better part of an hour with her father discussing security measures for an upcoming summit. Luckily , the light of the moon showed her sleeping form in his bed. He spun on his heel and went straight to her father —told him what had happened. Fortunately , he'd built a tremendous trust with the diplomat. The girl's father immediately went with a trusted maid to remove his daughter from Sebastian's room.

The poor girl had lost her mother two years before—and her father had indulged

her—perhaps too much. But after the incident, the man packed his daughter off to the finest finishing school where she would be safe from her whims.

This is not the same situation . Yes , Katie was in a vulnerable state because of the brutal murder of her fiancé, but it was her inner spirit that he found admirable. She was determined to find her late fiancé's killers.

And she was beautiful—a unique beauty, different from his mistresses. She was taller than the average woman and carried herself like a young queen. Her lush dark hair, ivory complexion, and rose-tinted cheeks only enhanced her beauty. But it was those sparkling blue eyes that made her breathtaking. So much so that he was finding it more and more difficult to keep his mind from conjuring her up in his thoughts.

When he found himself in her company, it was effortless. He thoroughly enjoyed himself with her. He realized he wanted to call on her.

What would Latham think? This wasn't what his friend had in mind when he asked him to watch his sister. And it wasn't what Sebastian had intended. He made it a practice to not get involved with his clients. Katie was a client, only she didn't realize it, but she felt like more. So much more.

If Miss Gowans agreed to help with the sketches, he felt certain they would have a chance of finding the men responsible for Colborne's death. It pleased him that Katie was open to his suggestion of sketching what she saw in her dreams. Now , he needed to determine how to make the idea operational. He hoped Nelson might help.

As the carriage turned the corner past a large oak tree, a sudden pricking of his senses made Sebastian look out the window. He scanned the area for anything out of the ordinary, but seeing nothing, he sat back in his seat.

The odd feeling stayed with him all the way to the club, making him all the more

determined to catch those killers.

He huddled in his black coat, wishing he'd worn his long underwear beneath his clothes. The big toff had turned to look, but he'd ducked behind the massive oak tree just in time. No one had seen him, but just to make sure, he'd looked left and right before hurrying on his way. He pulled a toothpick from his mouth and tossed it to the ground. Pulling down on his black hat, he hailed a passing hackney.

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Chapter Six

The Next Day

“ I love you.”

He pulled the sensual redhead into his arms and claimed her luscious lips in a searing kiss. She purred like a contented cat as his mouth traveled down her neck. He had never known anyone like her—someone who needed him as much as he needed her. She understood him like no other woman ever had. She knew how to bring him to the heights of ecstasy. And he knew what set her on fire.

As a Tower of London guard, Rosco Black was privy to nefarious opportunities for the right price. It was easy to make extra coin by doing certain tasks, such as acquiring opium for a certain lord or looking the other way when another toff's favored footman paid a nocturnal call. Usually , he spent the bribe on a night at The Rooster and squirreled the rest to fund his own unique hobby. But since meeting her , he'd begun to purchase trinkets and other items to ease her life in the Tower . All he wanted was to make her happy. It had become the driving force in his life. He'd even curtailed his monthly habit of prowling the streets of London hunting for his next trophy.

One day I'll take Lady Endora Deville away from this hell. We'll go where no one can find us and live our lives as they were meant to be — together .

When the right opportunity presented itself, he would find a way to steal Endora away—and make her his forever...

“ I love you,” he said again after he’d brought her to the pinnacle as only he knew he could do.

She gave a feline stretch and lay back on the pillows. “ Hmm ...how wonderful, Rosco , darling,” she said, running her finger along his lips. “ Did you bring me something today?”

“ I did.” He rose from the bed and retrieved a small box and a folded newspaper from his satchel. “ Your favorite newspaper, The Tattler , and a treat for my lady,” he said, presenting them to her with a bow.

“ Oh , I so love marzipan! Thank you,” she gushed, reaching for the box.

“ No , allow me,” he said, feeding her a red marzipan treat.

“ Mmm ,” she said, chewing on the bonbon as she shook out the newspaper, flipping through the pages. “ What a perfect way to spend the afternoon.”

He wished he could lie abed and watch her all day, but he had other duties that he had to attend to. He smiled to himself as he pulled on his trousers, knowing that one day they would spend every day in such ease.

A high-pitched screech from the bed made him jump. He turned to find the love of his life red-faced with fury.

“ That skinny bitch!” she snarled, throwing the box of marzipan to the floor. “ I can’t believe it!”

“ What is it, my love? What is the matter?” he asked, rushing to her side.

“ Why didn’t you kill her?”

“ Kill who?”

“ The Latham chit! She’s all over the Tattler —parading about London , going to balls, attending the theater. I wanted her gone so the perfect Viscount Thomas Latham and his precious Viscountess , Frankie , would suffer,” she spat. “ What woman goes by a man’s name? Frankie !” she said the name again with a sneer. “ If only I could have done away with her—then Latham would have lost his mind for certain.” She flung the newspaper aside. “ The next best solution was to do away with Latham’s sister. And you failed!”

Rosco sighed. This was not the first time his lady love lost her temper over the botched robbery last year. For months, he’d managed to mollify her with regular reports of the young woman’s self-imposed imprisonment. He’d kept watch on the Latham’s townhouse and only ever saw her venture into the garden, her face a mask of pain and sorrow. Endora had loved hearing him describe how the girl sat on a bench under a tree and sobbed for hours.

“ Why oh, why didn’t you kill that simpering twit when you had the chance?” Endora shouted, bringing his attention back into focus. “ It was meant to be a robbery gone wrong. The perfect crime and completely unconnected to me. How many times do you have to be told things? And now, everything is all ruined!”

“ I told you. The Latham chit screamed, and men came running to help her. I didn’t have time to do it, my love...” Roscoe said, trying to appease her.

“ Nonsense ! You messed it up. Admit it. When I get out of here, I will have my vengeance. They will all feel my wrath. I will see to their demise— Latham , his wife, and the Dowager Duchess of Clarence ,” she muttered with a scowl.

“ Yes , my love,” he soothed, plumping up the pillows and easing her back against them.

“ Why didn’t you want to kill her?”

How did she know he had hesitated? When he saw Miss Latham , a familiar feeling took over but ended just as quickly. She wasn’t his type. The chit had dark hair and he had only ever liked blondes until Endora . When he remembered what Endora wanted, it was too late. Help was coming and he had to run. By the time he was sufficiently on his way home to Endora , he no longer felt that need. She was all he needed.

“ I want you to contact your two buffoons and have them return to London . We need another plan to do away with her.”

“ I promise, my love. I will do it right away,” he said, running his hand down over her naked flesh.

She moaned and pulled him down on top of her. “ Tell me again how you felt when you killed Colborne .”

“ It was like a bolt of lightning surged through me...” he rasped in her ear.

Only I know what she needs, what she craves. Only I can make her happy.

How he wished he had killed the Latham girl. Letting her live was disturbing his life, causing him more trouble than he’d imagined.

“ You love me, don’t you?” he asked, gazing into her eyes.

“ Yes , my darling,” she said, driving her nails down his back and smiling with wanton pleasure. “ You know how I feel. You’ve always known.”

Yes , always...

Sebastian arrived at the dowager duchess' promptly at ten o'clock. His curiosity was piqued by the dowager's request to meet with him.

"Your Grace, Lord Soren, is here to see you," Franklin intoned, stepping into the drawing room doorway where the dowager duchess and her two charges were having tea.

"Lord Soren, thank you for paying me a call," the dowager said and then nodded to the two young ladies. "You know Miss Latham and Miss Gowans."

"It's a pleasure to see you both this morning," Sebastian said, giving a deferential nod of his head.

His gaze riveted to the brunette beauty in an olive-green dress to the right of the duchess. Her smile was warm and welcoming and made him wish they were alone.

"Good morning, Lord Soren," Katie said, followed by Paula.

Paula was there, which offered a good opportunity to bring up the sketching idea. He made a mental note to mention it.

The duchess smiled. "We were just having tea. May I offer you some? It'll warm you up."

"I'd like that, Duchess."

She gave a respectful nod and poured him a cup. "Help yourself to cucumber finger sandwiches and biscuits."

"Lemon biscuits are a favorite; you don't have to ask me twice," he said with a grin as he chose a lemon biscuit and took a bite.

They spoke of various pleasantries for a few moments until the duchess cleared her throat. “ I asked you to stop by to ask you two favors.” She glanced at Katie and Paula . “ This is nothing I cannot say in front of my girls.”

“ I am at your service, Duchess .” He had known the duchess since leading strings and felt comfortable using his pet name, Duchess , when not in a social setting.

She smiled. “ As I mentioned, there are two favors, which I hope you won’t find odious of me to ask of you. We plan to attend several of the balls during the holiday season, and I wondered if you would escort us—so that I may ensure the safety of my charges.

Sebastian didn’t hesitate. He was going to attend in any case, but this made his promise to Latham all the easier. “ I would be happy to accommodate as many outings as I can.”

The duchess sat back and smiled. “ Excellent ,” she said, clapping her hands. “ My next request might seem strange at first, but I think you will agree—a necessary one.” She glanced at Katie and then turned her gaze back to him. “ I have heard of your extensive talent in the art of self-defense. And I wonder if you might give fencing lessons to Miss Latham . At least enough to help her feel more confident. She has expressed an interest in knowing more about the art and, were his countess not on the verge of delivering their first child, I know her brother, the viscount, would have taught her himself.”

“ Is this true? You’d like to learn to fence?” he asked.

Katie nodded, and he recognized the same determined glint in her eyes he had seen years ago in the eyes of a young female informant in Paris . Given the danger she had undertaken, Sebastian had planned to teach his informant how to defend herself, but she was killed before he could help her. “ I would be delighted to be of service.”

“ Excellent ! Perhaps we can begin this afternoon?” the dowager said.

“ I am happy to do that. But I have one request to make,” Sebastian said, looking at Katie . “ Miss Latham and I were discussing her recurring dreams where she has recalled various details of the night of the attack?—”

“ I saw the faces of two of the thieves,” Katie interjected.

He nodded. “ Yes . Miss Latham also mentioned that Miss Gowans is an excellent artist and perhaps could be of assistance in sketching the faces of the thieves based on Miss Latham’s descriptions.”

“ A capital idea!” the dowager said. “ Paula , what say you to this?”

Paula nodded enthusiastically. “ Of course, I would do anything to help Katie .”

“ Excellent !” the dowager proclaimed. In the meantime, I took the liberty of having an area of the ballroom prepared for a fencing lesson, complete with epees, masks, gloves, plastrons, and jackets. They used to belong to my dear husband. And Katie , dear, I’ve included the fencing jacket I used when my husband gave me lessons. I’ve noticed you are also right-handed, so it should suit. We can begin with your first lesson today.”

“ T -thank you, Your Grace ,” Katie replied.

Sebastian noticed Katie looked surprised, although she had not seemed so about the lessons. Was there nothing the dowager could do? The woman had truly thought of everything.

Do you fence, Your Grace ?” he asked.

“ Oh , my goodness,” the elderly woman replied with a dismissive flick of the wrist. “ I was quite good back in the day before you were even born. As I mentioned, my dear George taught me all those years ago. I had won a wager, you see, and the duke had to, despite his reservations. But he was a wonderful teacher,” she said with a mischievous smile.

Sebastian noticed Katie’s lips twitch in humor and her eyes danced with merriment at the dowager’s story.

“ That is remarkable, Your Grace ,” Sebastian said. “ You must have caused quite a stir back then.”

“ I never stopped causing a stir, young man. Now , I do hope you will join us for dinner, Lord Soren .”

Sebastian opened and closed his mouth, feeling much like a fish. “ My apologies, but I have a dinner engagement with Sir Nelson? —”

“ Nonsense ,” the dowager interjected with a thump of her cane. “ We will invite Sir Nelson to join us here for dinner. Afterward , we can begin sketching Katie’s recollections. Franklin will see that Sir Nelson is informed of the change in plans.”

Is that a sparkle he saw in the dowager’s eyes? Hopefully , she wasn’t scheming again. She was known for her penchant for matchmaking. Sebastian readily acknowledged his attraction to Katie , but marriage was another matter entirely. His work took him from place to place, certainly not conducive to having a wife and family. At least not at this juncture of his life.

Sebastian’s eyes met Katie’s and her expression was one of bemusement. He gave a little shrug and grinned. The dowager Duchess of Clarence was an unstoppable force of nature.

“ Then you appear to have removed every obstacle,” Sebastian quipped. “ We can begin when you are ready, Miss Latham .”

“ I am ready to begin as soon as possible,” Katie said.

With the look of excitement on her face, Sebastian had a feeling it would not take Katie long to gain her footing in the sport.

Tapping her cane once more, the dowager stood. “ Good . Everything is settled. I think we should get started. Come with me.”

The dowager exited the parlor, clearly expecting them to follow her. Which they did.

The dowager led them to the ballroom where she had indeed thought of everything, including a screened-off changing area for Katie . Her maid Millie was there to assist as well.

Sebastian would do without wearing the fencing jacket. He did not require it in any case for their first lesson.

“ My dear, I feel that if I hover, it may impede your success,” the dowager said to Katie . “ There are things you must know to learn the sport, and I trust Lord Soren to show those without compromising you. I shall leave the ballroom door open, and Millie will sit just outside the door in case you need anything.”

A blush stole over Katie’s face. “ Thank you, Your Grace ,” she said.

“ Please , we know each other so well. You may call me Duchess .” The dowager glanced up at Lord Soren . “ As he does. We can be more formal in public.” She looked at Paula . “ Come Paula . Let me show you my collection of silk scarves,” she said, dragging a bemused Paula behind her. Millie followed close behind.

Even though the doors to the ballroom were open and Millie was sitting just outside, Sebastian could not help but be aware of the fact that they were alone. Katie took a step toward him, her gaze meeting his. How beautiful she looked and how tempting it would be to take her in his arms and kiss that luscious mouth. He pushed those thoughts aside. He was there to teach Katie how to fence, not indulge his secret whims.

He could read the excitement in her lovely face, along with nerves, and he wanted to help ease her anxiety.

Clearing his throat Sebastian picked up an epee. “ There are different rules for scoring depending on the different weapons used. But since you are learning for self-defense, we will focus on the movements and not the scoring aspect. That way, most of what you learn is transferrable to the foil.”

“ Oh , I have a foil,” Katie said, retrieving a parasol hooked on the back of a chair. “ The duchess gave it to me the other day while she and my mother were having tea. It seems my mother approves of my learning as well.”

She pressed the underside of the frilly white parasol and slid out a foil. “ Voila !” She grinned, waving the foil in the air with a flourishing motion.

Sebastian couldn't help but smile at her endearing enthusiasm. “ Did she show you the foil she has hidden in her cane?”

“ Yes ,” she said, handing him the foil to examine. “ I thought it was a secret though.”

He laughed. “ If it is, it's the worst kept secret in London .” He handed the foil back to Katie . “ It's finely made. I'm glad the dowager and your mother realize that learning to defend yourself will help you in the long term to vanquish some of your fears.”

Katie nodded, her face solemn, her eyes glistened with tears. “Forgive me,” she said in a husky voice, blinking furiously.

Damn ! The last thing he wanted was to make her cry. He reached out and took her hand in his. “No, it is I who should ask for forgiveness. I am sorry, Katie.” He took a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her.

“Thank you, but it was not your words,” she said in a soft voice, dabbing her face. “I am truly happy that you are helping me vanquish my fears.”

Her extraordinary blue eyes met his and it was all he could do to keep from taking her in his arms and kissing her tears away. God help him, but it was getting harder to resist those bow-shaped pink lips.

He glanced at the open door, reminding himself that Millie was sitting out there, and while there was a significant distance between them and the door, and he knew Millie could not hear most of what they said, the young maid could walk in at any moment, as could the dowager. “I am glad you are happy about learning to fence,” he said, clearing his throat again. “Shall we begin?”

“She nodded, a wobbly smile on her face.

“There are common terms to learn—many of which you have probably heard. The first is *en garde* —a phrase that means ready and summons both opponents to the fighting stance, which is thus.” He demonstrated the stance with his foil. “You face your opponent with your fighting side forward. Allow me to show you.” He stepped behind her. “We are both right-handed, so we will face each other with our right sides, thusly.” He eased her into position, showing how to use the left arm for balance. Warmth spread through him as soon as he touched her. It had been this way from the first moment he’d met her. And he wondered if she felt it as well. “Now you try,” he said, his voice sounding ragged to his ears. He stepped back to give her

room.

Katie quickly sprung into the en garde position. She had done it perfectly. “ How did I do?”

He swallowed. She looked beautiful, even with the silly fencing jacket covering her slender curves. “ Well done. You look like you are ready for the next step.” He nodded as he picked up his foil. “ As I mentioned, we’ll dispense with the scoring rules, as that differentiates the weapons in this sport. This is for self-defense, so you must strike from any angle possible.”

Sebastian taught her the meaning of riposte, parry, block, and thrust, demonstrating each move first and then helping her parrot each stance. They spent the next two hours practicing each move over again until she knew each one by heart.

Katie had moved past her tears and was completely engrossed in learning each stance. Sebastian was impressed by her endurance and strength of will. Never had he enjoyed fencing more than he had with Katie —not only sparring with swords but verbally sparring with her as well. Her humor was quick and her eyes gleamed as she parried him word for word.

“ Let’s try it once more. En garde !”

Once they assumed their position, Katie thrust with a look of sheer determination on her face. Then she stopped. “ You’re certain I cannot hurt you,” she said, panting from the last half-hour of exertion.

“ Yes , I am certain.” He laughed and blocked her, showing her one of his many blocks.

He reposted, and she parried.

“ How often can we practice?” she asked, thrusting once again in his direction.

“ How often do you want to see me?” he asked, failing to realize what he’d said until he said it. He blocked her and reposted.

“ I ... I enjoy seeing you very much,” she stammered as she parried.

There it was. What he shouldn’t want to hear. Only he did want to hear it—she enjoyed spending time with him. “ I can come by tomorrow for another lesson, but I wanted to make sure you were up to it,” he said, parrying.

“ I would love that,” she said, stepping back. She beamed at him, her blue eyes sparkling.

He almost forgot himself as he beheld the warmth in her smile. And before he knew it, she thrust her epee and scored a touch at his midsection. “ I did it! I did it!” she said gleefully, jumping up and down.

“ You did. I must have fallen asleep not to have seen that coming,” he jested. “ You’re an excellent student and a quick learner.” Sebastian grinned. “ You win.”

A tap on the floor drew his attention to the opened doors. “ I say, you’ve done well in one day!” said the dowager. “ I hope the next lesson is soon, so you can build on that success!”

“ Would tomorrow be too soon, Duchess ?” Katie asked.

“ Tomorrow ?” She laughed. “ Of course not. I want you to learn. If Lord Soren has time for us, we will make time for him!” She thumped her cane as if to change the subject. “ I have sent an invitation to Sir Nelson for dinner.”

“ I should leave so that I may change for dinner. I will return with Sir Nelson . I feel sure he won’t be able to refuse your invitation, Duchess .” He placed his mask, glove, and epee on a table. “ Thank you for providing the opportunity to teach Miss Latham ... Katie has already proven to be a most apt pupil and has done better in her first lesson than many men I know who’ve had years of practice.”

“ When you have the motivation Katie has, my dear Sebastian ,” the dowager drawled, “ You learn things quickly.”

Sebastian gathered his hat, coat, and gloves at the door. “ This has been an unexpected and most delightful afternoon, ladies, Your Grace . I shall return for dinner.”

Once outside, Sebastian turned back to see Katie watching him from the parlor window. He winked and turned back to the drive where his coach awaited.

“ Why don’t we step into the drawing-room, now that dinner is over,” the dowager duchess said, standing. “ Franklin has set up an easel with paper, and there are charcoals.” She turned to Paula . “ Will that suffice, my dear?”

They stepped into the cozy room. Books lined two walls, with gliding ladders that slid to the various stacks. A roaring fireplace was built into the wall across from the bookshelves. A painting of the dowager hung over the mantel. The fourth wall featured portraits of her son, the duke, her children, the duke’s family, along with the duchess and her late husband hanging on both sides of the window. “ I miss him,” the dowager whispered, glancing up at her husband.

Katie heard the heart-felt remark, and her own heart squeezed. She knew the feeling, having lost Wendel . And yet the sharp pain she’d felt for months after Wendel’s death had lessened to an ache and she didn’t know how she felt about that.

“ I thought it might be helpful if Miss Latham and Miss Gowans sat next to each other,” the duchess suggested, pulling Katie from her thoughts. “ Lord Soren , Sir Nelson , you may sit across from the young ladies to offer advice. I will sit here on the chair.”

A footman walked in with a small tray of drinks and set them down beside the duchess.

“ Please , help yourself to an after-dinner drink. We have brandy and sherry.”

Katie and Paula chose a sherry, and Katie suppressed a smile as the duchess took a brandy, as did the men. “ I’m ready. I’ve been giving this thought all afternoon, so there’s some anxiety to see if we can put my jumbled thoughts to paper and have them make sense.”

“ Katie , tell us what you recall,” Sebastian said. “ Miss Gowans , perhaps you can interpret her thoughts onto the paper.”

“ Please call me Paula , Lord Soren ,” Paula suggested. “ I’m already nervous enough.” She chuckled. “ I hope I can rise to the challenge.”

“ Very well, but I insist you call me Sebastian . And I am certain you will do very well. Katie has told me how talented you are.”

Paula blushed becomingly, and Katie couldn’t help but notice the slight frown on Sir Nelson’s face as he glanced between Paula and Sebastian .

“ And I insist that you both call me Nelson ,” Sir Nelson said abruptly. “ Everyone else does.”

“ Thank you, Nelson ,” Katie said with a smile.

“ Very well,” Paula added in rather a stiff tone.

Katie caught the irritated look Paula shot at Nelson . Nelson was Sebastian’s friend and Sebastian trusted him completely, and yet for some reason, Paula , who was usually so affable and quick to smile had been rather prickly toward him at dinner. The dowager had placed Paula next to Nelson and Katie had seen them exchange only a few stilted words but not much else.

She took a sip of her sherry and thought it best to begin with her description. Perhaps as the evening progressed, Paula would soften her view of Nelson .

“ It might help if you close your eyes,” Sebastian suggested, his voice kind.

Katie nodded and closed her eyes. Taking a deep breath, she waded through her memories and tried to focus on what she remembered. “ I recall a tall, substantially sized man. He had black, almost obsidian eyes. His eyes haunted me for the longest time—and then in a recent dream, I saw the rest of his face.”

With her eyes closed, Katie heard the scratching sounds of charcoal on paper.

“ Do you remember the shape of his face, Katie ?” Sebastian asked.

“ I think he had a round face,” Katie said, her eyes still closed.

“ Any distinguishing features or marks on his face,” Nelson asked.

“ A scar—a thick white scar below his mouth, shaped like a moon.” Katie’s eyes flew open. “ I just remembered that. It wasn’t in my dream. How strange.”

“ It could be this process of sitting and actively visualizing the attacker’s face while someone sketches beside you that may have nudged your memory in the right

direction,” Sebastian said with a smile. “ I’ve seen this happen before.”

“ Remarkable ,” Katie said.

“ How is the sketch coming along, Paula ?” Nelson asked, leaning forward. He was sitting directly across from Paula and was clearly angling to see the sketch.

“ It’s coming along just fine, thank you very much, and I’d thank you not to peek,” she huffed, shifting in her seat to hide the drawing from his view.

“ Well , it’s a very good start,” Sebastian said, with a quick wink at Katie . “ Do you recall any other distinguishing features?”

Katie nodded. “ Thick eyebrows. They looked like one large, furry eyebrow.”

“ So , one brow across his face?” Paula asked.

“ Yes .” Katie shivered involuntarily.

“ All right, give me a moment to catch up.” Paula bit her lower lip as she sketched furiously, the charcoal scratching loudly on the paper. When she finished, she turned the pad toward Katie . “ Like this?”

Katie tilted her head and stared at the picture. “ Hmm ...something isn’t quite right.”

“ You’ve made his face heart-shaped, if you ask me,” chimed Nelson , who’d stood up and was now looking over Paula’s shoulder.

“ I didn’t ask,” Paula said, smiling tightly. “ But I’ll make it rounder.” She reached for a small scrap of cloth on the table and gently smeared the edges of the drawing.

“ His face was longer, not round like a circle, more like an egg shape, and he had a wide forehead with heavy lines across.”

“ What about his eyes, Katie ? What shape do you see?” Sebastian asked.

Katie closed her eyes again and pushed herself to remember. This is for Wendel . “ His eyes were beady, dark, scary.”

Paula sketched quickly. “ What about this?”

Katie opened her eyes again and examined the sketch. “ Yes ! That looks like his eyes. Well done, Paula .”

Paula smiled and shot Nelson a smug look.

Nelson arched a brow and shot a challenging look back.

Katie was becoming even more curious about their exchange.

“ What about his nose?” Sebastian asked, clearing his throat. “ Noses can be a very distinguishing feature.”

“ He had a bumpy nose,” Katie said, touching her own nose. “ And it was crooked as if it had once been broken,” she added. “ And at the bottom, it lifted a little with wide nostrils.”

“ How close did he get to you, Katie ?” Paula asked.

An involuntary shiver skittered down Katie’s spine at the thought. She shook her head. Too close. He rubbed himself on me . “ If only I had heeded Wendel’s order to hand over the pearls.” She wiped a tear from her eye. “ Perhaps he would not have

been killed.”

“ Are you all right?” Sebastian asked solicitously.

“ Dear , we can stop this if it’s too much for you,” the dowager said suddenly.

“ Thank you, Duchess , but I would like to forge ahead. We have to do this,” Katie said. “ So that we can catch him and his cohorts.”

“ That nose looks more like a camel’s hump than crooked,” Nelson said, causing Paula to glare in his direction.

“ I know what a crooked nose looks like,” she snapped. “ If you think you can do better, be my guest...” She held out a piece of charcoal.

Nelson held up his hands. “ It was a mere suggestion and not meant as a criticism.”

Katie looked between the bickering pair. For the life of her, she couldn’t reconcile their sniping. It was so unlike Paula .

“ What about the mouth, my dear? That’s a very important thing,” the dowager piped in.

“ His lips were thin. The white scar was bigger than his lips. I remember that because I barely knew he had lips beneath his large black mustache.” She gasped and her eyes widened. “ Oh my, he had a black mustache!”

“ Well done!” Sebastian said.

“ I can’t believe that I just remembered that.”

“ I have seen that before too,” Sebastian said. “ Sometimes what is buried in the mind suddenly comes to the forefront when one is in the process of describing a traumatic event.”

“ It is extraordinary,” Katie said, feeling encouraged by Sebastian’s smile. She took another deep breath and closed her eyes as she recalled the leader’s face. “ I think the mustache looked crooked—as though it might have been fake.”

“ So , he was possibly wearing a fake mustache. Did you say his hair was dark?” Sebastian asked.

“ Yes . It was black. And stringy. To his collar.”

Paula continued to sketch and after a few moments turned the pad toward Katie again.

“ That’s him!” Katie said with a shudder. “ It’s him.” Her eyes met Paula’s . “ You did it, Paula ! You sketched him. That is the leader of the trio of thieves who attacked Wendel and me last year.” Katie embraced her dear cousin. “ Thank you, Paula . Thank you so much.”

Paula hugged her tightly. “ You’re welcome, Katie . I’m so happy I can help.”

“ Here , here!” the dowager said. “ I second that. Well done, Paula and Katie .”

“ May we see the sketch?” Sebastian asked.

“ Of course,” Paula said, handing the pad to him.

Sebastian stared at the sketch and then passed it to Nelson .

Nelson's eyes narrowed as he examined the drawing. " Hmm ...this bloke looks familiar to me, only I cannot recall where and when I saw him."

" I hope it will come to you, my friend, it would be of immense help."

Nelson nodded. " Can you describe his stature, Katie ?"

" Yes , he was big and tall, with broad shoulders."

" Didn't you mention there was another man?" the dowager asked.

" Yes , Duchess . There was. The leader called him Doogan ."

They worked on the sketch of Doogan . Nelson drew closer to Paula's easel and Katie noticed she sketched faster, almost as if she were hurrying so she could get away from him. Paula's behavior around Sir Nelson was so unlike her friend. She made a mental note to ask Paula about it later.

In a short time, they produced a drawing they could use in their search for the killer.

" Looking at these sketches, both of these miscreants have struck a chord with me," Nelson said.

" They are the sort one might see at an alehouse in Covent Garden ," Sebastian added.

" That's it!" Katie's thoughts lit up like a flash of lightning.

" What is it, Katie ? Do you remember something else?" Paula asked.

" The Rooster ," she exclaimed. " I remember one of the thieves suggested they head to The Rooster ."

“ That’s wonderful, Katie ,” Sebastian said, taking her hand in his. “ I’m so proud of you.”

Katie’s breath caught at his words. His dark eyes were filled with such warmth, she could have gazed into them for hours.

“ Yes , of course,” Nelson interjected. “ The Rooster is a well-known public house that is frequented by the criminal element.”

“ And how would you know that?” Paula blurted.

“ I’m a man who knows a great many things,” Nelson countered, arching a dark brow.

“ Bravo , Katie ,” the dowager said, setting her empty brandy glass on the side table. “ I think that is enough for today. We’ve accomplished a great deal. Well done to all of you.”

The dowager was right. They had accomplished a lot today—first, the fencing lesson, where she’d learned so much, and now the sketches. She suddenly felt a wave of exhaustion wash over her. And a sudden worry that nightmares would plague her again now that she could see those faces.

“ Do you think the sketches will help?”

“ I am positive that between the sketches and knowing the alehouse the thieves frequent, we will find these men, Katie ,” Sebastian said.

“ And not to worry. Soren’s virtually unkillable,” said Nelson .

“ What does that mean?” asked Katie .

“ Sebastian has honed his fighting skills on the battlefield and his work as a security expert. He’s probably the best hand-to-hand fighter in the land,” explained Sir Nelson . “ He is almost unstoppable in combat.”

“ Pay no attention to him,” Sebastian said, frowning at his friend.

Nelson shrugged. “ I was only offering reassurance.”

Sebastian turned back to Katie and gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “ I promise, Nelson and I will be careful in our search for these men.”

Katie’s nerves felt raw, as a strange sense of foreboding swept over her. “ I — I hope so,” she said.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:24 pm

Chapter Seven

Three Nights Later

Sebastian was like a racehorse chomping at the bit. He wanted to find the bastards who'd caused Katie so much pain and heartache and had left her paralyzed with fear for more than a year.

“Several ships have come in today. The Rooster is likely full of riffraff that came in with the tide,” Sebastian said as his carriage traveled swiftly through the London streets. “With luck, Doogan —will be there.”

“Let's hope he has coin in his pockets for several mugs of ale,” Nelson added. “It's been three nights and no sign of him yet.”

“By the by, your man certainly came through with these clothes.” Sebastian glanced down at the shabby coat and trousers they had worn on their late-night patrols. “I must thank him with a jug of his favorite ale.”

“Just get him some fresh kippers, he loves those above all else.”

Sebastian chuckled at Nelson's description of his head footman, who'd acquired the nickname Kipper because of his fondness for the fish. “And I thank you for foregoing your nightly visit to your mistress and spending this night with me.”

Nelson shrugged. “I don't visit her every night. We have a firm understanding. Our relationship is quite free of entanglements.”

Sebastian grinned at his friend's seeming indifference. After watching Nelson and the lovely Miss Gowans bicker back and forth most of the night, he was curious at Nelson's sudden change of heart about his mistress. "Well, entanglement or not, I'm glad to have you with me this night."

"You don't think I'd let you have all the fun, should a fight break out, do you?"

Sebastian knew that was Nelson's way of saying he would cover his back. "Thank you, friend. I have an overwhelming need to look for the scum that did this to her."

"You mean the beautiful Miss Latham?" Nelson said.

Sebastian was silent for a long moment. "I know what you're thinking—and you can un-think it. I have no intention of marrying. Not for a long time. My work takes me all over. And that is my life at present."

"Then, if that's how you feel, you'd best watch yourself around Miss Latham. I see the way she looks at you, with those big blue eyes. Latham would give you a good bashing if he thought you were dallying with his sister's feelings. I'm not sure that his anger wouldn't give him the edge."

"I hear you. And I assure you, there is nothing to be concerned about," Sebastian replied. The trouble was, more and more, Katie consumed his thoughts. Was he merely feeling protective over Katie? It made his blood boil when he saw the completed sketches of the men who'd accosted her.

The leader, in particular.

Katie had not shared everything with him, but men like that had no respect for women. Sebastian's thoughts had gone to a very dark place as he pictured what they might have done or tried to do to Katie. But he had to push those thoughts aside. No

matter how protective he felt toward her, no matter how much her beauty beguiled him, no matter how sweet and charming she was, he had to focus on the task at hand—tracking down and capturing the men who attacked her and killed Wendel Colborne .

For now, he needed to shelve his feelings towards her and find the man who helped with Colborne's murder.

“ Tuck your hair into your cap,” Sebastian said, pulling his own hat down as the carriage came to a stop. Sebastian had instructed his driver to let them off far enough away from the docks so they wouldn't be seen descending from the conveyance. He pulled up the collar on his patched-up coat as he and Nelson strode toward the row of public houses located near the docks. The two of them resembled typical ship hands heading out for a mug or two of ale.

A few minutes later, they were seated in a darkened corner of The Rooster , each with a tankard of ale in hand.

“ This could be our lucky day,” Nelson said in a low voice.

“ Do you see him?”

“ Tucked back in the corner with a buxom barmaid on his lap. Dark hair and dark complexion.”

“ Well done,” Sebastian said. He lifted his tankard and took a sip. “ He's seated next to the back door. We'll have to make sure he doesn't bolt for it.”

Nelson snorted. “ While he has that lap piece, I don't think he plans to go anywhere.”

“ I'll block the door. You ask him nicely to leave with us,” Sebastian suggested.

A few minutes later, they stood outside the bar with Doogan , the tall beanpole who matched Paula's second drawing.

“ That was easier than I anticipated,” Sebastian said under his breath.

“ So , what's the job? Ye said ye have work fer me,” Doogan demanded, with his arms folded across his chest.

“ In a manner of speaking. Think of it as re-work . We want you to tell us about a job you pulled off in front of the Drury Lane Theatre over a year ago. A toff and his woman. When she refused to give up her pearls to your leader, he stabbed the poor sod.”

Doogan's eyes widened, and he took a step back, causing Sebastian to grab his shoulder. Nelson stood behind Doogan , neatly pinning the thief between them.

“ I see you remember that night. You and your friends killed a man who was a well-known respected bloke in Society . Did you think all those powerful toffs would have forgotten that?”

“ No one was supposed to die,” Doogan whined. “ Else , me and Gummy wouldn't 'ave 'elped 'im.”

“ And who is him ?” Nelson asked, taking a menacing step closer to the now cringing thief. “ Gummy doesn't sound like the name of a ringleader. Who's the one who planned it?”

“ He'll kill me if I tell,” Doogan said. “ Ain't never met no one like 'im. He's dangerous. Got no soul, I tell ye.”

“ And you may hang for the murder if you don't tell us more than that,” Nelson said.

Doogan's grubby hands slid to his neck and his face twisted into a grimace. " All I know is, Gummy and I thought we was just supposed to rob a toff and his chit. He did the killing. We had nothin' to do with the dandy dyin'."

" What is his name?" Sebastian asked in a steely voice.

" I - I can't tell ye, or I'm done fer," Doogan stammered.

" Tell me his name or you'll have more to fear this very night," Sebastian said, lifting the now trembling man by the collar.

" Rosco . He goes by the name Rosco ," Doogan squeaked out. " I only see him when he comes looking for help in one of his jobs. He pays better 'n most others 'round here."

" Tell us about the toff and his chit. They were targeted, weren't they?" Sebastian demanded.

Doogan's face twisted in pain. " Yes . Yes , they was. We were waitin' fer them. We tried a few times to get them and then that night Rosco broke the gas lamps on Drury Lane , we figured no carriage driver would want to wait there on that dark corner. And we was lucky the toff walked into our trap.

" You were lucky, eh?" Nelson growled, shoving Doogan from behind. " You were lucky to get the chance to murder a man in cold blood?"

" No ! No ! No !" Doogan shook his head. " I told ye both, that Rosco told us there would be nobody killed. And then he killed the bloke—for nothing."

" You're coming with us," Sebastian said bluntly. " And if you try to leave, I'll break your legs."

“ I’d listen to him. He’s not his usual charming self at the moment,” Nelson suggested.

Doogan drew up. “ What’s goin’ to ’appen to me?”

Sebastian lifted him once more by the collar. “ I’m having you locked up. Prinny has become interested in this murder—you killed a peer and the nephew of a prominent judge in one of the common law courts. You cannot believe that bodes well for you.”

“ I didn’t kill him,” Doogan protested again.

“ But you did help Rosco to rob the couple and you didn’t go to the authorities after, either,” Sebastian said. “ But if you help us now— I will put a good word in for you. I can make no promises. But anything is better than swinging at the end of a rope. Right ?”

Doogan ran his hand along his neck. “ There’s a place in the Blackfield Cemetery where he goes sometimes. He bragged about bringing the women up there.”

“ What do you mean, the women ?” Nelson asked.

“ I told ye, Rosco is dangerous. I’ve heard rumors that he kills them and buries them there. He takes ’em to the old gatekeeper’s cottage first. I never done anything like that, but Gummy and I met Rosco there the first time we worked for him.” Doogan expelled a breath. “ He’ll kill me if he finds out I snitched.”

“ We won’t tell. But you aren’t finished helping us, either. Where’s Gummy ?”

“ I dunno...and that’s the truth. Haven’t seen him in weeks.”

“ Fine . That’s enough for tonight. Let’s go.” They walked a visibly shaking Doogan

to the corner where Sebastian's carriage was waiting. "No . 4 Bow Street ," Sebastian said to his driver.

Nelson opened the door to the carriage and shoved Doogan inside.

" We're going to keep you somewhere nice and safe," Sebastian said. " You may become useful again."

Rosco opened her cell and walked in, kicking the door closed behind him. " I'm back, Endora ."

" I'm sick of this filthy cell." Endora flung the paper she'd been reading to the floor. " You say you have clout here, yet you have yet to find me a more suitable chamber. I want a larger room, one that matches my station in life." She pouted. " You promised me. I want a canopied bed—not that ridiculous excuse for a bed." She pointed to the unmade narrow bed with its dingy sheets. " And an Aubusson carpet, not that flimsy thing," she said, scowling at the threadbare rug.

Rosco instinctively closed his eyes and covered his ears, trying to shut out her shrill voice. Lately , he was finding it more and more of a challenge to coax her out of her dark moods. Endora had picked up exactly where she'd left off that morning when he shut the door behind him.

" You're not listening to me!" she whined. " You never listen to me!"

" You're in the bloody Tower , woman!" he said, losing his temper. " A convict. You killed two husbands with arsenic—and don't bother to deny it. You're lucky they put you in here."

" Lucky ? Lucky am I ?" She stood and began to pace. " How am I lucky? I'm in here because of that meddling old woman and the Lathams ."

“ You avoided the hangman’s noose, En ...dor...a ,” he said, deliberately drawing out her name. “ I’d say that qualifies as luck.”

She threw a scowl at him and continued to pepper him with questions. “ Well ? Did you do what I asked? Are those two buffoons back in town? Have you been following the chit’s movements? We have to know what her routine is.”

How he wished Endora would stop pestering him. Between catering to the wealthy prisoners and doing her bidding, he was exhausted.

She stopped pacing and pointed an accusing finger at him. “ You’re keeping something from me. I recognize that look on your face. I’ve seen it before when I mention Katie Latham . Does that tart arouse you more than I do? Do you want to make her your lover?” She threw up her hands in the air. “ And after everything I do for you,” she screamed in her shrill voice. “ Do you honestly think sweet Miss Latham would turn her attention to you?” Endora threw her head back and laughed. “ She likes pretty fair-haired boys, not brutish goliaths like you.”

She continued to cackle as she pointed out his physical faults.

“ You go too far, woman,” Rosco yelled, clenching and unclenching his hands.

“ Stop acting like a petulant child,” she snapped as she strode to the small window. Looking out, she uttered another curse. I can barely see the courtyard. I should have a better view...”

His anger was beginning to boil. Her favorite pastime of late was berating him and complaining about her quarters. Ignoring him. Talking with her back to him. Like she always did.

She whirled around. “ You haven’t been spending enough time with me lately. Why

do you run to Mayfair every chance you get?"

"To do your bidding," he growled.

"I doubt that!" she screeched. "You have some sort of fetish for the young tart! Had you followed my orders, I wouldn't be reading about her in the Tattle, every damn day."

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" Rosco yelled, picking up a chair near the door and flinging it against the wall, splintering it in pieces.

I hate her! I hate her! I hate her! Rosco eyed her lank hair. It was once a rich burnished red. It was the first thing that drew me to her. Now, it hangs dirty, matted, and wild about her shoulders.

He couldn't understand it. He'd given her brushes and combs, perfumes, soaps. He'd even managed to steal a brass tub for her to bathe in. But when she took to one of her moods, she would go weeks without washing, and still, she would rant and rave at him.

He loved her. He'd loved her from the first moment he'd laid eyes on her. From the first moment she'd called him into this chamber, she stood naked, in all her glory, tempting him with her lush beauty, making him want her more than anything else.

Even now, when she rants at me in that ugly voice, she is still beautiful.

I love her.

I hate her.

How can I feel both at the same time?

“What a dullard you are,” she said, continuing to deride him. Then , she laughed.

Just like the others... When did she become like them? They all laughed at me too, at first. But they soon learned. I saw to that.

“You’re useless,” she raged.

“I told you, I was spying on the girl,” Rosco said, his teeth clenched. “I went to see if she’s back at all the parties like it says in your silly paper.” He wanted to tell her how much he cared about her, but she wouldn’t stop the incessant insults. “The Latham girl has a new toff. I didn’t recognize him. A tall bastard.”

Endora spun around. Her face was a twisted picture of hatred. “I hate her. And I hate you for not having killed her. Her brother and his wife ruined my life. And her fiancé’s uncle put me here. I wanted them all to pay. She should have died with Colborne , so they would all know the pain they caused me. Had you not botched the whole thing up at the theater, they would have felt the sting of retribution. But no! Instead , you did half a job. You say you love me, but you failed me. You always fail me. Just like every other man I’ve ever known.”

“Enough !” he roared, lunging at her. He lifted her in his arms and threw her onto the bed. “No more talking!”

He rolled her onto her back and straddled her, his hands slipping around her neck.

She was still flushed from all her ranting but now she wore that seductive smile he liked. Good . He wanted her to smile.

“Is this a new thing we’re trying?” Her voice was husky as her hands found their way to his pants.

“ Yes . It’s something new. Do you like it?” He pressed against her as he added more pressure.

“ Yes .” She began to breathe heavily.

Finally , he would make her truly his. No more ranting. No more raving. She would belong to him and only him. Just like the others...

He added more pressure. And her eyes began to bulge.

“ I —can’t—breathe...” she rasped.

He smiled as he pressed his fingers around her neck.

How beautiful you look.

Just like the others...

When he didn’t hear anything, Rosco pulled back, but Endora kept staring at him—no longer mocking him. He leaned down and didn’t feel her breath. Noooo !” he screamed and pulled her body close. “ She did this. She killed you.”

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Chapter Eight

Three Days Later

“ My dear,” the dowager said as Millie fastened the fencing jacket over Katie’s day dress. “ When Sebastian arrives for your lesson, Paula and I will leave for a brisk walk to take in some air. I find it good for my constitution. Millie will remain outside the door, as she’s been doing.”

“ Your Grace , Miss Latham , Lord Soren has arrived,” Franklin announced at the entrance to the ballroom.

Katie’s breath caught as the tall, handsome man stepped from behind the butler. They had practiced for a week now. She felt more confident handling both weapons—the epee and her parasol. And she really liked it when the dowager and Paula left her here. Katie had noticed that since her duties were lighter at the dowager’s, Millie tended to take advantage and nap when no one was looking. But since the advantage had been hers in the form of time with Sebastian , she would not complain. Or say anything to Millie .

“ Good morning, Sebastian . We are so glad to see you,” the dowager said with a thump of her cane as she walked to the door to greet him.

Sebastian smiled. “ Good morning, Duchess , Katie , Paula . I trust you are all well this morning?”

“ Good morning, Sebastian ,” Katie said, her voice sounding breathless to her ears.

“ Good morning,” Paula echoed with a smile.

I can see you are ready to begin,” Sebastian said to Katie .

“ Katie has been practicing her moves this morning,” the dowager said. “ I helped as much as I could. But I’m afraid my advice was not as meaningful as yours has been. Although I’m very pleased with her progress.”

“ Indeed , I agree,” Sebastian said with a smile. “ Katie has a strong will and is a most determined pupil.”

Katie beamed at the compliments, the heat of a blush warmed her cheeks.

“ I asked Franklin to set a refreshment table in the corner.” The dowager nodded towards the window. “

“ Thank you, Duchess .”

“ Come along, Paula ,” the dowager said with a thud of her cane. “ It is time for our morning walk. Millie will be right outside the door in case you need anything.” The dowager turned and walked out the door. Paula gave them a quick wave, then hurried after the old woman.

“ Please take your time, Sebastian . I need to take a moment and have a glass of lemonade.” Katie had been practicing for the past hour under the duchess’ tutelage. She had proven to be quite a taskmaster. The dowager would call out instructions and Katie would follow them. It wasn’t as effective as actual fencing, but it helped build her reflexes.

“ It’s good to see you smiling,” Sebastian said. “ Fencing seems to agree with you.”

“ It’s good to be smiling,” Katie said. “ And it feels wonderful to learn something that gives me control over my life again,” she said, setting down the epee and pouring herself a glass of lemonade. “ Would you like a glass?”

“ Yes , thank you,” he said. “ How was your practice this morning?”

“ It all feels more comfortable to me. And I also practiced with the foil in my parasol to make sure I’m comfortable with that, as well.”

“ Excellent idea,” Sebastian said. He took a few sips of his drink, then set down the glass. “ Did you have any trouble sleeping last night? Any more bad dreams?”

Katie shook her head. “ I slept like a baby, to be honest.” She had been surprised that she hadn’t had any nightmares, considering everything she’d recalled while Paula sketched the men’s faces.

“ That is good to hear. And it might be because you were able to clear your mind of some of that darkness that was buried inside. Perhaps you are beginning to heal, Katie ,” he said softly.

She heaved a deep sigh and blinked back sudden tears. “ T -thank you for everything you’ve done for me.”

He reached into his pocket and pulling out a handkerchief, handed it to her.

“ And thank you for your endless supply of these,” she said with a chuckle as she dabbed at her eyes.

“ I have plenty more.” He grinned, patting his pocket.

“ But I also wanted to thank you for taking the time to teach me, Sebastian . I cannot

tell you what this means to me,” Katie said. “ For so long, I’ve been a prisoner of my fear. Knowing how to defend myself is—well, it’s a liberating feeling. I don’t know how I will ever be able to thank you enough.”

“ Just knowing that you are feeling stronger every day is all the reward I need,” he said, his deep voice taking on a timber that made a delicious shiver tickle her spine.

“ That is most kind of you,” she said, raising the glass of lemonade to her lips in the hopes that the sudden flush of heat infusing her cheeks would dissipate.

Oh , Lord . How can I feel a shiver one moment and a rush of heat the next simply by being in his presence?

Katie drained her glass as Sebastian strode to the other end of the table and began to unbutton his jacket. As she poured herself another glass of lemonade, she peeked at him from the corner of her eye, watching him unbutton his waistcoat. She took a few more sips as she watched him roll up the sleeves of his shirt, his muscles bunching and shifting as he moved.

How different Sebastian was from Wendel . Throughout her engagement to Wendel , Katie had never seen him without his waistcoat, let alone his shirtsleeves. Wendel had always been impeccably dressed in the latest fashion for men, with nary a speck of lint on his coat. Sebastian on the other looked as though he was more comfortable in shirtsleeves, and yet he cut an impressive figure in his dark evening clothes and moved like a graceful panther the night of the Clarence ball, as they danced to the waltz...

“ Now then, shall we begin,” Sebastian said, pulling her from her thoughts.

Katie felt a heat permeate her cheeks and she quickly turned away, busying herself by pouring yet another glass of lemonade and taking a few more sips. “ My , I seem to

be so very thirsty this morning,” she said in a raspy voice.

“ Fencing is one of many rigorous sports,” he said, his lips curving up in a roguish smile.

I will not think about other rigorous sports he has engaged in. I will not. I will not...

“ Ready ?” he asked in that velvety voice again.

“ Ready !” she said more loudly than she’d intended.

“ Allez !” he said.

“ En garde !” she replied, advancing and then lunging.

They sparred for a good half hour and then stopped to rest for a few moments.

“ Katie , I know you have carried a great burden on your shoulders, but you could not have done anything to stop those men from killing your fiancé.

“ You're suggesting that had I given him my pearls, he would have still killed Wendel ?” She could feel the tears welling in her eyes.

“ If what I suspect is true, this man is a killer,” Sebastian interjected.

“ Why do you say that?”

“ Last night, Nelson and I took the sketches to the dock area, where The Rooster is. We found the man you called Doogan based on his picture. It was a perfect likeness, by the way. Based on what he told us, we believe the man who killed Lord Colborne was deliberate.”

“ Th —the man in my dreams terrifies me. For so long, the faces and the scene looked foggy. I couldn’t even describe him. But since that night at the Clarence ball, the dreams have returned. Even though they are more intense, I’ve been able to see the faces.” She swiped at a tear and looked up at him.

“ It’s helped tremendously that you can recall the faces. I think we are making progress. While I have no reason to suspect he would come after you, I need you to promise me you will be vigilant and have a footman with you when you leave the house.” He nodded at the parasol. “ While I think you are developing your talent nicely, nothing replaces having someone there to watch out for you.”

“ Is ...is he still a danger to me?” Sir Nelson had called this tall, formidable man standing by her side unkillable .

“ Why did Sir Nelson call you unkillable?”

Sebastian’s face was suffused with a deep shade of red and she couldn’t remember the last time she had seen a man blush, especially such a big man. It was most endearing.

“ We have been friends since boyhood. And have always been competitive. But when we joined the war and fought against Napoleon , we sparred in our spare time—to hone our fighting ability. The battlefield was fierce and meaner than I had ever imagined. You not only fight to survive, but you fight to kill. Over time, I earned a reputation for defeating the enemy, especially in hand-to-hand combat. I don’t know who began calling me unkillable, only a fool believes he cannot be defeated. I never did.”

At that moment, Katie realized she couldn’t bear it if anything happened to him. Beyond her attraction to him, she felt a deeper pull. She’d felt it from the first moment her eyes had met his across the ballroom. And it had only grown deeper

since then. She wondered if she'd somehow transmitted her thoughts to him, as he took a step closer to her and reached out to cup her face.

Sebastian glanced at the door before stepping closer.

“ I believe the duchess and Paula are most likely still on their walk,” she murmured.

He pulled her near and gently cupped her face. “ Katie ...” he began, his voice sounding husky and ragged. “ Would you mind if I kissed you? You see, I just can't seem to help myself— I've imagined myself kissing you so many times.”

No , I don't mind at all. In fact, I desperately want you to kiss me, Sebastian .

For the first time, she noticed specks of green in his sable brown eyes. She marveled at the masculine beauty of his face. Marveled at everything about him. Most of all, she marveled at how he made her feel. Cherished . Protected . Since there had been no movement or sound outside the door, Katie assumed Millie might have dozed off.

Even if Millie is awake, I don't care ...

So strong was her yearning to be in his arms, it felt like a craving. She craved the heat of his touch—the touch she remembered from their waltz. But more than that she craved his lips on hers.

“ Yes ,” she whispered. “ I would like?—”

Before she could finish speaking, Sebastian lowered his lips to hers.

Her heart pounded in her chest, and her knees felt so wobbly she feared they would buckle on her. But this was no dizzy spell from anxiety. She did not fear her reaction, she welcomed it. The heat of his hands on her back sent butterflies swirling in her

stomach. Her eyes fluttered open and she noticed the beautiful, long dark eyelashes that fanned out beneath his eyes.

I want to know more about this wonderful man—this man who cares enough to give me fencing lessons because it is important to me. This man has made me feel safe and strong at the same time. I want to remember these moments with him forever. I want to see him like this in my dreams.

His tongue gave a gentle nudge to her lips, and she opened up to him as a flower does to the heat of the sun, savoring the feel of his tongue in her mouth and the heat of his breath on her face. She loved the taste of him. A woodsy taste mixed with lemonade. She sighed and pressed herself closer to him. His responding groan made her feel heady with a blossoming passion she'd never felt before.

She vaguely heard the sound of footsteps outside the ballroom. Sebastian pulled away, his breathing deep and heavy. His forehead touched hers. “ Thank you for a most unforgettable kiss,” he whispered.

Katie blinked, feeling quite dazed. “ You're welcome.”

He chuckled and kissed the tip of her nose. Stepping away he picked up their foils just as Millie stepped into the ballroom.

“ Miss Latham ,” Millie said from the doorway. “ Luncheon is ready in the dining room. The dowager duchess and Miss Gowans are awaiting you and Lord Soren .”

“ We'll be there right away,” Katie said, doing her best to slow her racing heartbeat.

“ Do you need my help, Miss Latham ?” Millie asked.

“ I'll assist Miss Latham with her vest,” Sebastian volunteered. He had already

slipped on his waistcoat and buttoned it.

“ We will be directly behind you, Millie ,” Katie said.

“ Very good, milady,” Millie said with a bob and then turned to leave.

“ I believe I have worked up quite an appetite,” Katie said as Sebastian helped her remove the vest.

Eyes sparkling, Sebastian smiled down at her. “ As have I , Katie .”

Chapter Nine

Three Days Later

Katie stood in the middle of her bedchamber, still in her nightgown, holding her parasol. Pressing the button on the underside of the handle, she slid out the foil. It felt light in her hand. She moved her wrist and swirled the epee left and then right. She smiled, pleased with her progress. Over the past week, the foil had become more comfortable in her hand, and her anxiety had lessened. Now, when she stepped out of the dowager's townhouse, she felt almost like her old self.

Or rather, my new self.

She swallowed the sudden lump in her throat as her thoughts turned to Wendel. She had loved Wendel but realized she no longer thought of him daily. For the first time in more than a year, she had begun to let go of the burden of pain and guilt that she'd carried on her shoulders. And wonder of wonders, she'd begun to envision a happy future for herself.

A different life than she had envisioned with Wendel.

Her love for Wendel had been warm and familiar. Wendel had been her best friend. They'd shared a lot in common, and they enjoyed spending together. Marriage to Wendel would have been good—a life of contentment.

But she'd changed a lot over the past year, and she'd come to realize that perhaps she wanted more from life...and more from love.

And with that realization came the awareness that she was falling in love—and it felt different from before. It was Sebastian who filled her mind and heart. She'd never experienced such feelings before. From the first moment they'd met at the Clarence ball, she'd felt an immediate connection to him. A spark that had become brighter and stronger with every conversation, every moment spent with Sebastian . And when he kissed her, the spark had flared into a flame of yearning.

Closing her eyes, she imagined fencing with Sebastian , then waltzing, then kissing. She imagined how just the touch of his hand made heat spiral through her. She loved the way he looked at her as though she were the only woman in the world. She loved his smile—charming one moment and sensual the next. She loved his kisses! Lord , she adored his kisses. She craved them even more than she craved chocolate. And that was saying something. She'd concluded that Sebastian's kisses were even better than chocolate.

“ Good morning,” Paula said, sticking her head in the door.

With a jolt, Katie spun around. “ Oh ! You startled me.” She'd been so lost in thought that she hadn't heard the bedroom door open.

“ Daydreaming ?”

Katie smiled. “ Yes and no.”

“ That's a provocative statement.” Paula grinned.

“ I was just thinking about how used to the feel of the foil I've gotten,” Katie said, slipping the epee back into the parasol.

“ It seems you're getting used to more than that,” her cousin teased. “ Do you expect Lord Soren this morning?” Paula asked, taking a seat on Katie's bed. “ For fencing

lessons,” she added quickly.

Katie’s heart hitched . I wish! I’m not sure I can wait to see him again. “ He mentioned having an appointment today that he needed to attend but asked if we might skip our lesson and take a drive to Hyde Park later this afternoon.

Katie hoped she would see him. He’s on my mind all the time—and I cannot deny my heart. Memories of his tender kisses and teasing voice occupied her thoughts day and night and were a welcome distraction from the nightmares she had suffered since Wendel’s death.

“ Let’s take advantage of the day,” Paula suggested. “ The weather is mild, and the sun might even make an appearance. How do you feel about walking to Gunter’s for chocolate? The cook’s chocolate is delicious, but nothing compares to Gunter’s . It’s really not far, and if you carry your parasol, I should feel most protected,” Paula said, grinning.

“ Cheeky thing!” Katie said, nudging her cousin with her elbow. “ I’d love to go to Gunter's , but perhaps we should consult the dowager first.” Those men had still not been caught, and she had promised Sebastian she would remain cautious.

“ Well , I for one am glad to be given a day off from examining the dowager’s silk scarf collection,” Paula declared. “ You realize it was her code for allowing you time alone with Lord Soren .”

Katie felt a blush warm her cheeks. She had suspected but had not known for sure. “ So , you didn’t actually look at scarves?”

Paula shook her head, and they both burst into laughter.

“ I must admit to being very impressed with her knowledge of fencing,” Katie said. “

The woman is amazing. Even before Sebastian arrives for our lesson, she's already put me through my paces."

"And the way she swings that cane of hers—I would not want to cross her on a dark street at night!" Paula said.

"Yes, she is probably the most vibrant person I know—across all ages," observed Katie.

"Ladies, you may go as long as you take my footman, Jason, and Millie," the dowager said a short while later. It hadn't taken Katie long to get ready, with Paula nipping at her heels.

"Until this business with those horrible men that killed Lord Colborne is cleared up, I think we must take precautions, now that Katie is out and about again."

"Thank you, Duchess. We promise not to be long," Katie said. "And with Jason and Millie, we should be fine."

"Good. Don't forget your parasol, dear," the dowager said.

"Thank you, Duchess. My parasol goes wherever I go, now." Katie smiled.

A few minutes later they were on their way to Gunter's. Katie wore her blue pelisse against the slight chill in the air. And she carried her trusty parasol firmly in hand. She was almost tempted to thump it along the sidewalk just as the dowager did with her cane.

"I can almost taste the delicious chocolate," Paula said, smacking her lips.

Millie and Jason were about to cross the road to Gunter's when a black hackney

pushed its way forward between the foursome, cutting off Jason's and Millie's view of Katie and Paula , and halted. Other vehicles followed, so Katie and Paula paused on the curb to wait for them.

“ How rude!” Paula said, looking for Millie and Jason .

“ Yes , very,” Katie said, gripping her parasol tightly in her hand as a sense of dread came over her. The hackney had essentially blocked Jason's and Millie's access, so they would have to go around it once the traffic slowed. Katie and Paula stepped around the hackney to wait for their friends.

It happened so quickly. The door to the hackney opened and a big man with a black hat lowered over his face leaped out and grabbed her, hefting her up and almost throwing her into the conveyance.

Before Katie could even retrieve the foil from her parasol, he ripped the parasol from her hand and tossed it into the carriage. She screamed and tried to push her way out, but he shoved her back with such force she hit her head on the corner of the seat.

“ Stop ! Help ! They have Katie !” Paula shrieked, trying to pull her friend away from the man's grip. “ Somebody , help her!”

Dazed from the hit to the head, Katie blinked furiously and saw the horrible man forcefully kick Paula to the ground, where she crumpled in a heap.

“ Help —” Katie's scream was cut off as the kidnapper shoved a foul-tasting rag into her mouth and shoved her mouth.

“ Let's go, Gummy !” he called out.

A cold ripple of shock moved through Katie . She hadn't heard that voice in a year.

But she would never forget it.

The driver cracked his whip, and the carriage hackney lurched forward.

Her vision swam, and she struggled to stay focused and calm as the big man tied her hands and feet.

“ Stop ! Stop the hackney!” she heard Jason shout.

The carriage careened to a stop so suddenly, she would have fallen off the seat if the kidnapper hadn't grabbed her and kept her firmly in place.

She heard Gummy yelling and the sound of a whip cracking and an earsplitting scream of pain before the carriage jerked forward and began to hurtle down the street.

“ Mmm ...mmm...” Over and over, Katie tried to spit the foul rag from her mouth. It was him—the man who killed Wendel . Her worst nightmare was happening. The man drew her close to him and she could feel his sour breath on her face as he spoke.

“ I finally have you,” he said with a grin. “ And I will make you pay for what you did to her. I will finish what I left undone.”

Terror gripped her heart as Katie realized what he meant. She struggled against the bindings and screamed behind the gag, but all to no avail. She had no idea if Paula , Jason , or Millie were hurt. And she would likely never find out. She would never see her family again.

Sebastian ! If only she had waited at the townhouse for Sebastian to arrive.

The kidnapper suddenly forced another cloth over her face and panic overwhelmed her as she fought like a wild horse to escape. Holding her in a vice-like grip, he

pressed the cloth to her face. She heard a cork pop from a bottle. Unable to move her head, she screamed behind the gag as she watched him pour several drops of a pungent, sweet-smelling liquid onto the rag and hold it over her mouth and nose.

Oh , my God ! He's going to kill me...like he killed Wendel . She shook her head wildly and her eyes filled with tears . Her last thought was of Sebastian before blackness descended.

Sebastian leaned against the squabs of his friend's coach as he and Nelson traveled from White's . Nelson and his brother were planning to expand their successful fencing school to other cities. Sebastian was interested in investing, and the three of them met a fourth potential investor at White's . He hated to skip their morning fencing lesson, but he had promised to take her on a carriage ride to Hyde Park later that afternoon.

He and Nelson had also promised a full report on their investigation so far. They were on their way to the dowager's now, where he would be able to see Katie . As his mind often did these days, he thought about Katie .

Sebastian could no longer deny having feelings for Katie . His relationships had always offered a diverting romp with delightful mistresses who, like he, had no desire to marry and were quite happy with a brief but pleasurable liaison.

But with Katie , everything was different. From the first moment he laid eyes on her he was drawn to her beauty, the vulnerability in her eyes, and yet he admired her inner strength and her determination to learn to fence. He'd seen the changes in her in the short time he'd been teaching her. But more than that he could feel a change in him. He who had declared had no desire to marry had begun to think about just that. The brunette beauty with the mesmerizing blue eyes had mesmerized his heart.

They arrived at the townhouse in time to see Paula and Millie in hysterics, running up

the steps with a footman in tow. Cold dread gripped his heart as Sebastian threw open the door and leaped out, with Nelson on his heels. “ Where’s Miss Latham ?” he roared.

“ Someone took her,” Jason answered.

Sebastian eyed the footman and noticed the bloodied red welt across his face and the rips in his jacket. “ What happened?” he thundered.

“ My lord, Millie and I were crossing the street to Gunter’s , just behind Miss Latham and Miss Gowans . A hackney suddenly barreled in behind the ladies, blocking us off. We heard Miss Gowans scream. But by the time we got to them, the kidnappers had thrown Miss Latham in the carriage, and they were getting away.

“ Jason tried to stop the horses and that horrid man cracked a whip across his face and kicked him away from the carriage. It was awful,” Millie cried.

“ The horrible man in black was huge. I’ve never been more afraid in my life. I — I tried to stop him, but I couldn’t,” Paula cried. “ Dear God ! They’ve taken Katie . They’ve taken her.”

“ Miss Paula tried to stop that brute, but he kicked her so hard she fell to the ground,” Millie said. “ I saw it happen just as Jason and I ran to the carriage.”

Nelson wrapped his arms around Paula . “ Are you all right?”

Paula gave a jerky nod. “ I’m fine, but I’m so afraid for Katie ,” she said, crumbling into his arms and sobbing.

The dowager came rushing outside. “ Heavens , what’s all this fuss about? And on the front steps?” she demanded. “ Millie , what happened? Paula ? Why are you

crying? And where is Katie ?”

“ Let’s go inside,” Sebastian said in a tight voice, as he and Nelson ushered everyone into the house. He needed to maintain a cool head. Katie was gone. The bastard took her. Katie ! A piercing pain stabbed his gut. Why hadn’t he insisted she stay home and not venture out without him? He had to find her. If she’s hurt, I’ll never forgive myself.

They explained to the duchess what happened. The dowager quickly and efficiently dealt with the situation.

“ Franklin , please ensure that Millie is taken to her room and that the doctor is called. I’d also like to have Jason’s face looked at,” the duchess said. “ Jason , can you tell me anything else?”

Jason shook his head. “ No , Your Grace . I’m so sorry, I wasn’t able to help Miss Katie . I’ll never forget what happened until the day I die.”

“ It’s all right, Jason . You were brave to try to stop them. We’ll get the doctor to sew up that cut on your face,” the dowager said in a shaking voice.

Of course! The cemetery! Jason’s comment had triggered Sebastian’s thoughts and he recalled Doogan telling them about the gatekeeper’s cottage at Blackfield Cemetery .

“ Your Grace , we found one of the men that were involved with Lord Colborne’s death,” Sebastian said. “ We need your help, but I don’t have time to explain. I have an idea where these men might have taken Kat — Miss Latham . I’ll need several of your footmen to help. Can you spare them?”

“ Of course! Whatever you need,” she replied. “ Do you need pistols? We have many here. My husband’s pistols are kept clean and ready for use.”

“ I have weapons in the carriage,” Nelson said.

“ Have them follow us to Blackfield Cemetery and meet us at the gatekeeper’s cottage,” Sebastian said.

“ I will. Just find her. Hurry ,” the dowager said, her eyes filling with tears.

“ Please be careful,” Paula said.

“ We will,” Nelson squeezed her hand.

“ Let’s go,” Sebastian said, already striding to the door.

Please let us get there in time. Sebastian could not imagine what his life would be like without Katie in it. I’m coming, Katie . I promise.

Nelson looked at him. “ We’ll get there, Sebastian . I promise,” Nelson said, echoing Sebastian’s thought.

Sebastian nodded as Nelson’s carriage sped along the road.

He would find those bastards and kill them with his bare hands.

Chapter Ten

Katie awoke with a gasp, breathing in through her nose, as she recalled struggling against her kidnapper, who'd muffled her breathing and rendered her unconscious with some noxious substance. She could still smell the acrid scent of the gag in her mouth. Trying to keep a level head, she realized that she was lying on a cold, dirty floor. She had no idea where she was and was thankful for the few rays of moonlight that filtered in through a window, giving her enough light to see that she was alone.

She tried to move but realized her hands were bound in front of her. With her eyes now adjusted to the darkness, Katie looked around her, trying to find something she could use to slice through the rope. Spying the rough edge of a table, she scooted across the floor and began to saw through the ropes on her wrists.

She bit her lip as she grazed her hands a few times but kept going until she was finally able to unravel the rope. Katie immediately ripped the nasty gag from her mouth. She stood on wobbly legs and searched for a weapon she could use. A sob of relief escaped her as she spotted her parasol across the room. She hurried over and grabbed it, thankful that the men who'd abducted her were somewhat dim-witted enough to bring the parasol with them. Perhaps they thought they could sell it for some quick coin.

Pressing the button on the underside of the handle, she withdrew the foil and walked to the door. She tried the doorknob, but it was locked.

Where were the men who had abducted her? Had they abandoned her here, hoping she would die in a ramshackle shed, tied up and with no food or water? Well, she

refused to give up without a fight. She strode to the window and peeked outside, hoping she could discern where she was, but all she saw were patches of dead grass around the shed and trees in the distance. Her nostrils flared and she detected a musty smell, but there was something else. Perfume ? How can that be? She looked around and noticed an old tarp in the corner near the window. She started toward it but heard voices outside.

She rushed back to the corner where she'd woken up, taking special care to conceal the foil beneath her skirts, where she could easily reach it. Retrieving the foul rag, she placed it back into her mouth, trying not to gag as she did so. Next , she wrapped her hands with the rope, hoping the men wouldn't notice the frayed ends. Willing her heart to stop pounding, Katie leaned back against the wall, slumped her head to the side, and closed her eyes to feign sleep—just as the door opened.

“ Look , Gummy , the chit is still out cold,” a deep, raspy voice said. “ She doesn't know what's in store for her.”

Gummy cackled. “ Maybe we can have a bit of sport. She don't even have to be awake.”

“ Never mind that just now, we have to attend to Endo —the widow. She's over here.”

Heavy footsteps followed by shuffling ones worked their way to the far corner of the room. Katie opened one eye to peek and saw them lift the dingy tarp she'd seen earlier. It had been dark over there, Katie recalled.

“ That's a dead body,” Gummy said.

“ That's the widow. I finally got her out of the Tower , and she's where she belongs...with me.”

Katie swallowed a gasp and kept as still as she could.

Oh Lord , I was unconscious, lying here for who knows how many hours with a dead woman in the corner.

Did they plan to kill her too and leave her under that tarp?

“ Where are you gonna put her?” Gummy asked.

“ You’ll know soon enough,” the big man said. “ By the way, I went to Doogan’s place, and he wasn’t there. What happened to him?”

Gummy shrugged. “ Maybe he’s gone to visit his mum in Spitalfields . I hear she’s been ailin’, and that boy do love his mum.” He pointed at the dead woman. “ If I’m gonna get stuck with Doogan’s duties, you’ll have ter pay me more, ’else Molly’ll ’ave my hide.” The stout man heaved a deep sigh. “ If only she’d find herself another bloke. She’s getting on m’nerves lately with all her grouching about money. ’ Sides , since I met Daisy , it’s too much work to go between The Rooster , where Molly works, and the Skinny Goat , where Daisy works. But I do like Daisy more. She’s got a body a man could get lost in.” He threw his head back and guffawed.

“ Heh , heh! Women can be more trouble than they’re worth,” the raspy voice said.

“ But ...but what happened to the widow? I thought you liked her,” Gummy pressed.

“ Of course I do! I love her, you dolt. But something had to be done about that screeching of hers. She was enjoying the bonbons I brung her and that rag she likes to read, and then all of a sudden she started shrieking at me...yelling like the others did. Callin ’ me names. I asked her to stop, but she kept on. It makes my head hurt so bad. So , I showed her how to be quiet. I put my hands ’round her neck, and she stopped. I could tell she liked it, though. She’s a wild minx, she is.”

Gummy chuckled. “ Those are the best kind. How did you get her out of the Tower ?”

“ I had to roll her up in that dingy old carpet she hated. But when she finds out the rug came in handy to help her escape, I’m sure she’ll change her mind.”

“ But ain’t she dead?” Gummy asked, obviously speaking of the widow.

“ Sleeping ,” the raspy voice corrected. “ And when she wakes, she’ll be happy because I finally got her out of that prison tower. When she wakes, we’ll have a big laugh. And she’ll be happy to see we finally got that skinny chit. She complained it weren’t enough that we killed Colborne . She wanted me to kill the Latham girl too. She wanted to make Latham and his whore, and that old crow suffer. And they will. Mark my words. Maybe she’ll even want ter kill the girl herself. She’ll like that.”

Oh my God ! The widow in the Tower is Endora Deville ! Or rather, she was Endora .

The hateful woman had succeeded in ruining Thomas and Frankie’s relationship years ago. Frankie was forced by her uncle to marry an elderly Earl who held his debts. As a result, Thomas had sailed the high seas, going from port to port with his shipping line for years, trying to escape his pain and anguish, all the while believing Frankie had left him. After five long years, they met again at the Duke of Clarence’s ball. Frankie was widowed, and Thomas was still unmarried. Katie’s eyes filled with tears as she recalled how happy the Lathams were when Thomas and Frankie had been able to heal the past and allow their love to bring them together once more.

Endora Deville had then tried once again to come between them, but this time she was caught with the dowager’s help. The widow had been investigated and arrested when it was revealed that she’d killed her first and second husband.

Katie’s heart thundered in her chest and she worried they could hear it. She fought to slow down her breathing.

He plans to kill me, too! I have to get out of here.

She heard a noise outside and prayed it was Sebastian . Did he even know she was missing? No , he had said he would see her later in the afternoon. Even if he hadn't shown up at the dowager's, she and Paula would have gotten word to him. But how in the world would he know where to find her? Katie knew he and Nelson were conducting their own investigation over the past few days since Paula had made those sketches, but he hadn't given her any details of what they'd found. Perhaps he didn't want to add to her anxiety when she was doing so well with her fencing lessons. But the dowager mentioned she wanted to speak to Sebastian and Nelson about it.

Oh , why didn't I ask Sebastian when I had the chance? Perhaps what they'd found out might have been useful to her now, when she so desperately needed to escape. But she'd been so caught up in her lessons, and truth be told, the magic of Sebastian's kisses.

You have no time to feel sorry for yourself!

With cold awareness, she realized she was on her own. She'd have to use everything she'd learned to save herself.

“ Someone's outside,” Gummy said. “ I'll go have a look.”

“ Fine , but hurry back. I'll need your help with the girl.”

Katie pretended to still be unconscious, she opened one eye just a sliver and watched Gummy walk past her, unlock the door, and leave. But she noticed he had left it open. She had to make her move. This could be the only chance she had. She peeked at the hulking man who stooped over the body in the corner, talking to it as if she were still alive.

It's now or never.

She was about to get up and make a run for it when a shadow moved in the open doorway. Oh , God ! I'm too late. But wait, the shadow was tall and lean, not short and squat. And then wonder of wonders, Katie saw Sebastian appear in the doorway. Her eyes widened and she must have moved and alerted him to her presence because he turned and looked directly at her. He held a finger over his mouth, instructing her to be quiet.

She would be as quiet as a church mouse. But inside she was giddy with relief. He had come for her!

“ Go !” he mouthed. But she couldn't leave him. Not now. Gummy would be back any moment and two men against one wasn't fair, even if Sebastian was strong and an excellent fighter.

He shook his head and held up his hand for her to stay put. Slowly , he approached the kidnapper huddled over the prone form in the corner and cleared his throat.

“ Shut up, Gummy , I don't want her to wake up. She's sleeping so peacefully. If she wakes up too sudden-like she gets crabby and will start yelling again. “

“ I'm not Gummy ,” Sebastian said.

The man turned and Sebastian plunged a fist into his gut and then leveled another blow with such force, it flattened him.

Sebastian reached down to grab him, but the man rolled to his feet, a lethal blade in his hand.

“ Katie , run,” Sebastian yelled as he faced down the killer. The two men moved in a

slow circle, staring at each other.

Katie cast off the ropes and gag. Reaching for her foil, she stood and was about to hurry over to Sebastian to toss him the epee when she was grabbed by the neck from behind and felt a blade against her neck.

“ I’ve got yer woman,” Gummy said, holding Katie from behind and pressing the tip of a knife to her throat.

“ Yer mine, now,” the brutish kidnapper said, pulling another blade from around his boot. “ Sit ,” he demanded, dragging a chair to the middle of the room. “ I plan to carve you up and let her watch.”

Sebastian sat down calmly. Katie watched in horror as the man she loved was about to get flayed alive. The kidnapper held a length of rope and reached for Sebastian’s hands. With a move so quick that Katie would have missed it had she blinked, Sebastian swiveled and kicked the man into the wall before springing back onto his feet.

The kidnapper was bigger and beefier than Sebastian . But Sebastian was taller. Katie knew his reputation as a fighter was legendary. But the kidnapper was a maniac and a cold-blooded killer and that made him very dangerous.

The two men circled each other once more until the kidnapper lunged with both knives but Sebastian did something that left Katie in awe. He leapt into the air and spun, kicking out his leg and landing a blow to the kidnapper’s chest with his boot. The kidnapper toppled backward, losing his grip on both blades. The knives skittered to the floor, where they landed below the window.

Realizing she still had the foil but could not use it, Katie remembered a move Sebastian had shown her. She’d made him show her several times since it required

him to get close and prayed she'd remember it when she so desperately needed it.

Slowly she allowed the foil to drop, feeling it hit noiselessly against her skirts. Without drawing attention from Gummy , she slowly moved her two hands up in front of her body, within range of her neck. He's not much bigger than me. Please , God , let this work.

In a flash, her hands came up, hitting Gummy's arms as hard as she could to push the knife away from her throat. She used the heel of her foot to strike him in the groin. When Gummy screamed, Katie yanked as hard as she could at the knife and kned him again between the legs.

She picked up her foil and rushed to Sebastian's side. The brute was groaning and beginning to shift on the floor.

“ Run , Katie . I mean it!” Sebastian yelled.

“ But I can help. I can tie his arms and legs.”

“ No . I want you to leave. Now !”

Not wanting Sebastian to see the tears in her eyes, she turned around and saw that Gummy had fled. Damn ! I should have tied him up instead.

The brute let out a low growl, and Katie turned back, fearing for Sebastian , but she moved forward, holding her foil ready to do battle, when Sebastian pulled out a pistol and aimed it at the kidnapper.

“ Move and I'll kill you. I want to kill you, so please do move.”

Sebastian had a gun? Why didn't he use it sooner? And then she realized something

he told her once when they were discussing guns over blades. Sebastian told her that a gun could be dangerous in a smaller space, especially when there were innocent people nearby who could get shot by a stray bullet.

Katie sighed with relief. Sebastian had everything under control.

“ I’ve got this one. Need any help?” a familiar voice said from the doorway.

Katie turned and saw Nelson standing at the entrance to the room, holding Gummy by the scruff of his collar.

“ Nelson , I’m so glad to see you,” she said as he dragged Gummy in.

“ I tend to have that reaction on women,” he quipped with a grin. “ If you would be so kind, Katie , and hand me that rope.”

Glad to be useful, Katie reached for the rope and handed it to Nelson , who quickly and efficiently tied Gummy’s arms behind his back.

“ Is that a dead woman in the corner?” Nelson asked as he tied Gummy’s feet.

“ Nooo . Endora’s mine. You can’t have her...” the man screamed and suddenly leaped up and lunged at Sebastian .

Katie screamed. The kidnapper looked like a bull charging at Sebastian .

Sebastian fired the gun, sending the kidnapper flying back and landing on Endora Deville’s body.

“ I suppose he meant it,” Nelson said with a smirk.

“ Check for a pulse, will you, Nelson ?” Sebastian said, still aiming the pistol at the prone man.

Nelson strode over to the kidnapper and placed his fingers against the man’s throat. “ He’s dead.”

Katie collapsed in a heap on the floor, sobbing, “ Thank God !”

Sebastian knelt beside her and gathered her in his arms. “ I thought I’d lost you.”

The tears were pouring down her cheeks. “ I thought I’d never see you again. How did you find me?”

“ Doogan told us about the cemetery when we questioned him,” Sebastian said, taking a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiping her tears.

“ Thank you,” Katie whispered. “ For the handkerchief.”

“ I will always have one for you,” he said in a tender voice.

“ The drawings, really,” Nelson said. “ I suppose this was Rosco .” Nelson gave a derisive laugh. “ Now I know where I’ve seen this one before. The Tower of London—he was a guard there.”

“ He killed Endora Deville ,” Katie said.

“ Yes . His name is Rosco Black ,” Sebastian said.

Nelson checked the ropes around Gummy’s feet and hands.

“ You took your time getting here. How far away did you park the carriage?”

Sebastian arched an eyebrow at Nelson .

“ Sorry about that, Slice . But I figured you’d have everything under control.”

Sebastian rolled his eyes at his friend.

“ It was Endora ,” Katie said. “ I heard him talking to Gummy . It was her idea to kill Wendel and—and she wanted me dead too so my family would suffer. She hated Thomas and Frankie and the dowager.” Katie began to tremble again. “ I — I thought Wendel was killed because of the pearls, but the robbery was just a pretense. Wendel was meant to die. A —and so was I . Only Thomas and the footmen came running before Rosco could finish the deed. And he must have waited until I began to emerge from the house again, and he—just waited for the right opportunity to kidnap me and...”

“ Hush , sweetheart, it’s all right. Everything is all right now. We’ll talk about it all, I promise you, but right now, I want to get you out of here.” He kissed her forehead and stood up, lifting her in his arms as he did so.

Katie felt a mixture of emotions—grief and anger at the tragedy of losing Wendel in such a horrific way by such a diabolical woman bent on revenge, disbelief at how close she’d come to being killed not once—but twice in fourteen months, relief that Sebastian had come in the nick of time.

Sebastian . I love you.

As if he could read her mind, he tightened his hold around her as he carried her out of the cottage.

She closed her eyes knowing she had to tell Sebastian how she truly felt. She knew he cared about her, but was he in love with her as she was with him?

I will tell him, no matter what.

Katie had lived in fear for more than a year. Rarely venturing out, she'd become, in effect, a prisoner herself.

Well , that ends tonight.

She would tell Sebastian that she loved him. And if he didn't feel the same, then so be it. But she refused to hide away from life anymore.

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Chapter Eleven

A Week Later

Katie whirled around and thrust her epee. She'd been practicing every day that week, determined to become as adept as she could. Even if the danger had passed, she enjoyed the practice—it made her feel stronger and more secure whenever she went out.

“Well done, Katie,” the dowager said, with a thump of her cane.

Katie smiled at the elderly woman over her shoulder. The dowager had been good to put her through her paces, calling out moves and critiquing her form, but it wasn't the same as the lessons she had enjoyed with Sebastian.

She sighed as she executed a repost. No matter what she did, and no matter who was with her, Katie's thoughts always seemed to find their way back to Sebastian.

She wished she could stop thinking about him. Heck. She wished she could stop wanting to think about him. But she couldn't. With each day that went by, she wondered if his feelings had waned.

It had been almost a week since the kidnapping. He'd returned her to the dowager's and updated everyone on what had happened, including what they knew about Endora Deville and Rosco Black. The next day, she received pink roses and a card saying he hoped she felt better, and that he'd see her soon. And then—nothing. No visit. No cards. No missives whatsoever. She had been prepared to declare her love,

in the hope that he too felt the same about her, or at least cared enough to want to court her, but now she wondered if she had misread him.

After all, Sebastian was a man of the world. His mistresses were no doubt sophisticated, worldly, and independent. A man of his caliber no doubt had his pick of women. Yes , he'd been caring and had helped her enormously but perhaps that was all it was.

But what about the kisses we shared?

And he practically swept me up in his arms and declared how worried he'd been when I went missing.

When Sebastian had entered that cottage to rescue her, her heart had soared with hope. But now, time and distance had worn down her new-found self-confidence, and she was no longer sure of what she'd shared with him.

For a moment in time, her life had seemed bright and hopeful again, but she was growing doubtful she would ever find happiness again.

“ You're making great strides, my dear. I, am pleased you are continuing to practice. You'll feel even more confident with the parasol when you are out and about,” the dowager said.

“ You're right, Duchess . It makes sense to gain a good feel for its weight.”

“ Keep practicing while I check on dinner. I'll be right back,” the dowager said. “ This practice will pay dividends, dear. I promise.” She thumped her cane once more. “ Don't give up hope on him.”

How can I not?

Katie thrust and reposted, then lunged.

“Excellent form,” a deep male voice said from behind.

Katie froze. Her heart leaped to her throat. She took a deep breath and then turned to see Sebastian standing in the doorway to the ballroom.

“Sebastian, how are you?” She wanted to whoop with joy and run and jump in his arms, but she no longer felt certain it would be welcomed.

“I am fine. And you?”

“I’m feeling ever so much better, thank you. And as you can see, I’m keeping up my practice.” She gave a quick flick of the foil from left to right.

“Yes, I can see. You are doing splendidly.” His lips curved up in a slow smile.

“Thank you,” she said, silently curing her squeaky voice.

“Er, did you finish your investigation?” she asked.

“I did,” he said, as he began slowly walking towards her.

“What will happen to Gummy and Doogan?”

“The Crown is involved and is trying to determine their value to the rest of the investigation. Black was a serial killer, so if they cooperate and give evidence, there might be hope for them. Otherwise, their prospects are bleak.”

He kept walking towards her in that maddeningly slow walk.

“ Is it finally over?” she asked, shakily.

“ It is,” he said, reaching her.

“ Thank God for that,” she said. He was standing so close she had to lean back to look up at him. Lord , he’s a tall one.

“ Now it’s time for me to ask you a question,” he said.

Sebastian got down on one knee and gazed up at her.

Her heart hitched and she would have sworn the green flecks in his eyes sparkled.

“ Miss Katie Latham , will you do me the great honor of becoming my wife so that I can spend the rest of my life making you happy?”

She gasped. And then she burst into tears. But they were happy tears. So she didn’t mind. They spilled down her face as she looked into his beautiful sable eyes. “ Yes , yes, yes!” Katie got down on her knees with him and hugged him. “ I thought you had given up on us,” she breathed. “ It’s been an eternity since I saw you, and...”

He didn’t let her finish. “ I love you, Katie , and there’s no way I can live my life without you by my side. When I thought I’d lost you, my world almost crashed down around my head. I was so afraid I wouldn’t get there in time.”

“ I’m so glad you got there in time.” Fresh tears poured down her cheeks.

He withdrew a handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes.

“ I owe you so many handkerchiefs,” she said in a wobbly voice.

“ It’s all right,” he said tenderly. “ I have a lifetime supply.”

“ Thank you,” she whispered, reaching up to caress his face. “ But why didn’t you send word?”

“ Forgive me, my love. I was working day and night and had to tie up the investigation and make sure no one and nothing was left that could hurt my beautiful Katie .” He placed a soft kiss in the palm of her hand.”

She almost swooned.

“ And then, there was the trip to Sussex . I had to ask for your brother’s permission,” he said.

“ You did?”

“ I did.”

“ What did my brother say?”

“ He said it’s about time.”

The thump of a cane echoed behind them, and they stood and turned to see the dowager with Paula .

“ Here , here!” the dowager said. “ I heartily second that!”

“ Honestly , I’m just glad I won’t have to look at another scarf collection again!” Paula chimed in.

Everyone laughed.

Sebastian wrapped his arms around Katie and hugged her close.

“ There is one other thing I was taking care of this week.”

“ Yes ?”

He reached into his waistcoat pocket and pulled out a black velvet box. When he opened it, he placed a ring on her finger. “ I had this ring made for you.” The ring was gold with a large oval sapphire surrounded by a halo of diamonds. “ There is not a jewel that could possibly match the beauty of your eyes. But this one comes close. I love you, Katie Latham ,” Sebastian said, cupping her face.

“ It’s beautiful,” she said through fresh tears. “ I love you, too, Sebastian .”

The dowager tapped her cane. “ Well , now. While they sort things out, I need to ask your opinion on my collection of teas, Paula .”

Laughing , Sebastian pulled Katie closer and kissed her. It was a long, lingering, passionate kiss—and Katie no longer cared whether anyone saw them.

“ I don’t want to tempt you to the dining room before you are ready, but when you sent word you were coming, Cook outdid herself. She made the most delicious meal, starting with turtle soup, which is my favorite. And of course, we all want to hear all the news! I’ll meet you both there. ”

It had been a hectic week for Sebastian . Between meetings with the magistrate, the Crown , and even the King himself, he had managed to get to Sussex and speak with Latham . He had been pleasantly surprised his friend had been thrilled about the match. His only request was that they hold the wedding in the chapel at their home since Frankie was so close to her delivery date. Sebastian was happy to oblige.

“ I apologize for taking so long to get here,” Nelson said, entering the room.

“ Quite all right. You’re still in time for dinner.” The duchess nodded to an empty seat next to Paula . “ I’m so glad you made it,” she said with a knowing smile.

“ Thank you for the invitation.”

Over a course of turtle soup, Sebastian supplied the latest update.

“ The pauper’s section of the Blackfield Cemetery became the ultimate resting place for Rosco Black . As far as the other two, Gummy is being held with Doogan in a goal, secured by guards until their fate is decided. They knew about him going to the caretaker’s cottage, but they weren’t aware of the women buried in a small plot next to it. While that does not exonerate them from the crimes they took part in, they may have valuable information that can be used to solve other crimes that Black perpetrated, ” said Sebastian . “ But their fate is in the hands of the courts now.”

“ Black used his job for personal gain and his own dark and twisted tastes. He was notorious for taking bribes but also for feathering his nest with female prisoners. Many have disappeared, and we suspect they are the ones in the cemetery. I suspect they will continue to uncover things for days,” Nelson added.

“ What a gruesome, twisted man,” said Paula with a shudder.

“ At least he can no longer inflict harm on anyone else,” the dowager said. She turned to Katie and dabbed her eyes. “ I am so thankful you were spared.”

Katie reached out and squeezed the dowager’s hand. “ Not everyone is lucky enough to have a fairy godmother,” she said, her eyes glistening with tears. “ Thank you, Duchess , for all your encouragement and support.”

“ Tsk ! You give me too much credit. You are perfect for each other, and that made finding each other easy. Besides , having you here gave me a chance to have daughters—and I hope you both will continue to indulge me.”

“ Of course,” Paula said.

“ We consider ourselves lucky to have you!” Katie added.

The older woman sniffled. “ Thank God that’s behind us,” she said with a thump of her cane. “ We are fortunate to have escaped the widow and that horrible Mr . Black . But do we know why they pursued Katie ? It makes no sense,” the dowager said.

“ Because the widow asked him—at least that’s what I’ve gleaned from Doogan and Gummy . They said he would complain but continued to do her bidding. She wanted to hurt those that she perceived had hurt her...”

“ But in a way that couldn’t be connected to her,” the dowager concluded. “ The widow Deville was a horrible woman, but I certainly never wished her dead. She could have had a much better life than she chose. She would be devastated over your happy news.” The dowager paused. “ We should probably focus on the wonderful, happy occasion we have been blessed with tonight.”

“ Quite happily,” Paula said. “ Besides , your townhouse is closer to Gunter’s than Mama’s is.”

“ Aha . I knew the stars were aligned when I invited you girls to stay,” the dowager said with a chuckle.

“ Whatever or whoever was in charge of aligning the stars our way, I thank them from the bottom of my heart,” Sebastian said.

Growing up, Sebastian had never been like other youths, prone to spouting off poetry and falling for every pretty girl he met at a ball or a house party. He'd always been a man of action. Someone who had put his military career first and then his security work and several other ventures. Although he always enjoyed the company of women, marriage had never been a priority for him. Until the night he met Katie . Now , he couldn't imagine his life without her. She was the loveliest, most adorable, and bravest woman he'd ever met. And he couldn't wait to marry her so he could finally be alone with her.

He winked at Katie above the rim of his wine glass, enjoying the pretty blush that tinted her cheeks. Ah , yes, he was definitely looking forward to their honeymoon.

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Latham Manor ~ Sussex, England Christmas Day, 1825

“ This feels like a dream, Mama ,” Katie said, looking at her reflection in the mirror.

“ Your papa would have been so proud to see his little girl all grown up and getting married,” her mama said, dabbing at her eyes. “ You honor me by wearing my dress. With the small touches the modiste made, it looks as if it was made for you.” The dress of cream silk gauze had an underdress of creamy white satin, padded at the hem. Pearls and crystals were sewn into intricate designs on the bodice and the cap sleeves. Katie had fallen in love with it when her mother showed it to her.

“ I’m honored that you allowed me to wear it, Mama .

“ There is one more thing I have for you.” Reaching into her reticule, her mother withdrew a small, blue velvet bag. “ Your father gave me these sapphire and diamond earrings at our wedding all those years ago. They were your grandmama’s—your father’s mother. He would want you to have them.”

Katie’s eyes welled with tears. “ It will be as if he is here with me. Thank you.” She wanted to say more, but her throat was tight with emotion.

“ They’re lovely,” Paula said in a teary voice. “ And they perfectly match the diamond and sapphire bracelet Sebastian gave you.”

“ Sapphires have always been my favorite stone—probably from having seen you wear these earrings, Mama .”

Her mother hugged her close.

The door opened and the dowager entered, leaning on her cane and carrying a nosegay of red roses. “ Good ! I’m not too late. You appear to have something old, something new, and something blue. Would you honor me and wear this as your something borrowed? My darling husband, George , gave me this broach many years ago. I thought it would look beautiful on the silk wrappings of your nosegay.” She gave the broach a gentle touch before handing the bouquet to Katie .

“ Duchess , it’s the most beautiful pin I’ve ever seen. It was gold with diamonds and pearls, intricately placed to form a heart. Thank you.”

Katie swallowed the lump in her throat. She still had trouble believing her life had completely changed in two months. She was so full of happiness, she had to keep pinching herself. Today she would marry a man she adored who adored her. Today was a day full of joy, light, and love. Such a sharp contrast to the dark days of the past year leading up to her kidnapping that it seemed like the ending to a bittersweet fairy tale.

She thought back to a week before when Sebastian escorted her to visit Wendel’s gravesite. With tears streaming down her face, she left a bouquet of white roses and prayed for his blessing. When a turtledove landed on his tombstone, she smiled, believing it to be a sign that Wendel had given his blessing.

A heavy knock sounded at the door. “ Katie , it’s time,” Thomas said, poking his head into the room.

Looking at her reflection once more, Katie pinched her cheeks. “ I’m ready.” And she was ready. Ready to join her life with Sebastian’s .

Sebastian felt more nervous than he had in his life. He was marrying the most enchanting and loving woman in front of both of their families and dear friends.

Two months ago, if someone had said he'd be getting married on Christmas Day , he would have laughed at the preposterous notion. And now he couldn't think of anything else he'd rather do than marry Miss Katie Latham .

The small Latham family chapel was decorated in greenery, gypsophila, and red roses. A perfect setting for his beautiful bride.

“ Thank you for being here and for being my best man, Nelson ,” he whispered, as he kept his eyes on the entrance where his bride would arrive at any moment.

“ I wouldn't have missed it for the world,” his best friend said.

The door opened and his bride walked into the chapel on the arm of her brother, Thomas .

His breath caught as he watched his bride gracefully float down the aisle. My God , she's beautiful . Her sparkling blue eyes held him captive.

He didn't know how he managed to get through the first part of the ceremony. All he wanted to do was stare at Katie .

“ I do,” Katie said, bringing him out of his reverie.

“ The bride has requested one additional vow be added to the service,” the bishop said, his lips twitching.

“ Thank you, Your Grace ,” Katie said with a regal nod.

Sebastian was curious as to what the additional vow would be.

Katie turned to Sebastian and, in a clear voice, said, “ Do you, Sebastian Charles Soren , promise to continue with my fencing lessons and teach me other fighting

techniques for as long as I desire to learn?”

He grinned. “ I will. I promise.”

“ Then , by the power vested in me, I pronounce you man and wife,” the bishop said, proudly.

As they made their way to the carriage that would take them to Latham Manor , — Sebastian leaned down and whispered, “ I’ve been thinking about that last vow and there are a few other techniques I’d like to teach you. The first chance we get, let’s steal away to our chamber. I can’t wait to make you my wife in every way.”

Katie gave a slow, seductive smile. “ And I can’t wait to learn all you have to teach me, dearest husband—as long as you start it with those toe-curling kisses of yours.”

Sebastian pulled her close and tucked a dark curl behind her ear. “ I promise. Something tells me this may be the shortest wedding breakfast in history.”