



Stolen by the Cruel Duke (Dangerous Dukes #1)

Author: *Arabella Wells*

Category: Historical

Description: "We have a deal, but don't mistake this for anything more"

When her father traps her in a scandal with his greatest enemy, Iris finally decides she will be more than a pawn in his game...

Duke Phineas is called the cruelest man of the ton, and for good reason. And if the only way to achieve his goal is by marrying his nemesis' daughter, so be it.

But soon, thoughts about his vexing new bride start clouding his head. And now, his only goal is to make her his...

*If you like powerful Dukes, loving Duchesses and a marvelous depiction of the majestic Regency and Victorian era, then *Stolen by the Cruel Duke* is the novel for you.

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Chapter One

“We’re ruined! We’re all ruined!”

Miss Iris Crampton looked up to see her sister, Rosalie, staring at the newspaper she was reading, a look of shock, horror, and confusion on her face.

“Rose?” she asked cautiously, her finger hovering over the daisies she was stitching into a pillowcase. “Is everything all right?”

While the youngest Crampton daughter was prone to dramatics, Iris couldn’t help but feel a twinge of unease at her sister’s calamitous announcement.

Rosalie turned her large green eyes—so much like Iris’s, so much like their mother’s—to her sister and opened her mouth, but no words came out. This was also unlike her. At seventeen, Rosalie Crampton always had something to say.

From across the drawing room, their middle sister, Violet, looked up from her book. “Are you reading the gossip sheets again, Rose? You really ought not to believe a word they say. Life for young ladies is not nearly as exciting as they make it out to be.”

Rosalie found her voice. “But—this one is about Iris!”

A stunned silence greeted this pronouncement.

Iris’s stomach turned over, and heat rushed to her cheeks and neck. “W-why would

they write about me?” she stammered. “I’m just a boring spinster.”

Violet, however, had closed her book. She stood up and crossed to Rosalie, snatching the paper from her hands. Her eyes widened as she began to read, and then she clapped a hand over her mouth.

“It can’t be,” she whispered through her fingers.

“The gossip sheets wouldn’t lie about something this ruinous,” Rosalie said at once. She turned to look at Iris, who felt as if she’d been punched in the stomach.

“Now you’re both scaring me,” Iris said. Standing, she held out her hand, which had begun to shake. “Give me the paper.”

Violet hesitated for a moment, and Iris gave her her most formidable look. Iris was the eldest, after all, and now that their mother was gone, it was her responsibility to look out for her sisters and mitigate any harm that might come to the family. Whatever the paper said, it was better she met it head-on.

Violet handed her the paper, and Iris smoothed it out to read it.

She wasn’t sure what she had been expecting. The headline, however, was far worse than anything she could have imagined.

Spirited Spinster Miss I. C. sneaks away from the ball for rendezvous with Dangerous Duke E.

Iris began to read, her heart in her throat.

Scandal ensued by the cover of night last Saturday at the Holloway Ball, when the eldest daughter of a divisive viscount was seen embracing the most dangerous Duke

in the realm. Miss I. C. was the only young lady to faint at the ball, leading some to speculate whether this fit was, in fact, genuine or a ruse designed to allow her to meet in secret with her paramour. After ‘swooning,’ Miss I. C. was seen leaving the ball unchaperoned and making her way to the rose garden. There, she was joined by her tall, blue-eyed Duke, in what this writer can only describe as a licentious tryst unfit for the eyes of its delicate readers

The article went on in a similar vein, but Iris had stopped reading.

The most dangerous Duke in the realm. Duke E. Tall, blue-eyed. There could be no doubt who this piece was referring to: the infamous and reclusive Duke of Eavestone.

Iris thought she might cast up her crumpets. Looking up, her eyes met her sister’s.

“Who would write this?” she whispered as she slowly sank back onto the settee. “It’s not true. I swear it isn’t true!”

“We’d understand if it was,” Rosalie began quickly. “Certainly, we wouldn’t approve, but I’ve read romance novels, so I understand the temptation to?”

“It isn’t true,” Iris repeated, her anger flaring. “I mean... Yes, I did feel faint at the ball. It was warm and crowded, and I swooned from overexertion. So, I stepped outside onto the terrace for some air, but I was accompanied by... by...”

In truth, Iris couldn’t remember who had been out on the terrace with her. Some matron or another. She hadn’t been paying attention, as she’d been still woozy from her fainting spell. Now she wished she could remember so that she could beg them to verify her innocence.

“Of course, we know it isn’t true,” Violet interjected quickly, shooting Rosalie a scathing look. She sat down on the settee next to Iris and put her arm around her.

“We’ll find a way to prove it. I promise.”

But her reassurance did little to comfort Iris. “My reputation will be ruined...” she whispered. “I’ll be shunned from Society. And you two will be wrapped up in the scandal, tainted by association.”

The irony of it all was not lost on her. After all these years as the perfect, proper young lady, she would not be the reason for her sisters’ ruination. It was unthinkable. She rarely danced at balls, never flirted with gentlemen, and had never even had a serious suitor. At twenty-three, she was firmly on the shelf, happy to be the spinster who guided her sisters through the various pitfalls of London Society.

“Who would make this up?” Rosalie asked. “Could it have been one of Father’s enemies?”

“Perhaps...” Violet looked thoughtful. “But why target Iris? She has never done anything to warrant such an attack.” She fixed her serious gaze on Iris. “Unless... you don’t have an understanding with the Duke of Eavestone, do you?”

Iris’s stomach clenched, as it so often did when Violet looked at her like this. Of the three sisters, Violet alone looked like their father. She had the Viscount Carfield’s dark hair and severe features, and sometimes, when she stared at Iris accusatorily, Iris swore she was looking at her father. But she knew that Violet’s looks masked the kind, sensitive girl she was underneath, and who was as far from their father in personality as was possible.

Still, it unnerved her.

“Of course, I don’t,” Iris said, stiffening at the suggestion. “The man is known far and wide as one of the most dangerous and ruthless men in England. We have never even spoken. He rarely attends balls, and he certainly doesn’t court spinsters.”

All three girls were quiet for a moment as they contemplated this. Iris was starting to feel some of the shock wearing off. But as the reality of the situation began to sink in, fear also overtook her.

What will happen now? Will I be forced to marry the Duke of Eavestone? Or, worse still, what if he refuses to offer marriage, permanently ruining my and my sisters' reputations? And, Oh God, what will Father say?

Iris's stomach churned. Their father would not take kindly to a rumor impugning his daughter's virtue. Nor would he believe that she had done nothing wrong—not after a lifetime of finding fault with everything she did. His punishment, she knew, would be swiftly delivered and brutal.

A knock sounded at the door, and the butler entered. Mr. Jones's expression was grave.

“Miss Crampton, your father requests your presence in his library. Immediately.”

Iris looked around at her sisters. They wore identical expressions of horror.

“Do you think he knows?” Rosalie hissed.

Violet said nothing, but her eyes seemed to be saying what Iris was thinking— It can't be a coincidence .

Rising on shaky legs, Iris followed Mr. Jones out of the drawing room and down the staircase that led to the ground floor of their London townhouse.

Outside the Viscount's library, the butler knocked.

“Enter,” Lord Carfield's voice boomed from inside.

Iris took a deep breath, then walked through the door.

The room was large but dim. Heavy curtains had been drawn over the windows, which otherwise would have looked out over the hustle and bustle of Grosvenor Square. Instead of natural light, her father's library was lit with candles, which cast an eerie glow over the bookshelves, the dark mahogany furnishings, and the Viscount himself, who was seated at his desk on the far side of the room beneath a larger-than-life portrait of himself. The portrait was part of what added to the chilling atmosphere of the room, as two versions of her father leered down at her as she approached him.

Iris curtsied. "You wanted to see me, Father?"

Now that she was in the proverbial lion's den, she felt her courage rising. It was always like this with her father.

I will never let him see me afraid. Certainly not of him.

Whenever she was in his presence, she met his ferocity with a determination she had been cultivating since the age of thirteen, when her mother had left her and her sisters alone and unprotected.

I have to be strong, the way Mother couldn't be. For Violet, Rosalie, and me.

So, as she approached her father, Iris kept her head held high and her shoulders squared, and she did not once look away from his cold stare.

"A rumor has been circulating about you," her father began, his voice low and gravelly. Steepling his hands in front of him, he surveyed her with the cold, dark eyes that reminded her so much of Violet's. "A rumor about you and the Duke of Eavestone."

“It isn’t true,” Iris said at once. She’d been preparing this speech on the way down the stairs, and now she rushed to get it out before he could begin making accusations. “I would never dishonor myself or our family name, nor would I do anything to put my sisters’ futures at risk. You must know this, Father. I have only ever looked out for them, and I wouldn’t be so foolish as to throw that away for a man, especially not one like the Duke of?—”

The Viscount held up a hand to silence her, and she stopped speaking at once. Her father, she was well aware, did not tolerate disobedience of any kind. She was surprised, however, that he didn’t look angry. She’d been expecting rage, but instead, he was watching her placidly, even with some amusement.

“I know the rumor isn’t true,” he said, and she felt a small flicker of relief. Almost immediately, however, it was extinguished. “After all, I am the one who sold it to the papers.”

It took all of Iris’s good breeding to keep herself from gasping. Shock reverberated through her, and she felt as if the ground had opened up beneath her feet.

“You sold it to them?” she repeated faintly. “But... why? Why would you risk our good name like that?”

“There are more things than our name at stake,” her father said dismissively. “Besides, you will save your reputation by marrying the Duke of Eavestone.”

Another wave of shock rocked through her, and Iris had to reach out and steady herself on the back of a chair. “But I have no desire to marry,” she whispered. “You know this.”

“I don’t care what you desire,” the Viscount snapped, his cool facade cracking for a moment. He took a deep breath, as if to collect himself, and looked at her very

seriously. “As I’m sure you know, the Duke is a very powerful man. What you probably don’t know is that he and I have often been at odds in our business enterprises. Over the past few years, he has bankrupted several of my business associates, and recently it has been brought to my attention that he plans to do the same to me. I cannot allow this to happen. But Eavestone is cunning. And in order to understand his plans, I need someone on the inside. Someone who can watch him, take note of his plans, and report back to me. Someone close to him, like a wife.”

Iris gaped at her father. She had heard stories, over the years, of the ruthless deals the man before her had cut in order to secure his business interests. And it wasn’t unusual among the ton for a daughter to be married off for the financial gain of the family. But she had never heard of something quite as mad as this.

“But why risk my reputation?” Iris asked numbly.

“Well, I could hardly just ask Eavestone outright to marry you.” Her father shook his head at her, as if he expected more of his eldest. “He would refuse me on principle alone. Which is why I had to resort to such unsavory tactics. Believe me, it gives me little pleasure to drag our family name through the mud. But needs must if I am to outmaneuver the Duke and ensure our family’s survival.”

“You want me to spy on Eavestone for you?” Iris could hardly believe what she was hearing. “But, won’t he suspect that?”

“Eavestone does not put much stock in the intelligence or cunning of young ladies, nor should he. He may suspect that I am trying to appease him, but he will not suspect that you are in on a plot to spy on him.”

“And what if he discovers it?” Iris was well aware of the legal rights husbands had to punish their wives, and she was not eager to become the property of a man who would have reason to hate her.

“You will have my protection, as you do now.”

Iris swallowed. She was more than familiar with her father’s idea of protection.

As if he suspected her thoughts, the Viscount narrowed his eyes. “I will expect your full compliance in this matter, Iris. If not... there will be consequences.”

Iris’s stomach seemed to hollow out as she stared at her father. Consequences always meant something bad when it came to him. Memories—unbidden, long-buried memories—came flooding back to her—her father standing over her, red-faced, his fist shaking.

“I’ll marry you off to the cruelest, most vile man in England.”

“You deserve a husband who’s familiar with a cane, and I’ll make sure you get one.”

“The husband I’ll find for you will cure that temper of yours.”

“What consequences could be worse than marrying me off to the Duke of Eavestone?” she asked, her voice smaller than she would have liked.

Her father smiled, a cruel, pitiless smile that chilled her to the bone. “If you refuse, then I will marry your sisters off to the meanest, oldest, and most impoverished gentlemen I can find. I will ensure that their lives are miserable and that it will all be your fault.”

Iris’s mouth went dry. For a moment, she thought she might be sick. After all these years, her father had finally made her worst fears come true and turned his familiar threats on her sisters.

Anger surged through her, and a wooshing sound filled her ears. She had to lower her

eyes and press her lips together to keep from lashing out with all her fury. Getting angry wouldn't help anything. Her father had her cornered. He knew she would never let anything happen to her sisters, that she would do whatever he wanted in order to protect them.

But who will protect me?

As usual, she would have to protect herself.

So, even as she shook with repressed anger, the gears in her head were turning, and a plan was starting to take shape.

Let him think I've given up .

The Viscount might have won this fight, but she would win the war.

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Chapter Two

“I’ve never even met the girl, and now I’m accused of dallying with her?!”

Phineas Thorne, the Duke of Eavestone, prided himself on being able to keep a cool head under pressure. This, however, was beyond the pale. The idea that he would dishonor a young lady was intolerable—more than intolerable. It went against everything he stood for. Not to mention that this particular young lady was the last one he would ever court.

Throwing the paper down on the table, the Duke glared across to the settee, where his best friend, Lord James Bolden, sat watching him. “And of all the young ladies,” he spat, “Miss Iris Crampton! The daughter of that infernal, backstabbing, treacherous snake? Why would I want to tie myself to that man?”

“It does seem unlikely,” James agreed, his tone infuriatingly matter-of-fact.

“His daughter is probably as vile as he is.”

“Now, now,” James interjected, holding up his hands in a placating manner. “I know the father is villainous, but don’t take that out on the poor lady.”

Phineas checked himself. “You’re right, I suppose it was unfair of me to say so. I’m sure she is... lovely.”

Though, even as he said it, he could hardly believe it.

James's lips quirked up. "In fact, from what I understand, she's actually quite beautiful, if a bit of a bluestocking. You could do worse, really."

Phineas narrowed his eyes, annoyed by the look of amusement on his friend's face. "What are you smiling about? This is hardly the time to make jokes."

"On the contrary, I think this is exactly the time to make jokes." James folded his hands in his lap and tilted his head to the side. "Come, sit down, and let's sort this out."

Phineas stood still for a moment, defiant, then sat down on the settee opposite James. He folded his hands and tried to regain his composure.

"You can't deny it's a catastrophe," he argued after a moment. "I've been implicated in a scandal with Carfield's daughter, and it will ruin the plans I have been setting in motion for ten years now..."

He shook his head and turned to stare out the window. It was late April, and the London Season was being favored with a beautiful spring. Outside the window, Mayfair was in full bloom. The trees lining Berkeley Square were full and green, while beautifully sculpted hedges hemmed in rows of vibrant flowers that glinted in the buttery morning light.

It should have lifted Phineas's spirits. But it was impossible for him to feel cheerful these days—or really, for the past ten years. He'd been so careful, so methodical, so strategic in his takedown of Jebediah Crampton, the Viscount Carfield. One by one, he had crushed all of the Viscount's closest allies—all as corrupt and prone to taking advantage of those weaker than them as he was—until Lord Carfield was the last one standing, alone and unprotected. And now this?

He wasn't sure exactly what it meant that he'd been romantically linked to the man's

daughter, but it couldn't be good.

"If you'd stop stewing in self-pity for a minute," James said tartly from the settee, "and think for a moment, you might see how this romantic entanglement could be good for you. How you might use it to your advantage."

Phineas stilled. James might be a little too unserious at times, but he was his oldest and most trusted friend, and his advice was usually astute.

"And how might that be?" Phineas asked.

James grinned. "Your marriage to your enemy's daughter could be exactly the answer to your prayers. Just think, Phineas. She knows her father even better than you do. She could give you invaluable insights into how to take him down."

There was a moment of quiet as Phineas absorbed these words. "Surely she would not inform on her father," he countered slowly.

"She might not even know she is," James pointed out. "She's a spinster, after all, probably desperate for marriage. If you were to show her kindness, even affection, she would open up to you without question. And then you could discover what you need to know about Carfield's weaknesses."

There was sense in these words, and as Phineas mulled them over, he almost smiled. Almost. Phineas Thorne never smiled, and he wasn't about to start now.

James was right. An impressionable, pliable spinster, unlucky in love, was exactly what Phineas needed to finally achieve his long-awaited revenge. The brilliance of these words even outweighed his next, more irritating ones.

"And who knows," James added with a melancholic sigh. "Perhaps having a woman

in the house is exactly what you need to cheer you up a little...”

“After all these years, we meet again... and under equally unfortunate circumstances.”

Phineas sat across from the Viscount Carfield, his pale blue eyes taking in the man who had, for so long, been his sworn enemy.

Lord Carfield looked old, Phineas was pleased to see. In the years since they had last met, his once-dark hair had become streaked with gray, and while his dark eyes were still sharp and intelligent, there was a wariness to them that hadn't been there before. His townhouse was equally diminished. From what Phineas could see, it was shabby and in need of updating. It seemed that the Viscount's business dealings were not going as well as they once were.

The only thing that didn't look diminished about the Viscount was the portrait of himself that hung behind his desk. If anything, the artist had enlarged Lord Carfield, adding several inches of height and considerable handsomeness to his image. The portrait didn't depict the Viscount's looks so much as his vanity.

Phineas liked to think he was to thank for that. He'd caused more than a few losses of profit for the Viscount over the years.

“What has it been? Six years?” Lord Carfield asked carelessly.

“Ten. Ten years since you cheated me out of my inheritance.”

Lord Carfield gave him a contemptuous sneer.

Glad to see some things never change .

“Still holding a grudge, are you, Eavestone? I think it’s time to let bygones be bygones, don’t you? We have other more pressing matters to discuss.”

Phineas nodded. “This is true. I didn’t come here to discuss the past. I came here to put to bed the specious rumors that I dishonored your daughter.”

The Viscount’s expression remained skeptical. “Yes, I heard the same disgusting gossip as you.”

“And yet, you did not call me out immediately upon reading the rumor.”

“I know you,” the Viscount countered. “And I knew you would do the honorable thing.”

Phineas considered this. The fact that the Viscount had not appeared on his doorstep with a sword and pistol the moment the article came out the day before gave him pause. His lack of fury now only confirmed his suspicions.

Is it possible that Carfield is pleased about the rumor? But why? He must think it is to his advantage.

If so, it disgusted Phineas beyond belief that a father would risk his daughter’s reputation for financial gain.

“I vehemently deny the accusations,” Phineas stated, his deep, resonant voice filling up the entire library. “I would never dishonor a young lady. I think we both know this to be true.”

“I know nothing of the sort,” Lord Carfield snapped. His eyes had narrowed, and his frown had deepened. “You have long had it out for me. How do I know you didn’t seduce my daughter to enact your revenge?”

“My quarrel is with you,” Phineas snarled. “Not with your daughter.”

“Do you take me for a fool?”

Lord Carfield’s eyes glittered with hate, and Phineas felt, for a moment, as if he was fifteen again, grief-stricken and vulnerable, feeling the sting of the Viscount’s ring against his cheek. As if on cue, the scar on his cheekbone tingled, and he struggled not to touch it.

It had been a long time since he’d felt that powerless, and he didn’t like the feeling one bit. Over the last ten years, he’d worked hard to make himself into the man he was today—fearsome, powerful, and in control of his emotions. No one would ever again take advantage of the Duke of Eavestone. No one would ever again make him feel small, of that he was sure.

“I know how these things work,” Lord Carfield continued. “You see my daughter, icy but beautiful, twenty-three and still unmarried, and you think you can take advantage of her. Spinsters are desperate, you assume, so you court her in secret, make promises you have no intention to fulfill, until the moment she gives herself to you and you can take your revenge on me. Well, the jig is up, Eavestone. You’ve been caught, and fortunately, before it is too late. Now you will have to marry the girl, or you will have me to answer to.”

Red-hot fury radiated through Phineas. He hadn’t been this angry in years. Usually, he maintained a low level of simmering rage, a reminder of the vengeance he sought. But now, it took all his self-restraint to keep from leaping to his feet, seizing Lord Carfield by the cravat, and bludgeoning him. As it was, he couldn’t keep the anger from his voice when he spoke.

“You are throwing dangerous accusations, Lord Carfield. I am the last man on earth who would ever take advantage of a naive and innocent young lady.”

Except that's what you just told James you would do , a small, nagging voice whispered in the back of his head.

“After what was done to me by the men who said they were my parents’ friends, I know better than most how it feels to be duped by people you trust.” His eyes bored into Lord Carfield’s, which, he was not surprised to see, did not look remotely embarrassed. “The idea that I would ever abuse my power over a young lady is beyond reprehensible. I ought to call you out right here and now.”

Something in his voice must have told Lord Carfield he was serious, because the Viscount shifted and blinked, and his face grew pale. Licking his lips, he adopted a slightly more apologetic tone.

“Perhaps there is no truth to the rumor,” he conceded. “I cannot say for sure. The problem is, the story is out there, so regardless of its veracity, my daughter’s honor—and thus mine—is tainted. There must be a marriage, and quickly, in order to rectify this situation. Now... I believe I can sweeten this prospect for you.”

Phineas hadn’t been expecting this, but his face did not show a flicker of emotion or surprise as he continued to gaze steadily at the Viscount.

Lord Carfield smiled—a cool, calculating smile that did not reach his eyes—and held his hands out in supplication. “You will find I am not an ungenerous man, Your Grace. In order to encourage you to marry the girl, and to soften the blow somewhat, I am prepared to give you a stake in my coal mines. I believe you will find this offer more than fair.”

He reached into a drawer and pulled out a piece of paper, which he slid across the desk.

Phineas took the paper and unfolded it. It was not merely a percentage, he was

surprised to see, but a legal contract drawn up by Lord Carfield's solicitor.

He could not have arranged all this yesterday .

Phineas pretended to consider the offer in front of him.

If Carfield had this contract drawn up ahead of the printing of the gossip sheets, that meant he must have already known about the rumor. Not only known about it but figured out a way to make the marriage more appealing to me.

Which meant Phineas's instincts were right—Lord Carfield had planted the rumor himself.

But why? What does he have to gain from this?

Ten years ago, when Phineas was just a lad of fifteen, his parents had died in a tragic carriage robbery. Afterward, Lord Carfield took advantage of Phineas's grief and naivete by stealing the Eavestone seal and forging documents granting him ownership of the dukedom's coal-rich lands.

For ten years, Phineas had been plotting to get the lands back. And now, here he was, presented with the chance to own part of the business that should have been his. Lord Carfield was offering it up, with only the condition that he marry his daughter. It felt suspicious. More than suspicious. It felt like a trick.

Unless... unless Lord Carfield knew how close Phineas was to taking him down.

Unless he was trying to tie their assets together, to disincentivize Phineas to ruin the venture he himself had a stake in.

Unless he wanted his daughter close to Phineas, perhaps have her try to get close to

him, so he would feel some loyalty toward her family.

Phineas almost smiled. Almost.

It was too good. After all these years, the Viscount Carfield was scared of him . So scared that he was willing to give up a portion of his profits, and his daughter, to keep him at bay.

Well, two could play that game.

“I find your premise insulting,” Phineas began, setting the paper back on the desk. “I don’t want a percentage of your mines. I do not need to be bought off in order to do the honorable thing. I will marry your daughter because it is the right thing to do. Her dowry will be sufficient. However, I do ask that it reflect the accurate sum you owe me.”

Reaching for the quill that sat in an inkpot on the desk, Phineas crossed the percentage that the solicitor had written and wrote in a new number. He then slid the paper back across the desk to Lord Carfield.

The Viscount’s face went from pink to a bright vermillion red as he stared down at the new sum.

“Are you out of your mind?” he hissed, slamming his fist down on the desk. “This number is outrageous! It’s?—”

“The exact amount the lands you stole from me were valued at,” Phineas finished for him. “Adjusted for inflation, of course.”

Both men stared at each other, a shiver of understanding passing between them.

“I will not be manipulated,” Lord Carfield snapped. “Not by the man who may or may not have taken liberties with my daughter.”

Phineas merely smiled. He could feel the man’s control over the situation slipping. If the Viscount refused to give the sum Phineas had demanded, then his daughter and family name would be ruined. If he accepted it, then he would be forfeiting the money he’d saved by stealing the land in the first place.

Lord Carfield, however, surprised him. Standing up, he leaned over the desk, until his face was uncomfortably close to Phineas’s. “Your arrogance has once again gotten the better of you, Your Grace. There will be no betrothal, not with these conditions. I will find another way to ensure you compensate me for the ruination of my daughter’s reputation. Now, get out of my sight.”

Phineas gave him his most disdainful look as he rose to his feet. “Happily, My Lord. But may I suggest you think this over? After all, I have nothing to lose from your daughter’s disgrace. You, on the other hand, have everything to lose.”

As he left the Viscount’s library, Phineas felt sure that he had bested his old enemy at his own game. In fact, he was so caught up in his victory that he did not notice the swish of a skirt as someone disappeared around the corner.

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Chapter Three

“Iris Crampton, what have you gotten yourself into now?”

Iris couldn't help but ask the question out loud as she slipped out the door of her father's townhouse. It was ludicrous, really. After dressing in the simplest frock she could find and donning an old white cap she had secretly borrowed from her maid's bedroom, she had waited until noon, when her father typically took his nap, her sisters were at their pianoforte lessons, and the servants were having their lunch, before sneaking out of her bedroom. She went down the servants' stairs on tiptoe and then snuck out of the back of the house and out into the alleyway between the lanes.

“You've really lost your mind,” she muttered to herself as she turned out of the alley and into Grosvenor Square.

At this time of day, the square was quiet. Most ladies slept late and were only breakfasting now. In an hour or two, they would call on friends and acquaintances, and the sidewalk would be busier. Iris would have to be back home before then. But even if someone were to see her, she doubted they would recognize her dressed as a servant. No one paid any attention to maids, especially when they would likely assume she was out on an errand.

This would have been so much faster with a carriage!

It wasn't a long walk to Berkeley Square, but she was nervous the whole way. Every time she passed someone, she kept her head down and skirted around them. In servants' clothes, however, no one looked twice at her, and soon, she had arrived

safely at the Duke of Eavestone's townhouse.

Iris had never been to Eavestone House before, but she knew the address. Two years ago, she'd attended a ball at the Earl of Scrampton's house across the square. Lady Scrampton, after several glasses of champagne, had pointed out the Duke's house and stage-whispered that he was as terrifying in person as the scandal sheets insinuated.

Now, Iris hesitated before she knocked on the door. The Duke would not be expecting her, and from everything she'd heard, he could have a nasty temper. But she didn't know what choice she had, and so, steeling herself, she knocked sharply on the ornate front door.

Several long moments passed before the door creaked open. An aging butler appeared on the threshold, frowning down at her.

"Can I help you?" he inquired.

"I'm here to see His Grace," she announced. Her voice came out thin, and she cleared her throat and tried again. "Can you tell him that Miss Iris Crampton needs to speak to him urgently?" she demanded, handing him her calling card.

The butler's eyes widened, and his tone turned deferential. "Miss Crampton, this is highly irregular! You are without a chaperone, after all. His Grace will?"

"Want to hear what I have to say." Iris fixed him with her most imperious look. "I demand to be taken to him at once."

The butler hesitated a moment longer, then ushered her inside, snapping the door shut behind her. He led her to a small receiving room.

"Please wait here, Miss Crampton," he murmured, before disappearing back into the

hall.

Iris looked around. The room was modern and elegant, more so than she'd expect for a house without a mistress. The centerpiece was a grand fireplace, above which hung a portrait of a man and a woman. The woman was very beautiful, with wavy chestnut-brown hair and a warm, dimpled smile that made Iris like her immediately. The man had pale blue eyes and an athletic build, and he was gazing adoringly at his wife.

Iris had never seen a married couple look at each other with so much love, and she was still staring up at them when the door behind her opened and then closed. Turning, she found herself face-to-face with the exact replica of the two people in the portrait.

The Duke of Eavestone was tall, broad-shouldered, and very handsome, with wavy chestnut-brown hair and icy blue eyes that seemed to cut right through her. He could have had a warm smile, had he not been frowning. In fact, Iris suspected he had not smiled in a long time.

"Your Grace," she greeted, sweeping into a low curtsy.

She had seen the Duke before from a distance, but up close, she was shocked by how much he towered over her. In comparison, she felt tiny and delicate. It suddenly occurred to her how this must look—showing up at his house in the middle of the night. Would he think she was as wanton as the gossip sheets had made her out to be?

"Miss Iris Crampton, I presume," the Duke said. His voice was deep and rich, and she was reminded of drinking hot chocolate at Christmastime with her mother—a long, long time ago. "You should not be here."

"I know." She took a deep, steadying breath. "But I had to see you. It seems that our

fates have been tied together, and while I cannot change what has been said about us, I am determined to take my future into my own hands.”

The Duke stared down at her, unblinking and stony-faced. “And how do you intend to do that?” he asked.

“By asking you to marry me,” she said simply. “I heard you speaking with my father this morning. I cannot pretend to understand everything you spoke of, but it seems you asked for an exorbitant dowry, and he refused you, calling off any potential arrangement in the process.”

“I asked him only for the amount he owes me,” the Duke corrected. “I would not call that exorbitant. Nor do I look kindly upon young ladies who eavesdrop outside of doors.”

Iris flushed but didn’t look away. “This is my life, Your Grace, and I will not have it decided by men behind closed doors.”

The Duke blinked, then inclined his head. “Please continue.”

“I came here to beg you to reconsider my father’s offer. Your Grace, if we do not marry, my reputation will be ruined forever. I will have no hope of ever making a good match. And while I have never desired marriage, I have two sisters to consider. This scandal will ruin them, and then they will never be able to escape my father’s clutches. Or worse...” Iris hesitated. She had to be honest if she were to change his mind. “My father will marry them off to men he knows they’d hate out of vengeance.”

This, at last, seemed to penetrate the Duke’s mask. His eyebrows knit together, and his frown deepened. “Why would your father want to exact revenge on you?”

“He wants me to spy on you,” Iris admitted bluntly. From the startled look on the Duke’s face, she suspected he hadn’t seen this coming. “He started the rumor about the affair so that you would marry me and I could report back to him. If I do not cooperate, or if you refuse the match, then he will ensure my sisters suffer for it. Please, Your Grace. I beg you, do not resign my sisters to that fate. They are sweet girls and innocent in all of this.”

“And what about you?” the Duke asked. His eyes were searching her face, as if looking for clues as to what lay underneath. “Are you innocent in all this? Or did you conspire with your father to start this rumor so that you could at last secure yourself a husband?”

Iris bristled. She had been expecting some sort of accusation, but it still stung. “I would never conspire with my father for anything,” she spat. “I have never desired a husband, least of all you. Your reputation precedes you, Your Grace. What kind of woman would want to marry a man known for bankrupting multiple members of the ton?”

The Duke looked amused at this. “Believe me, they only got what they deserved.”

“So you really are heartless?”

His jaw tightened. “You say you don’t desire a husband, and yet here you are, begging me to marry you.”

“It’s that or watching my sisters’ lives be ruined,” she said sharply. “What did you think? That because I’m a spinster, I’d be grateful for the opportunity to marry you? I’m not as desperate as you imagine. I enjoy my quiet, simple life. But I will do anything to save my sisters. Anything.”

A moment of silence passed, during which Iris held her breath. Then the Duke turned

away and walked to the sideboard, where he poured himself a glass of amber liquid from a crystal decanter.

Gesturing toward the decanter, he asked, “Do you want one?”

“What is it?” she asked tentatively as he handed her a glass.

“Whiskey.” The Duke brought his glass to his lips, then downed it in one gulp. She couldn’t help but notice how strong and thick his neck was as he swallowed the liquor. Looking back down at her, his eyes glittered. “I’d suggest you sip yours.”

Iris took a small sip and nearly choked. The whiskey was strong and burned her throat on the way down. Eyes stinging, she forced herself to take another sip. After a moment, she was able to appreciate the aftertaste as a warmth spread throughout her body, making her relax slightly.

“I don’t know exactly why my father wants me to spy on you,” she said after a moment. “Although he seems to think you have plans to ruin him.”

The Duke made a noncommittal sound.

“Regardless, I don’t trust him. And I don’t want to spy on you. In fact, I believe we could have our own arrangement. One that would make my father only think I’m on his side.”

She reached into her reticule and produced a piece of paper. From what she’d gathered after listening in on their argument earlier, this was the contract the Duke had refused.

“I took this from my father’s office,” she explained. “But I need to return it before he notices its absence. I see here that my father offered you a stake in his mining

business. Why did you refuse?"

"Because that land is mine," the Duke replied at once. "And I won't settle for a tiny fraction of what is my birthright."

"Well, my father doesn't have this much," Iris said, pointing at the figure he had written. "At least, I very much doubt he does, considering how much he has been cutting back in recent years. But I think you and I could come to an agreement."

The Duke made a small, impatient sound. "Such as?"

"You accept a smaller sum—not a stake in the mines, but a lump sum that will make him think you've agreed to his terms but that won't bankrupt my family and drain my sister's dowries. And in exchange for accepting less than you wanted, and for helping my sisters and me, I will help you take down my father once and for all."

A deafening silence followed this pronouncement. If Iris had hoped to shock the Duke, she had certainly succeeded. He was staring at her with undisguised interest, and she flushed under the intensity of his gaze.

"Let me get this right," he began slowly. "You would act as a double agent against your own father? Why?"

"Why not? He is selling me off to a man the entire town fears without any consideration for my feelings. Why should I help someone who would do that to me?"

The Duke shrugged. "He is still your father."

"You and I both know he is a bad man."

It took a great deal of strength for Iris to say this. Even after everything her father had done to her, it still felt disloyal to speak of him this way to a stranger.

“I don’t know exactly what happened between you two, but I sense that you have as much reason as I do to want to stop him from hurting people.”

The Duke didn’t respond at once. Crossing the room, he poured himself another drink, which he sipped more slowly.

“And what if you are here on his behalf right now?” he asked finally, turning to face her.

“You’ll just have to trust me,” she said with a half-smile.

He didn’t return the smile. “Ah, but I don’t trust you,” he pointed out, swirling the whiskey in his glass.

“And I don’t trust you,” Iris snapped. “But what choice do we have?”

“Well, I have a very easy one,” he offered. “I could refuse you now, allow you to be ruined, allow your sisters to be married off, and not even think twice about it. I owe your family nothing, and you are not my responsibility. Tell me, Miss Crampton, why should I risk everything to help you?”

Iris wasn’t sure what sense of desperation possessed her to do it. All she knew was that suddenly, she was crossing the room to where the Duke stood and placing a soft hand over his. His skin was warm, and up close, she could smell his woody, masculine scent. She could also see a small scar on his left cheekbone, a thin white line like a cat’s scratch, which she had never seen before.

“How did you get this?” she asked, distracted by the sight, and without thinking she

reached up to touch the scar.

Before she could do so, the Duke had seized her wrist. For several tense heartbeats, they stared at each other, his hand tight around her wrist. His eyes blazed, and Iris felt as if all the wind was knocked out of her.

Finally, he let go, and she shrank back. But the Duke didn't look angry. If anything, he looked shaken.

"You'll help me," she whispered, "because I think, deep down, underneath all the stories about you and rumors about your villainy, you just might be a decent man who goes after men who take advantage of others. Or was I mistaken in noticing a pattern?"

The Duke of Eavestone was gazing at her, his attention rapt. His pale blue eyes seemed impenetrable, but the harder she looked, the more she realized they weren't as cold as she'd originally thought. There was warmth in them. Under many, many layers.

Then he blinked, and the moment was broken.

"You drive a hard bargain, Miss Crampton," he acknowledged, setting his glass down on the sideboard. "I find I cannot disagree with you. But don't go filling your head with foolish notions of my chivalry. I am agreeing to this not out of the goodness of my heart, but because you are offering me something I need—insider information on my enemy. Nor does it hurt that you are accomplished, smart, and beautiful. All desirable qualities in a wife."

Despite herself, Iris felt her heart flutter.

He thinks I'm beautiful?

“So, yes,” he continued, “I will accept a smaller lump sum from your father, and yes, I will marry you. In exchange, you will work with me to bring your father to justice for the ways he has harmed me. I will also offer protection to your sisters as part of this arrangement. Do we have a deal?”

The Duke held out his hand, and after a brief hesitation, Iris grasped it. They shook hands, and then he nodded at her whiskey glass. “Seems like I am to have a wife who’s unable to even finish a glass of whiskey.”

I am to have a wife .

The words sank into Iris as she lifted the glass and drained it in two large gulps, refusing to back down from a challenge.

The Duke smiled. It looked, to her, like a wolf leering at a lamb.

After a lifetime of fearing marriage, and four years of being on the shelf, during which she had determinedly established herself as a spinster, Iris Crampton was going to become a wife—with everything that entailed. She would have a husband, a man she barely knew but whose reputation for ruthlessness was legendary, and who would have legal control over every aspect of her life.

The prospect was terrifying, and as she took her leave of the Duke moments later, she had the awful feeling that she had made a terrible mistake.

Iris, what have you gotten yourself into?

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Chapter Four

“Iris, are you still awake?”

The whisper came from the door and was accompanied by a small knock. Iris looked up from her bed, where just moments before she had been staring up into the canopy, her mind whirring.

“Rose, is that you?” she called softly. “Come in!”

The door creaked open, and Rosalie slipped into the room, followed closely by Violet.

Iris sat up and reached for the flint box by her bed. By the time her sisters had tiptoed across the room, she had lit the candle on her nightstand, illuminating their anxious faces.

“Did we wake you?” Violet asked.

“No, I can’t sleep.”

“Us either,” Rosalie said, hopping up on the bed. “I can’t believe you’re going to get married tomorrow! You’re going to be a duchess! And married to the most handsome duke in England...”

Iris wrinkled her nose. “I’ve hardly noticed what he looks like,” she mumbled, although this wasn’t entirely true. One could hardly fail to notice how handsome the

Duke of Eavestone was. But that wasn't the point. "I don't even know what he's like as a person. Other than his reputation, of course..."

Violet seemed to sense her unease because she sat on the edge of the bed and laid a hand over Iris's. "Are you nervous?" she asked.

Iris swallowed. She didn't like to admit weakness in front of her sisters—she had to be the strong one for them—but in the cover of night, she found it a little easier to open up.

"A little," she admitted. "I know the Duke and I are on the same side now, but there is still so much I don't know about him. What if he is as cruel as people say?"

"Rumors aren't always correct," Rosalie said at once.

Violet rolled her eyes, and Iris had to stifle a smile. Considering that Rosalie had been so quick to believe the rumor about Iris, it was good to see she was becoming more discerning.

"But what if these ones are?" Iris asked. "For all we know, I could be entering into a marriage with someone as dreadful as Father. What if... what if I end up like Mama? So afraid of my own husband that I leave him and abandon my children like she abandoned us?"

Neither sister had anything to say to this. Even Rosalie looked subdued, and she put her own hand over Violet's so that the three of them were clasping hands.

"It won't be like that," Violet said at last.

"How do you know?" Iris whispered, her voice choked.

Violet smiled—a small smile, but one full of wisdom. “You’d never abandon your children. Like you never abandoned us.”

Iris looked deep into her sister’s eyes. They were so full of trust that Iris felt a renewed sense of purpose. She flipped her hand over and squeezed her sisters’ hands.

“You’re right,” she said. “I never would. And even though I’ll be leaving tomorrow to live with the Duke, I don’t want either of you to think you’re being abandoned. The Duke has promised to protect both of you. It was one of the conditions of our marriage. So, I need you to tell me if Father does anything to harm you, or if he makes threats of marrying you off. If he does, tell me at once, and the Duke and I will intervene. Do you promise?”

Both her sisters nodded, and Iris relaxed a little. She felt less nervous, knowing that at least her sisters would be protected by the Duke of Eavestone.

“And I want you both to visit me as often as you can,” she continued. “My new home will be your home.”

“It won’t be the same without you,” Rosalie said, flinging her arms around Iris. “I’ll miss you so much.”

“I’ll miss you too,” Iris choked out, swallowing her tears. She had to be strong now. “But if everything goes according to plan, then we will be reunited soon enough.”

And if the Duke is as trustworthy as he says he is.

“Phineas Thorne—a bridegroom. Now those are words I never thought I’d say!”

James was grinning from ear to ear as he surveyed Phineas, who was standing in front of the mirror in his bedchamber, fidgeting with the silk cravat at his throat.

Phineas glowered at his friend through the mirror. He did not like the smug look on James's face one bit.

"Stop grinning like a fool and get over here and help me with this," he snapped, gesturing toward the cravat. "My valet tied it too tight. I think he's trying to do me in on my wedding day."

James rolled his eyes, but he did as he was told. Coming over to Phineas, he examined the cravat with narrowed eyes.

"Having trouble breathing?" he asked, more soberly.

"I feel... constricted," Phineas admitted.

James couldn't keep from smirking. "That's the marriage vows, Eavestone, not the cravat."

Phineas scowled more deeply and turned back to the mirror. He looked the part of the bridegroom, it was true. He was in a black velvet coat, an elaborately embroidered royal blue waistcoat, a starched white shirt, and black breeches. To top it all off, he was wearing a top hat. He wasn't used to being this formally dressed so early in the morning, and he felt slightly uncomfortable.

But maybe it was as James had said: it wasn't the clothes so much as his nerves. After all, he was going to be married in a few short minutes.

The guests had already arrived, the chapel was full, and now all it needed was Iris and himself. It had all happened so quickly that Phineas could barely get his mind around it, and truthfully, his stomach was in knots.

Not that he would admit that to James.

“Of all the men,” his old friend admitted, shaking his head as he began to re-tie his cravat, “you were the one I was sure would never marry. I even had a bet on it going at White’s. You owe me ten pounds.”

“I owe you nothing,” Phineas said, more sternly than he meant to. “I didn’t ask you to bet on the likelihood of my marrying.”

James made a tutting sound. “So on edge that you can’t take a joke, I see. What, are you nervous?”

“Of course not,” Phineas huffed, too quickly.

For a moment, James looked as if he was about to make a ribald joke, probably something akin to, If you need advice on the wedding night... but then he caught sight of Phineas’s expression and seemed to change tact.

“I’m sure married life won’t be as unpleasant as one hears,” he offered instead. “Perhaps you’ll even grow to like your wife.”

Phineas nodded but didn’t quite meet his friend’s eyes.

James smirked again. “Oh, is that the problem? You like her too much already?”

“What do you mean?” Phineas asked sharply. His heart had begun to pound, although he wasn’t sure why. “I barely know the lady.”

“Still... there is certainly something intriguing about a woman who barges into your home and demands you marry her.”

“I wouldn’t call it intriguing,” Phineas grunted. “More impertinent.”

James stepped back and admired his handiwork. “How’s that? I made it a bit looser.”

Phineas cleared his throat, then felt around the edge of the cravat. Indeed, he did find it a little easier to breathe.

“Thank you,” he said curtly. “And I’d appreciate it if you didn’t make any more comments about my bride being intriguing. Our marriage is purely a business partnership. There will be no romance and no affection. Is that understood?”

“Certainly,” James uttered, but Phineas was sure that his friend was suppressing a smile. “But if you ask me, the lady doth protest too much... and in this case, the lady is you.”

Phineas didn’t dignify this with a response. He turned back to the mirror and looked himself over critically once more. He looked good, he thought. Distinguished. A true Duke of Eavestone.

Mother and Father would be proud of me if they were still alive.

“I’m sure she’ll be impressed,” James added.

When Phineas looked at him sharply, trying to ascertain if his friend was teasing him, James gestured toward the door.

“Shall we, Eavestone? I think it’s time to get you married.”

“Stop tripping,” Lord Carfield muttered out of the corner of his mouth.

“I’m not doing it on purpose,” Iris hissed.

She wouldn’t usually speak to her father so impertinently, but really, what was she

supposed to do? She could barely see through the veil in front of her eyes.

Her father gripped her arm tighter and took another step forward.

They were about halfway down the aisle. Apart from not being able to see, Iris's heart was in her throat. She could just make out the Duke of Eavestone waiting for her at the altar, and the sight made her dizzy. She couldn't make out the expression on his face, and she wondered if it was as apprehensive as her own. But then, why would it be? The Duke was getting what he wanted, and he had less to fear of marriage than she did.

As Iris and her father reached the end of the aisle, her father made to hug her. As he did, he lowered his head to her ear and muttered, "Don't forget, your duty is to your family first—to me. Don't disappoint me."

Iris didn't have time to reply before he had released her and the Duke had linked his arm with hers. The Duke's touch was warm, even through the sleeves of her dress, but she avoided his eyes. After her father's words, she felt ill. The Duke released her arm, and the two of them faced the rector as he began to recite the traditional wedding sermon.

"Dearly beloved," he intoned, "we are gathered here, in the sight of God and these witnesses..."

But Iris wasn't listening. She couldn't focus on the rector's words. Her mind was still on her father's threat. Fear filled her, and her legs began to shake. More than ever, she felt the mounting pressure to help the Duke take her father down before he could hurt her or her sisters any more.

Iris felt as if her legs were going to give out, and she swayed slightly to the side. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the Duke glance at her. She tried to stand still and

smooth her expression, to hide the fear that she knew was evident in every line on her face. The veil hid her face, but still, the Duke was close enough that he might be able to glimpse her expression, to feel her shaking with suppressed trepidation...

Then, to her surprise, she felt him take her hand. He wasn't looking at her, but he was holding her hand firmly. After several moments, he squeezed it.

As reassurance radiated through her, Iris felt hot tears prick her eyes. She refused to let them fall, but she was more touched than she could have said. It was possible, of course, that her bridegroom had misunderstood her fear, that he'd assumed she was afraid of getting married—which, admittedly, she was—and not of her father. But it only made his action even kinder. Undoubtedly, he was scared as well, uncertain of life with a woman he barely knew, yet here he was, comforting her.

Confidence surged through her, and she stood up a little straighter. Her legs stopped shaking. She was able to take several deep, calming breaths. And for the rest of the ceremony, she could focus on what the rector was saying.

At last, he declared them man and wife, and the chapel burst into applause. The Duke lifted her veil, and she gazed up into his eyes, which were kinder than the last time they'd seen each other. She smiled, and while he didn't smile back, there was a certain softness in his expression that warmed her. He turned her around, and together they beamed at the small crowd of people. Her sisters looked delighted—Violet even appeared to be misty-eyed. Her father, on the other hand, looked surly and contemplative, and he clapped only once or twice.

Iris surprised herself by realizing that she didn't care. For the first time since she had arrived on the Duke's doorstep, demanding that he marry her, she didn't feel doomed. She felt only relief.

Because for the first time in her life, she was free of her father's clutches, and she

was going to make sure she never fell back into them.

The wedding breakfast was a quiet affair. Throughout it, Phineas spoke not a word to his wife. He wanted to say something to her, to reassure her that their life together could be pleasant, to make her feel at ease in her new home, but he found he couldn't think of anything to say.

Throughout the meal, Iris kept trying to catch his eyes, even smiling at him. He tried to smile back, but the whole time he was aware of Lord Carfield's eyes on them. It seemed too risky to show any closeness between him and Iris—that, and the idea of smiling at his wife was more frightening than he had imagined it would be.

Iris's sisters sat close to them, and Phineas watched them covertly out of the corner of his eye. The youngest one—Rosalie, he thought her name was—talked animatedly to James between each of the courses. She was a little louder than a young lady ought to be, but Phineas supposed she was still young. The middle sister, Violet, was quieter, although when she did speak, she seemed intelligent and kind.

So these are the girls I will be protecting . My new sisters.

Just as the meal was winding to a close, and Phineas thought he might at last be able to escape, Lord Carfield rose to his feet, tapping the side of his champagne flute with a knife.

"If I may," the Viscount called, and a hush fell over the gathered wedding guests. "As the father of the bride, I would like to say a few words."

His tone was obsequious, but Phineas still felt his wife stiffen beside him.

"To say I'm proud of Iris would be an understatement," Lord Carfield began. "I didn't always have high hopes she'd marry, but here she is, not only married but

snagging a duke! My own daughter now outranks me.”

Scattered laughter rang out at this.

“Iris has always been a loyal daughter, and I know that she will make an excellent wife and duchess. Her loyalty to her family is unparalleled. Just look at how she has taken care of her sisters all these years...”

The Viscount’s cold eyes glanced over his daughters, and Iris’s expression darkened.

“While relinquishing such a daughter is always difficult, I know there is no better man to watch out for her than the Duke of Eavestone.”

Now he looked at Phineas, whose expression did not shift, even as he braced himself.

“The Duke and I are old friends,” Lord Carfield continued, a sneer now lining his lips, “and I know there is nothing he holds in higher regard than his family’s honor.”

Now it was Phineas’s turn to stiffen. He managed to affect a neutral expression thanks to years of practice, but under the table, his hands balled into fists.

“I am thus comforted in knowing that my daughter is now under his protection. I have no doubt that he will treat her with the utmost respect. So please, join me in raising a glass to my new son-in-law. To the Duke of Eavestone! And his new bride, the Duchess of Eavestone!”

Phineas knew what Lord Carfield was trying to do. In one speech, he was reminding Iris of his threats toward her sisters, while at the same time warning Phineas that if he tried to ruin him, he’d also be ruining himself.

As Phineas raised his glass, the collective murmur of “To the Duke and Duchess of

Eavestone” filling his ears, Iris’s fingers found his. She placed her hand over his fist and squeezed gently. This time, she was the one comforting him.

It was a small gesture, but it was enough to fill him with fear. Because he realized that Lord Carfield was right about one thing: Phineas wouldn’t do anything to dishonor or harm his new bride. He could only hope that she hadn’t fooled him, that she really was on his side.

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Chapter Five

“Are the Duchess’s chambers ready?” Phineas asked the butler the moment they returned to his London townhouse.

It had been a long day—first the ceremony, then the wedding breakfast, then various social obligations that were required of the new Duchess of Eavestone.

At last, they were back at Eavestone House, and Phineas needed a moment alone. He’d spent the whole day in the company of his bride, yet he hadn’t really had a chance to speak to her or get to know her. And while a small part of him was curious about the blonde-haired, green-eyed woman who was now his wife, he was also anxious to be alone.

In the ten years since his parents’ deaths, Phineas had worked hard to ensure that no one got too close to him. James, of course, was the exception. But Phineas spent most of his time by himself, and he didn’t feel comfortable spending the whole day in the company of Iris.

If the butler thought it odd that Phineas seemed anxious to get rid of his new wife, he was too professional to show any sign of it.

“Of course, Your Grace,” he replied, bowing to both of them. “I have put Her Grace in the chamber attached to yours.”

This made Phineas pause. He had assumed that his servants would put Iris in one of the family rooms further down the hall from his. But no... of course they had put her

in his mother's former chambers.

The chamber that adjoined his own...

Next to him, Phineas thought he felt Iris grow warmer, and indeed, when he glanced at her, she was blushing. Of course, Iris was not an innocent eighteen-year-old debutante. She had more of a sense of what was expected of wives on their wedding nights, and why her bedroom would be attached to her husband's.

Phineas felt his own ears start to redden, and he turned away at once.

Why are you acting like a schoolboy? This is a marriage of convenience, nothing more.

But he couldn't fully shake the feeling of agitation. Even if their wedding was one of mutual benefit, it still hadn't stopped him from reaching out during the ceremony and grasping her hand when she looked as if she might faint.

Poor thing... she had looked so fearful, even through her veil, and her whole body had been shaking. Not that he could blame her for being afraid. He wasn't exactly known for his kindness. She probably wished her father had started a rumor linking her to any other man but him.

Maybe Phineas had made it worse by taking her hand during the ceremony. The man who was the cause of her misery was probably the last person she wanted to comfort her. But he hadn't been able to help himself. She'd reminded him of a scared, wounded animal, in contrast to her usually tough exterior, and his instinct had been to care for her. Of course, she'd also taken his hand at the wedding breakfast, so perhaps she, too, wanted to care for him.

You'll have to put a stop to that before it goes too far .

It would not do to get sentimental about his new wife.

The butler led them up the staircase to their respective bedchambers.

“Goodnight,” Phineas said, nodding to his wife as he left her outside her chamber. Her eyes were wide as she stared after him.

“Goodnight,” she murmured.

Phineas felt a tug of guilt as he made his way to his bedchamber next door.

Was she expecting more? Does she want more?

Once inside, he went straight to the sideboard, where he poured himself a whiskey. The sideboard was near the door that connected his room to Iris’s, and through it, he could hear her moving around. There was a low murmur of voices, and he leaned toward the door imperceptibly. He wasn’t even fully aware he was doing it.

That must be her maid she was talking to. She’d come over with Iris’s things. As Phineas listened, he couldn’t quite make out what they were saying, but to his surprise, he realized he wanted to. He was strangely curious about what his wife was thinking and feeling during her first night in her new home.

After a while, he heard the sound of a door opening and closing, and then the chamber fell silent. Certain now that his wife was alone, Phineas set his glass down and knocked quietly on the door.

“Come in,” her soft voice called.

Phineas took a deep breath and then entered her room.

Iris was sitting at her dressing table, wearing a long dressing gown that covered her nightshift, brushing her hair. The only hint at the intimacy of the moment was her loose hair. It fell down her shoulders in long, blonde waves. In the flickering candlelight, it looked honey-colored.

Iris looked up from her dressing table, her intelligent eyes flicking to him, taking in his fully dressed state.

“Good evening, Duke,” she murmured. Although she appeared calm, he couldn’t help but notice that her hand had tightened around her hairbrush.

Her voice washed over him, soft and seductive, and he closed his eyes very briefly. When he opened them again, it was to find her just as infuriatingly beautiful as she had been moments before. With difficulty, he tried to ignore this, but he wasn’t entirely successful. Despite his determination to keep things simple between them, he was still a man, and he couldn’t help but feel something when his beautiful, half-dressed new bride was sitting in front of him.

“Good evening, Duchess, ” Phineas returned, and he was pleased to hear the composure in his voice. She would have no idea what the sight of her did to him. “I thought we might talk, now that we are finally alone.”

“That’s a good idea.” She set the hairbrush down on the dressing table. “There’s much we still have to figure out if we want to take down my father.”

“Yes, and considering how much time and energy that will consume, I thought we might dispense with the added worry of making heirs.”

It cost him something to say that, but he still did it. He had no time for distractions, even one as enticing as his enemy’s daughter.

For a moment, Iris's face remained blank. Then her shoulders relaxed slightly, and he thought he saw the briefest look of relief cross her face. He tried, and failed, to not take offense at this.

"I think that's probably for the best," she agreed, and he nodded curtly.

Phineas knew he should be relieved as well. He didn't want his relationship with Iris to get complicated. Especially when he wasn't yet sure if he could trust her. It was still possible she was working for her father. And if they lived as man and wife, there was no saying what information on him she might give her father. The fact she'd accepted his suggestion that they abstain from their marital rights went a long way toward proving that she wasn't trying to manipulate him, but he still couldn't be sure.

And yet, he was not relieved. He was frustrated. Unaccountably frustrated.

"Well, now that that's decided," he continued, a little more peevishly than he intended, "I think we should discuss how best to go after your father. What exactly did he tell you to look for when he asked you to spy on me?"

Iris frowned. "He didn't elaborate much. He seems to think you're going to try and take down his business interests, but more than that, he didn't say."

"Hmm. I think we need more information," he said. "We need to know what exactly it is that your father thinks I'm after. That way, we can stay one step ahead of him."

"What do you suggest I do?"

"Are you prepared to visit him and ask him to give you more information?"

Iris looked uncertain. "Won't he suspect me if I come right out and ask what he's up to?"

“I’m not sure what choice we have. You can play dumb... make it seem like you don’t know what to look for, that you’re overwhelmed by the vagueness of what he’s asked you to do. Play on your father’s biases against the fairer sex, his belief that you all are feeble-minded, even the intelligent ones.”

One of Iris’s fair eyebrows shot up. “So you know what my father thinks about women?”

“Everyone knows,” Phineas said contemptuously. He scowled, as he often did when he was thinking of Lord Carfield. “His lack of respect toward the fairer sex is well known.”

There was a moment of silence as Iris absorbed this, staring down at her dressing table. After a long moment, she looked back at him, a cool glint in her eyes.

“And what about you?” she asked softly. “What is your opinion on the fairer sex ?”

Phineas chose his words carefully. As much as he wanted to try and keep his distance from Iris, he also wanted her to feel safe and secure in her new home.

“My mother was a very gifted painter. I believe you were admiring one of her paintings when you first came to Eavestone House?”

Iris’s mouth opened slightly. “Your mother painted the portrait in the parlor?” she breathed.

Phineas nodded solemnly.

“It is an astonishing portrait. And to think... she painted her own likeness with such detail!”

“I remember her working on the painting,” Phineas said, and he was surprised by the emotion that colored his voice. He never usually spoke about his parents, and he wasn’t exactly sure why he was telling Iris about them now. “I’d come into her library every afternoon and watch her painting her own reflection in the mirror. She was patient, methodical, and obsessed with getting every detail right. My father was the opposite. He was an active man, impatient, and he hated sitting for portraits. But he would do it for my mother. The way he used to look at her...”

“Yes,” Iris murmured. “I saw that look in the portrait.”

There was a small lump in Phineas’s throat, and he swallowed past it before speaking again. “He always respected her patience and careful attention, especially since he was so different. He told me that she was the wise one in their marriage, the one who could always see the way forward when things felt hopeless. It taught me that women are not only worthy of respect but can be far superior to men in many ways.”

For a moment, Phineas thought that Iris was going to stand up and come to him. She was perched on the edge of her seat, staring at him, a look of deep emotion on her face. He wondered if he’d made a mistake in telling her so much about himself.

“It sounds as if they really loved one another,” she noted at last. Then, more tentatively, she asked, “How did they die?”

Whatever sentimentality had overtaken Phineas immediately evaporated, and he came back to himself. Straightening, he schooled his expression into one of polite disinterest.

She must have noticed the coldness in his expression, because she said quickly, “I’m sorry to ask, it’s just that?—”

“I should let you get some rest,” he interrupted, not looking at her. Bowing low, he

backed away toward the door connecting their bedrooms. “We will speak more about our plans tomorrow. I hope you sleep well in your new home, Duchess.”

And without another word, Phineas left his wife’s bedchamber as quickly as he possibly could, trying to ignore the hurt, confused look on her face.

It was strange to be back in her childhood home. Just a few days earlier, Iris had lived here, but now, it felt like a lifetime ago. In just a few short days, she had become the Duchess of Eavestone and taken over as mistress of Eavestone House. She had become a whole new person, with her own responsibilities and duties, no longer defined by her father.

Which is why it felt so strange to be back in her father’s townhouse, where she’d often felt she would never escape him. It was not a pleasant feeling. The moment she stepped across the threshold, she could feel the old, familiar panic beginning to stir in the pit of her stomach, and she promised herself that this would be the last time she ever stepped foot in this house.

In the future, Violet and Rose can come to me .

For now, however, she was here to see her father. And as Mr. Jones led her into the library, she braced herself to meet with her father’s usual brutal coldness.

Lord Carfield, however, looked surprised, and even a little excited, to see her.

“Iris!” he called, standing up and crossing to her. He kissed her hand before motioning that she should take a seat across from him. He sat back at his desk and gazed at her with anticipation. “I’m glad to see you so soon. I admit, I didn’t think you would be able to get information out of the Duke so soon, but I’m happy to be wrong. I’m sure you have your ways of getting him to... trust you.”

Iris didn't like the mocking look on her father's face, but she tried not to let her anger show. Taking a deep breath, she said, "I'm not here with information, Father, although I'm pleased to see you happy to see me."

At once, her father's face flushed, and he scowled. "Not here with information? Then why have you come? Your sisters aren't here—they're out promenading in Hyde Park."

"I came to see you, Father," Iris replied. "And to ask for your help."

Lord Carfield folded his hands on the desk, his eyebrows knitted in suspicion.

"It seems," Iris continued, "that I am having trouble finding out the information you want because I do not know what it is I'm supposed to be looking for."

"What do you mean?" her father barked. "I told you to find out if he's trying to sabotage me, to bring me down, ruin me like he has ruined my business associates."

Iris tried to be patient. "Yes, but he's hardly going to tell me his nefarious plans, is he? And the Duke keeps his study locked at all times, the key on him. Even if I were to somehow break into his study, which I don't think is possible, I wouldn't even know where to start. He's unlikely to state his plans outright. But if I had a sense of what it is you fear he is up to, then I could listen out for any reference to it, any conversations—no matter how subtle—with people who might visit."

Her father looked as if he were going to interrupt her, but she continued speaking. A change seemed to have come over her. Now that she was facing him, she didn't feel as afraid as she normally did in his presence. It was as if she were wearing armor that only she could see. He couldn't control her anymore.

"Right now I'm fumbling in the dark, and I don't want my sisters to be punished

because you didn't properly prepare me for this scheme of yours," she said rather forcefully.

Her father leaned back in his chair, his eyes roving over her with interest. Iris sat up a little straighter.

The Viscount wasn't used to being spoken to like this, especially not by a woman, and certainly not by her, and she liked the slightly shocked look on his face.

"Very well." He nodded. "You may have a point. I will tell you what it is I'm anticipating, and you can be on the lookout for anything to that effect."

He stood up and went to the window, his back to her.

"Many years ago, I had a deal with the previous Duke of Eavestone, your husband's father. Under that agreement, he planned to sell me some of his land that was rich in coal. But then Eavestone died—an untimely death, and very inconvenient for me—and his son didn't want to honor our agreement. I suspect he wanted to keep the land for himself and build his own mine."

He turned back around and gave her a contemptuous look. "Well... I wasn't having that. I had an agreement with the former Duke, and so I enforced the contract. Now, I suspect his son is going to attempt to sabotage my mines or the land on them. He may also be planning some scheme to buy back my lands—which would involve either forgery or blackmailing me into selling, as he knows I wouldn't give up the mines otherwise."

Iris sat very still, absorbing everything her father had said. "I'm surprised to hear he wouldn't honor his father's agreement," she began slowly. "Especially if the legal documents had been drawn up."

“Yes, well, he was fifteen and eager to prove he was tougher than his father, I suppose. I was prepared to make him a very competitive offer for the lands.”

“But if there was more profit to be had in mining it himself, then it makes sense he refused you,” she reasoned.

The Viscount scoffed. “What does a lad of fifteen know about what is more profitable? Had he done the work of calculating how much it would cost to build a mine? Did he hire the contractors who evaluated the land? Did he figure out how long until he’d see a return on his investment? No, that was all me. I did all the work, and he wanted to take my idea and my hard work and use it for his own profit.”

He strode to the chair where she was sitting and placed his hands on the arms, leaning over her in a menacing way.

“Believe me when I say this, Iris. Your husband is a spineless thief who couldn’t even do right by his dead father by honoring his wishes. He is not a good man. That’s why I need you. Together, we can take him down.”

Iris nodded. She wished she could lean back, away from her father, but she was blocked by the back of the chair.

“I understand,” she murmured. “And I promise to help you, now that I know what I’m looking for.”

Her father leaned back and stood straight. “Good. Because, don’t forget, your sisters’ happiness hangs in the balance. You would be a fool to cross me.”

Iris could hear his threat echoing in her head for the entire walk home, but it wasn’t nearly as loud as the nagging voice of her own doubt.

Chapter Six

“S o what did you discover?”

Iris looked up from her needlework to see her husband—she could never get used to that word!—standing in the doorway of her parlor, watching her. It had been several hours since she’d arrived home from her father’s house. The Duke had been out, which had given her time to think. Although she didn’t particularly like the direction of her thoughts.

Setting her needlework down, Iris stood up and curtsied. She knew she didn’t need to, but she still felt a little flustered whenever the Duke walked into a room. He was so tall and handsome, and his icy imperiousness—the remoteness that part of her longed to conquer—only made him even more attractive.

“Good afternoon,” she murmured, her throat very dry. “I didn’t realize you were back.”

“Don’t waste my time with idle chit-chat,” the Duke said, scowling as he walked further into the room. To her annoyance, the scowl only enhanced his chiseled jaw and aloof beauty. “Just cut to the chase. What did you learn from visiting your father?”

Settling herself back onto the sofa, Iris’s annoyance loosened her tongue. “I’m well, thank you for asking,” she scoffed.

The Duke stopped, scowling deeper, his eyebrows knitting together in confusion.

“I know ours is an unusual marriage,” Iris continued, “and that you are used to doing things your own way, but in a normal marriage, a husband asks his wife how she is doing before jumping into practical discussions.”

“What are you talking about?” The Duke snapped.

“I’m talking about a wife being treated with respect,” Iris said, stiffening. She held his gaze. “Which I know is something that was demonstrated to you as a child. Our arrangement might be... unusual, but I expect nothing less than that in our marriage.”

The Duke’s expression turned thunderous, and Iris held her breath. She was sure he was about to start berating her. But then his face softened, and he bowed his head in acknowledgment.

“You’re right, Duchess,” he relented. “I should have enquired about your health before jumping into particulars. Especially considering how difficult it must have been for you to enter your father’s house again.”

“Thank you,” Iris said primly. She tried not to look too pleased with herself, but she had to admit that it felt good to make the fearsome Duke of Eavestone apologize to her. Gesturing toward the sofa across from her, she said, “Won’t you sit?”

The Duke sat on the sofa, and for a moment, they just looked at each other. In the soft afternoon light, he looked particularly handsome. His hair was disheveled from riding, and Iris couldn’t help but wonder what it would be like to run her fingers through those chestnut locks.

“About my father,” she forced herself to say, “I think he was suspicious at first, but I managed to talk him into opening up. It’s about his mines. He thinks you have plans to sabotage them... or buy them back, I suppose.”

There was a flicker of triumph in her husband's eyes. He leaned back on the sofa, folding his hands behind his head. "Yes, I thought as much."

"If you thought as much, why didn't you tell me?" Iris snapped, irritated. "It could have saved me going to ask him, which may have alerted him that I'm working with you now."

The Duke gave her a cool once-over before answering, "I didn't want to influence you, and I didn't want you to give away our plans with your reaction when you spoke to your father. But I had to be sure."

Iris crossed her arms. She wasn't at all pleased with this answer. "If we are going to be on the same side in this, then you need to trust me. And that means telling me the whole truth. Not keeping things from me because you think I can't keep a secret."

"We already covered this," the Duke said dismissively. "I don't trust you. That's just something you're going to have to earn."

"Well then, I don't trust you either," Iris retorted, her temper flaring. It was bad enough to hear that he didn't trust her, but to hear it while he looked so handsome that it made her toes curl—that was infuriating. "Nor do I understand why you need to go about trying to ruin my father and his associates. I understand the situation with the mines is sensitive, but I think you could come to an agreement with him that leaves you both satisfied. After all, your father did agree to sell him the land..."

"What?" The Duke stared at her. His face, which was usually so expressionless, had become twisted with anger. "Is that what he told you?"

"Well..." Iris bit her lip. It hadn't occurred to her that her father might have been lying. After all, there would surely be legal documents to back up all his claims. "Yes, that's what he told me."

“And you believed him?” The Duke looked incredulous. “After everything he’s done to harm you and your sisters, you believed him?”

“What else am I supposed to believe?” Iris cried, throwing up her arms. “You tell me nothing!”

“Well then, let me tell you what your father won’t.” Her husband stood up, strode to the door, and wrenched it open before storming out.

Iris watched him go, feeling a mix of anger, fear, and doubt. As much as she was on his side in taking down her father, it was hard not to feel a small thread of doubt after listening to her father’s story. As terrible as her father was, the Duke’s reputation was almost as bad, and she couldn’t trust that he was as much of a victim as he said he was.

Within a few minutes, he returned holding several sheets of paper. He handed her the papers, and she began to read them.

The first was a letter from the former Duke of Eavestone to the Viscount. The tone was angry but calm, explaining again that he would not part with the land, that he didn’t know how Lord Carfield had heard about his plans to start a mine, but that he would not sell the land for anything. There were other documents as well. More correspondence between the late Duke and his solicitor outlining that he did not want to sell the land to Lord Carfield, and making it unequivocal that the idea of the mine had, in fact, been his.

Iris was aghast, although it was nothing compared to the feeling that rose within her when she got to the last document. It was a bill of sale of the land from her husband to her father, signed by them both. Even more shockingly, it was witnessed and signed by her mother.

She looked up, her mouth open. “You knew my mother?” she whispered.

“Of course not.” The Duke snorted.

“But... she witnessed you signing this.”

“She lied,” he growled. “I never signed that document. Your father forged it, including my signature, and your mother signed it. I was a lad of fifteen, grief-stricken and without anyone to protect me. It was easy to take advantage of me. I swore that I hadn’t signed this, but with your mother as a witness, it was two against one. Your father argued that it was my grief talking, that I regretted betraying my father’s wishes and selling, and that’s why I denied it. He was powerful and convincing, and I was just a boy, sick with the loss of my parents, and I couldn’t do anything to prove my innocence.”

“Even though your solicitors had these letters proving my father had been trying to buy the mine? Couldn’t they see that he’d go to any lengths, even forgery, to get them?”

“They couldn’t prove it,” the Duke said bitterly. He shook his head, then seemed to suddenly become tired, because he sat back down on the sofa across from her. He ran a hand through his hair. “And... your mother was very persuasive. Everyone knew her honor was unimpeachable. My solicitor believed her, and I think he thought I was rather unstable. Bertram saw me right after my parents’ death, you see, when the management of the estate passed to me, and he knew how hard I’d taken their deaths. To him, your parents’ story seemed plausible.”

He looked away. The pain on his face made Iris’s heart ache, and a new determination to help him surged through her.

“Bertram?” she repeated slowly. “As in August Bertram, Esquire?”

The Duke looked back at her, startled. “You know him?”

“He’s a close friend of my father’s,” she breathed. “He comes over for dinner regularly.”

The Duke’s jaw tightened. “Of course... They were working together the whole time. I should have realized.”

Iris, meanwhile, was looking back over the bill of sale. “There’s another thing...” she said slowly. “This was never notarized. Without the notary’s signature, it might not be legally binding.”

The Duke took the paper from her and scanned the document. Slowly, he set it down, his eyes wide. “You’re right. How did I not notice that?”

“It’s not always easy to see things clearly when we’re the ones who have been harmed.”

The Duke’s expression hardened, and he nodded.

Iris leaned forward until she could reach across the tea table and place a hand on his knee. As she did, she thought she felt him shiver.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t know any of this. But we’re going to make my father pay for what he did to you. We can speak to a new solicitor, get his opinion on the legality of a bill of sale that hasn’t been notarized.” She quelled the nerves inside of her—the nerves that told her she had no right to tell a man this handsome and powerful what she needed—and looked him in the eyes. “But in order to do this, we need to be a team. And that means being honest with each other. Agreed?”

Slowly, the Duke of Eavestone, the most feared man in England, nodded. “Agreed,”

he murmured. "From now on, we're a team. In fact, if we are to be a team, I'd like us to be on more equal terms. I'd like you to call me Phineas. "

Iris blinked, taken aback by the intimacy of his request. "I will try," she said slowly. "But it may take some time to get used to. You may... call me Iris if you wish."

"I do wish," he confirmed, surprising her further. His voice was husky, and she felt her cheeks flush.

"Phineas," she murmured, testing it out.

The word tasted sweet on her lips, and immediately, she shuddered. She'd never known a name could make her stomach ache with longing like that, that it could make her want to touch his cheek and feel his breath on her neck.

He responded to his name by leaning toward her, until his face was only inches away from her. For one wild moment, she thought he was going to kiss her. She couldn't breathe, she couldn't think. All she could feel was the pounding sensation of need coursing through her body.

Then he coughed and leaned back, and the spell was broken. "Right, well, I will leave you to your sewing," he said awkwardly, and before she could say another word, he stood up and exited the room, leaving her feeling more confused and flustered than she ever had in her life.

A week later, Phineas and his new wife sat down together to write a letter to Lord Carfield. They'd decided to wait a few days so that it would be more realistic for Iris to have discovered something incriminating about her husband.

"Write that a solicitor called William Barstow visited me," Phineas dictated as Iris sat at the writing desk in the room downstairs with his parents' portrait, which she had

turned into her private parlor. “Tell him you aren’t sure if that’s relevant, but that I wouldn’t let you meet him or serve him tea, and that we were locked up for several hours together. After he left, I was in particularly fine spirits.”

Iris paused her writing to raise an eyebrow at him. “You? In fine spirits? Well, now he’ll know I’m lying.”

Phineas was so caught off guard by her coy, teasing tone that he almost laughed. Almost. Instead, he gave her a hard stare, until she rolled her eyes and giggled.

“I’ll say you were less surly than usual and even had a slight spring in your step,” she offered, smiling to herself as she turned back to the letter. “That sounds more like you.”

“I’m not surly all the time,” Phineas protested.

Even as he spoke, however, he could hear the surliness in his voice. Iris looked at him and laughed again.

Briefly, Phineas felt the corners of his mouth twitch, and he wondered if he was about to smile. The sight of his wife laughing and smiling did lift his spirits a bit. And hearing her tease him made him want to be in on the joke, to laugh with her, even tease her back.

But he wasn’t sure how, so he kept silent. The feelings his wife elicited in him were strange, indeed. They made him feel like an uncertain fifteen-year-old again, unsure of how to act or what he even wanted.

So far, she still hadn’t called him by his Christian name, but he felt certain that soon, she would. He had similarly held off on calling her Iris, determined that she should take this next step before him. What surprised him was how much he wanted her to,

how much he longed to deepen the familiarity between them.

“Who is this William Barstow, anyway?” she asked as she scratched lines across the paper.

“He negotiates business acquisitions,” Phineas replied, glad for the change of topic. “It’s a purposeful misdirection. Your father will think my plan is to buy him out.”

“I see...” She paused, then started a new paragraph.

“What are you saying there?” he asked.

“I’m asking my father if he might allow my sisters to come visit me. Now that I’ve decided not to visit him anymore, I’d like to see them here. I’m just telling him that I miss them very dearly. Not that it will do any good. If anything, it’ll make him deny my request, just to make me suffer.”

She sighed, then put the finishing touches on the letter. She sanded the ink, then waved the paper back and forth in the air to dry the ink.

“Although I’m also reminding him that the girls’ happiness is paramount to me, so hopefully he’ll remember I’m only spying on you out of love for them, and I might not continue if he denies me access to them.”

It was clever, Phineas thought, as he watched her reread the letter. She was very clever. And striking. Her features were sharp in a way most women’s weren’t, and he found them startlingly beautiful. When she read, the lines of her face seemed to sharpen even more, and he admired how formidable she appeared. It reminded him of someone he’d once been close to...

He frowned, trying to remember. Too clever...

Then Phinease felt his stomach drop. He'd realized exactly who she reminded him of—her father. He'd just realized that she looked exactly like her father when she was thinking hard. Although she had none of Lord Carfield's coloring, the way her mind worked when she was scheming and the look in her eyes when she was focused was uncannily similar to the Viscount's.

It disturbed Phineas greatly to see his old enemy whenever he looked at his wife's face. Immediately, warning bells went off in his head. It was as if he had woken him up from a spell.

Taking a step back, he stared at Iris's profile. He'd almost forgotten that the smart, stubborn, sweet woman in front of him wasn't just his wife, but Lord Carfield's daughter.

She's still your enemy .

No matter how much she might tease him, or force him to open up about his past, he still couldn't trust her. And he'd be smart to remember that if he wanted to get his revenge.

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Chapter Seven

“If I didn’t know your husband was a ruthless tyrant, I’d almost envy you,” Rosalie said as she gazed around in rapture at the opulent entrance hall of Eavestone House. “Your house is beautiful! And the Duke’s palace is supposed to be even more magnificent.”

“Rose, don’t be insensitive,” Violet chided, following her sister through the front door. “Iris sacrificed a great deal to become the Duchess of Eavestone—and she did it for us.”

“It’s all right,” Iris reassured them, lowering her voice as she leaned in toward Violet. “In truth, I do love the house... and it does help ease the blow of my less-than-ideal marriage.”

Violet giggled and linked her arm with her sister’s. “I’ve missed you, Iris,” she admitted. “It hasn’t been the same without you at home.”

“I’ve missed you as well. It makes me ill at ease to think of you there without me.”

“Don’t worry about us,” Violet reassured her. “We can take care of ourselves.”

Iris looked at Rosalie, who was currently sweeping around the hall to look at the lavish decor, which included a cloisonné vase from the Far East, a tapestry from India, and a collection of Ottoman swords encased behind glass.

“It’s good to see Rosalie so happy,” Iris murmured. “She has too much energy and

enthusiasm to be locked up in the house all the time. I think it will be good for her to come out next year.”

Violet bit her lip. “Do you really think it wise for her to come out already? She’s still so young...”

“She’s only a year younger than you,” Iris pointed out.

“Yes, but she’s still so wild and impulsive...”

“She needs freedom,” Iris insisted.

She knew her youngest sister very well. In some ways, she envied her. Their mother’s departure had left Iris in charge of her sisters, and the early burden of responsibility had made her serious and cautious. Rosalie, on the other hand, had a wild spirit. She often had to repress it around their father, but when it was free to come out, it was infectious.

“Once she gets away from Father, she’ll settle into herself, find some calmness,” Iris continued. “Right now, she’s bursting with untapped energy because Father keeps her cooped up all the time.”

“He’s afraid she’s going to catch someone’s eye,” Violet scoffed. “His worst fear would be for us to marry someone not of his choosing—for him to lose all control over us.”

“Well, he’s lost control over me,” Iris said, glaring at no one in particular. “He can’t hurt me anymore, now that I’m under my husband’s protection.”

Violet didn’t respond to this right away, but her expression was thoughtful as Iris led her into the parlor and rang for tea. Rosalie was still full of energy, and she went to

the pianoforte, which was much nicer than the one at their home, and began to play a jig.

The tea came in, and Iris had just poured cups for herself and Violet when her sister spoke.

“So you really think you can trust him?” Violet asked, her voice low enough that Rosalie couldn’t hear. “When we spoke before the wedding, you weren’t certain...”

Iris stirred sugar into her tea and considered this. “I don’t know for certain yet,” she admitted. “But I am starting to feel that Society has misjudged him.”

“Oh? In what way?”

“The rumors that he is ruthless and dangerous... Yes, I think he has a thirst for vengeance that can drive him to extremes. But I also think that he has suffered greatly at the hands of men who were once more powerful than him and that his anger is justified.”

Violet frowned. “Who is more powerful than a duke?”

For a moment, Iris toyed with the idea of telling Violet about the Duke’s past—his parents’ tragic death when he was fifteen, and how, in his grief, their father had taken advantage of him. But she was afraid of Violet letting something slip to their father, and it wouldn’t be good for him to know that Iris knew the truth. More importantly, she was sure that the Duke would not want her to share his private confession with anyone else.

It had felt intimate when he’d told her what had happened to him. And apart from wanting to guard his secrets, she also felt a strange possessiveness of his confidence. He had shared the truth with her and her alone, and she wanted to keep it like that.

So, instead, she said vaguely, “There are many ways to be powerful.”

Violet looked like she wanted to ask more, but at that moment, a knock sounded at the door and the butler entered. He was holding a silver tray with a letter on it, which he offered to Iris.

Thanking him, Iris took the letter and unfolded it. Her blood went cold when she saw it was from her father.

Iris, I require the return of my middle daughter to our home at once. Her betrothed, Lord Redfield, has requested her presence in order to ascertain her suitability for marriage. He will not sign the contract of betrothal until he sees for himself that she will make an adequate wife.

If this letter comes as a shock to you, then I will point you toward the deviousness of your recent missive. I would also advise you not to try and trick me again with half-researched information clearly fed to you by your husband. I am intimately familiar with William Barstow’s client list, and I can assure you, the Duke of Eavestone is not among them.

If you want your youngest sister to escape your middle sister’s fate, then I would suggest you try harder to uphold your duty to me.

Yours,

C.

Violet felt as if she had been frozen in place. She couldn’t move. She couldn’t speak. The letter fell from her hands and onto the floor.

“Iris? Are you well?” Violet asked, anxiously grabbing her sister’s hand. “What is it?”

Who is the letter from?"

"He's given your hand," Iris whispered. Her lips felt numb. "He's promised you to Lord Redfield."

"What?" Violet's eyes widened. She snatched the letter from the floor and scanned it furiously. As she did, her mouth fell open. "But... You said that you had a deal with Father—that he wouldn't marry us off if you married the Duke of Eavestone!"

"We did," Iris said hollowly.

Of course, she hadn't told her sisters all the details of the deal, and now guilt flooded her. She had tried to trick her father, and he had seen right through her. Now, he was going to punish Violet for her mistakes.

"He can't do this," Iris spat. "And to Lord Redfield! He's the most vile, loathsome man in the ton. He has no respect for women, no decorum! It would be an insult to marry you off to that man."

She was almost shouting now, and the music came to a halt as Rosalie stopped playing and turned in their direction.

"What's happened?" she asked uncertainly.

But Iris didn't answer. She had leaped to her feet and was calling for the butler. When he came hurrying back into the parlor, she was already donning her gloves and preparing to head out.

"Where is my husband, Malloy?" she demanded. "I need to speak with him at once."

"Your wife is right," the solicitor said, giving Phineas a small smile as he looked up

from the document in his hand. “There may be grounds to fight this contract.”

Phineas’s heart leaped in his chest, but he kept his expression carefully guarded. He was visiting his new solicitor, Mr. Edwin Hargrove, at his offices in Piccadilly. Mr. Hargrove had been highly recommended to him by several men at his club who thought very lowly of Lord Carfield. Phineas was fairly certain, therefore, that Mr. Hargrove was not in Lord Carfield’s pocket, but after the revelation that Bertram had been double-crossing him, he felt more than a little paranoid.

Which was inconvenient, because that paranoia was also screaming at him that he should distrust his wife. But it was hard to distrust her, or to think any negative thoughts about her, when she had turned out to be so clever and helpful. Even the solicitor looked impressed as he set down the paper.

“She’s smart, your wife,” Mr. Hargrove remarked. “She noticed that this contract was never notarized, yes?”

“Yes,” Phineas replied, feeling like an idiot even as he said it. This was the kind of detail he should have caught himself.

“And then there is the matter of the witness.” Mr. Hargrove tapped the letter thoughtfully. “The Duchess of Eavestone says that her mother may be induced to tell the truth about the forgery?”

“My wife said it may be possible...” Phineas hesitated.

This was the part of Iris’s plan that he didn’t like. It didn’t sit well with him to put his faith in a woman who had already lied in order to ruin him. What would stop her from lying again?

“Well, even if she won’t change her testimony, we may still be able to prove that the

document was forged. Even if we can't, there is a case to be made that you were not in a fit state of mind to sign this. Including the fact that you were a minor at the time... there is an argument to be made that this bill of sale is null."

"I won't lend any credence to the lie that I signed this contract," Phineas insisted, staring at Mr. Hargrove with cool intensity. "Even if you think it could help our case. I won't let Carfield win like that."

"Your Grace, if the contract is ruled to be void, then he would hardly be winning."

"I never signed this contract, and I will not let you tell the court that I did. I will maintain that my signature was forged until my dying breath, because that is the truth."

Mr. Hargrove held up his hands in surrender. "Of course, Your Grace, I understand. Then we must look into the binding nature of a contract that was never notarized and see if Lady Carfield will agree to come forth with the truth. That may be difficult, as Lord Carfield will undoubtedly put a tremendous amount of pressure on her to testify in his defense."

"Lady Carfield no longer lives with her husband," Phineas revealed.

He watched with irritation as Mr. Hargrove's expression changed slightly—from surprise to disapproval and back to polite professionalism.

"I see," the solicitor said at last. "And where does she reside? Will we be able to get in touch with her?"

"I... am not sure," Phineas admitted.

His wife seemed particularly reluctant to speak about her mother, and he had not been

able to get from her how long it had been since she'd seen her, or where she lived. It was possible Iris didn't know.

"I can find out," Phineas offered.

What's the point of being a duke if you can't get people to track down witnesses for you?

"Very well," Mr. Hargrove said. "In that case, I will?—"

At that moment, he was interrupted by a commotion outside his office. He stared at the door as a woman's voice filled the antechamber outside. Phineas stiffened as well. He knew that voice...

Seconds later, the door was thrown open, and Iris stormed into the office.

If Phineas had thought his wife attractive before, it was nothing compared to what he thought now as she marched into the office. She looked angry—furious, even—but the passion of the emotions suited her. The color in her cheeks was rosy, and her neck and collarbones were flushed as well. It seemed to light her up, like a dazzling, brilliant sun. Her eyes were sparkling from exertion, and there was a look of fierce determination on her face that made his stomach flutter. She looked like a warrior maiden, come to claim her revenge, and it suited her beyond belief.

Behind her, the solicitor's secretary followed meekly, wringing his hands. "I'm sorry, Your Grace, Mr. Hargrove," he whimpered. "I told Her Grace that you were preoccupied, but she insisted on coming in..."

"You did the right thing to let her in, Jameson," Mr. Hargrove said, standing up at once. He bowed to Iris. "Your Grace, how may I help?—"

“You said you would protect them!” Iris interrupted, speaking directly to her husband. She had eyes only for him, and slowly, he rose to his feet.

“Duchess,” Phineas said, bowing low. “You are clearly distressed. Now, tell me what the problem is, and I will tell you how I will fix it.”

“Oh, you’ll fix it, will you?” She let out a wild, derisive laugh. “Just like you promised to make sure my sisters weren’t sold off in marriage like chattel?”

Phineas’s stomach twisted with horror. “Your father has threatened one of your sisters?”

“He’s already promised her to a man! They have just to sign the contract, and then it will be too late!”

“How do you know?”

“A letter came. He...” Iris glanced at Mr. Hargrove, as if unsure how much to say in front of him, then plowed on. “He knew the information I sent him was misleading. He must have realized I had decided to fight him. The girls had just arrived, and he sent a letter calling Violet back so she could meet Lord Redfield, so he could decide if she was worthy to be his bride.” She spat these last words out, clearly disgusted.

Phineas felt a wave of cold fury rush through him. Lord Redfield was a lecherous old man, reviled by every respectable member of the ton. It was preposterous that any father would marry his daughter off to such a man.

“This is your fault!” Iris continued, clearly too angry to do anything but shout. “I have held up my end of the bargain, and you have failed to hold up yours. You said you would protect them, and now...”

Tears filled her eyes, and she seemed to deflate in front of him. Phineas reached out to her and caught her just in time. She was limp as she looked up into his eyes.

“You have to save her,” she whispered. “Please, Phineas. Save my sister.”

Chapter Eight

“G ood God, man, who died?” James exclaimed.

He was staring up at Phineas from a wingback chair in the main room of their club, where, just moments before, he had been sipping brandy and playing chess with his cousin, Nathan Goldwin, the Marquess of Ketterdon.

Phineas had just strode in and made a beeline for the men, whom he’d known would be there, as they always were on weekday afternoons. Something in his expression must have alarmed them though, because they were both gazing up at him, concerned looks on their faces. James looked practically bemused.

Phineas, however, didn’t see what was so amusing. He had come straight to White’s after escorting his wife home, and rage filled every inch of him. This rage, however, gave him purpose. Everything felt clear, the way it always did when he was close to achieving a long-sought goal and knew exactly what to do next to ensure his victory.

“No one yet,” he growled. “But Lord Carfield might be meeting a very unfortunate end soon if I have my way.”

James let out a long ahhhh of understanding. “What has he done now? Did he make a move to protect the mines?”

“What? No, it’s nothing like that.”

“Then what is it?”

“It’s Violet, his daughter. He’s promised her to Lord Redfield.”

“Well then, I don’t envy the girl,” Lord Ketterdon said, stretching out and reaching for his glass of brandy. “Although I suppose she’ll be a widow soon, which is some consolation...”

“There will be no marriage,” Phineas snapped, making him pause with his glass halfway to his mouth, looking confused. “Not if I have anything to say about it.”

“All right, calm down, man.” James stood up and put a hand on Phineas’s arm. “Sit down and have some brandy, tell us what’s going on.”

“I don’t have time for brandy,” Phineas said. “I need your help to stop this marriage, and I need it now.”

“Of course, we’ll help,” James reassured.

Even in his single-mindedness, Phineas felt a flair of appreciation for his old friend, who was so willing to jump to his aid, even without understanding the reason.

Lord Ketterdon, however, looked uncertain. “I’m happy to help if I can, Your Grace, but is it our place to meddle in another family’s business?”

Phineas couldn’t understand why anyone wouldn’t understand the urgency of the situation. The memory of Iris’s tears, and her terror, was flooding him with panic. He’d barely even stopped to consider what it was he planned to do, or how unquestioningly he was leaping to his wife’s aid. All he knew was that he would go to the ends of the earth to keep this wedding from happening—to ensure Iris’s happiness.

Now, he fixed both men with a glare and declared, “It is my business. I made my wife

a promise, and I intend to keep it, no matter what.”

“There’s nothing we can do!” Violet cried, her voice much louder than Iris was used to.

She was usually so calm and collected, the kind of person who spoke only when she had something important to say, and even then, she had never raised her voice to make herself heard above others. Now, however, there was a slightly hysterical edge to her voice, and her eyes were wild.

They were sitting on the sofa in Iris’s parlor. Several hours had passed since the letter had arrived from their father, and so far, Iris had not sent her sister home. If their father wanted Violet to come home, he would have to come here and take her. That was the only way Iris was letting go of her sister.

So far, the Viscount had yet to try and force Violet to come home. Why should he? The law was on his side. Until Violet was of age, she was his to marry whomever he wanted. And while most rectors wouldn’t marry an unwilling woman, there was always someone that you could pay off to perform a ceremony against the bride’s will. If anyone could find such a man, it was their father.

“We can’t give up,” Iris told her sister sternly. “I will keep you here if I have to, but I won’t let you marry that horrible man!”

“But, Iris, I am technically Father’s property.” Violet’s eyes were filled with unshed tears, and it broke Iris’s heart to see it. “If you keep me here, he could send the Bow Street Runners to bring me home...”

“It won’t come to that,” Iris assured her, even as doubt tinged her words.

Would their father resort to such unsavory tactics? He wouldn’t like the scandal

attached to it, but as he had demonstrated recently, he was willing to sacrifice the family's good name to further his own ends.

“What about your husband?” Rosalie asked anxiously. She hadn't said much since the revelation of Violet's betrothal, which was unusual. Instead, she'd been sitting on the sofa, holding Violet's hand, crying quietly. “He's a duke. Can't he do something to help us?”

Iris bit back the angry reply she wanted to make. Phineas had already let them down enough. He had promised that he would protect her sisters, but he had failed to prevent this from happening. And she didn't believe for a second that he couldn't have discovered her father's scheme ahead of time.

Nothing happened in the ton without word getting out, especially at the clubs where all the gentlemen spent their days. If he had been paying attention to anything other than his quest for revenge, he would have known her father and Lord Redfield had been hatching this plan...

Violet, however, was shaking her head. “Dukes are powerful, but they're not omnipotent. He cannot keep me here against Father's will. He isn't my guardian. The law is on Father's side.”

All three of them were silent for a moment. Iris was thinking hard. If the Duke couldn't help them, if it was hopeless... then she would have to take matters into her own hands. Standing up, she began to pace back and forth in front of the sofas.

“We could send you abroad,” she suggested. “It would cause a scandal, and ruin Rosalie's chances of marrying well, so you'd probably have to go with her, Rose. To France, perhaps. Or America. Somewhere Father won't find you...”

Violet stared at her incredulously. “You mean for me to be on the run for the rest of

my life? And for Rose to forfeit her chances at a happy, normal life?"

"What chance does she really have, with Father arranging a match for her?" Iris argued.

"I can't do that to Rose," Violet said, and something in her eyes seemed to harden. "I am not so selfish as to ruin both your lives just because I do not care for my father's choice of bridegroom. No... I think I'll have to go through with it."

"You can't!" Iris shouted, and Rosalie nodded in agreement. "I won't allow it!"

"I'll be no different from the countless women before me who were married off to men they disliked," Violet said softly. She reached out and took Iris's hand, stilling her. "I'll be no different from you, marrying a man you hardly knew."

Iris sank down to her knees so that she was crouching in front of her sister, looking up at her. "Please," she murmured, "don't give up. Not yet."

"There will be no giving up," came a deep male voice from behind them.

All three sisters turned to see Phineas striding into the room, a thunderous look on his face.

Nor was it the only noticeable thing on his face. His left eye was badly bruised, and there was a cut on his eyebrow. His hair was mussed, his cravat had come undone, and the rest of his clothes were decidedly rumpled. He looked as if he had gotten into some kind of altercation.

Gasping, Iris jumped to her feet. "Phineas—Duke!" she cried, hurrying over to him. "What happened to you? Are you well?"

She wasn't quite sure what she was going to do when she got to him, but Phineas decided for her. When she reached him, he took her hands in his and pressed them against his chest. His eyes burned with something she'd never seen before as he gazed down at her.

"I am well," he replied, his voice gruff but soft. "And I assure you, everything will be well with Miss Violet as well."

"What do you mean?" Iris asked, unable to look away from the intensity of his stare.

"I mean that she won't be marrying Lord Redfield."

Iris's mouth fell open, and behind her, she heard her sisters gasp.

"Do you really mean it, Your Grace?" Violet asked uncertainly.

Turning around, Iris saw that her sister had stood up. Violet looked very pale and wobbly, but she was looking at Phineas with hope in her eyes.

"I do," the Duke said gravely. "You have my word on that."

He touched Iris's shoulder, and she turned back to him, unable to hold back the smile on her face and the tears in her eyes.

"What did you do?" she whispered. "How did you make this happen?"

"Don't worry about that," he said. "The matter is settled. But there are two things I need you to know, Iris." It was the first time he had used her first name, and it made her breath catch in her throat. "First of all, I always keep my promises. And secondly, I will always protect you and your loved ones. Even if I had not promised to protect your sisters, I still would, simply because you are my wife. The circumstances of how

our marriage came about do not matter. Now that you are my wife, now that you are the Duchess of Eavestone, I will always safeguard you and the people you love. Do you understand?"

Iris couldn't speak. Her throat was clogged with tears, and anyway, there was nothing she could say to articulate how she felt.

Her whole life, she had seen marriage as a life sentence of misery. That's what her parents' marriage had demonstrated to her. Never before had she thought that it could be safety, security, or peace. So she simply nodded, tears streaming down her cheeks as a new feeling filled her. She couldn't quite describe what it was, but it felt as if her heart were soaring.

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Chapter Nine

“Well, I rather think you shouldn’t go home tonight,” Phineas said, staring pointedly at the bruise forming around James’s right eye. “The Bow Street Runners might come by to question where you were tonight, and you can hardly answer them looking like you just got into a scrape on the street.”

“I did just get into a scrape on the street,” James reminded him, frowning sulkily as he sank into the sofa.

“I don’t want to hear anymore,” Iris warned from where she sat near the hearth, a slight smile on her lips despite her stern tone. “Whatever happened this afternoon, I’m choosing to believe it was all within the bounds of decency.”

This made James smirk, and even Phineas had to hide his smile.

It was evening, and James and Nathan Goldwin had joined them for dinner. Since the company was so small, all the ladies and gentlemen were now gathered together in the parlor, Iris and her sisters drinking tea while the men sipped brandy. It had been a pleasant evening, and as Phineas felt tiredness beginning to overtake him, he was able to reflect on how pleasant it was to have his home full of people he cared about. It hadn’t happened in a very, very long time.

There had been a cheerful atmosphere in the house since Phineas had announced earlier that Violet would not be forced to marry Lord Redfield. The usually reserved Violet couldn’t stop smiling, and he hadn’t failed to notice that his wife kept throwing tender looks in his direction. Each time, his heart leaped uncomfortably in

his chest.

It felt better than he had expected, to be needed, and to help someone who relied on him. More than that, it left him feeling warm and content to know that Iris was happy.

“I suppose Nathan should stay as well, then,” James argued, casting an appraising eye over his cousin. “He got it worse than I did.”

Indeed, the Marquess looked worse for wear. There was a bruise on his jawline, and one of his eyes was still half-closed, a cut on top of the lid. Still, he’d been in high spirits all night, flirting a little too obviously with Iris’s sisters and making them both flush scarlet.

“Do we have enough room for everyone?” Iris asked, catching Phineas’s eye. “I know Eavestone House is spacious, but it’s still just a townhouse...”

She was biting her lip, her brow furrowed in concern, and Phineas’s stomach fluttered with something he couldn’t quite place.

Pull yourself together, man . You’re making a fool of yourself.

“We will make do,” Phineas replied.

He scanned the room, counting the number of guests. One, two, three, four... Eavestone House had exactly five bedrooms. Which meant that Iris would have to give up her room to Violet and sleep in?—

“Violet and Rose will have to share a room,” Iris declared, her voice a little shrill, and Phineas knew that she’d realized the exact same thing at the exact same moment. She looked at him, but her eyes didn’t quite meet his.

Phineas felt a small flare of annoyance. His wife would rather make her grown sisters share a bed than sleep in his. Well, he was putting a stop to that right now.

“Absolutely not,” he said, his annoyance giving way to amusement as he saw her blanch. “Your sisters have been through an ordeal today, and I wish them to enjoy the finest hospitality we have to offer.”

“But—”

“The Eavestone dukedom is known for its generosity, my dear, and I won’t have it being said that I made my wife’s grown sisters share a bedroom.”

Iris opened her mouth to object, seemed unable to think of anything to say, and closed it again. Her cheeks were burning, and Phineas had to swallow a chuckle. His wife was embarrassed to share a bed with him, and he found her embarrassment wonderfully adorable.

Around the room, meanwhile, Phineas was sure he could feel their guests exchanging meaningful glances. He didn’t care. Let them gossip about them later. For tonight, he would get to share a bed with Iris. And while he knew that he would respect the agreement they had made to live not as man and wife, he couldn’t deny there was a part of him that longed to be so close to her for an entire night.

And from the look on her face, he suspected she felt the exact same way.

“Are you well, Your Grace?” Anna, Iris’s lady’s maid, asked, as she helped Iris out of her stays. “You’re trembling!”

Belatedly, Iris realized that Anna was right. As she lifted her leg to step out of her skirts, she noticed her whole body was shaking. But of course she was. This was the first time she would spend the night in her husband’s bedchamber. Phineas had

thoughtfully said he would be having another brandy in his library before coming up to bed, giving her time to change into her nightshift without his presence, but still, she felt his presence everywhere.

His chamber was decidedly masculine, from the dark mahogany wood paneling, to the wine-colored velvet curtains around the bed, to the lingering scent of her husband's eau de cologne, which smelled of bergamot and pine. There was also a large portrait of him hanging on one wall. It was a striking likeness, and as Iris stared up into the icy, penetrating blue eyes of her husband, she felt her heart flutter.

"I'm nervous," she admitted at last, turning back to Anna, who was watching her with a puzzled look on her face.

Anna's eyes flashed with understanding, and she tentatively put a hand on Iris's arm. "You're not... frightened of him, are you, Your Grace?"

"No," Iris said, surprising herself by the vehemence of her declaration. "I'm not. Actually, it's the opposite."

Anna frowned, but she nodded as if she understood and scooped up the rest of Iris's clothes from where she'd hung them on the changing screen.

"Well, if you ever feel frightened, you can always talk to me," she offered. "We servants know His Grace's reputation as well as you do..."

"Thank you, Anna," Iris said, and she meant it.

Anna had been with her her whole life, and she knew she meant well. But Anna didn't know the side of the Duke that Iris did. She hadn't seen the way he'd burst into the parlor earlier, declaring that her sister wouldn't marry Lord Redfield. She hadn't felt his strong arms around her as she'd fussed over his injuries...

Iris's heart fluttered again, and she cleared her throat. "Thank you, Anna. That will be all."

The lady's maid curtsied and left the room.

Very quickly, Iris shed her dressing gown so that she was just in her nightshift, then scurried over to the bed. Throwing back the covers, she got underneath as quickly as possible and pulled the blanket up to her chin.

Several long minutes passed, during which she anxiously watched the door. At last, there was a soft knock.

"Come in," she called out, her voice hoarser than she had anticipated.

The door opened, and Phineas entered.

The moment she saw him in the warm glow of the candlelight, her stomach fluttered. Her husband looked so handsome illuminated by the soft orange glow. His chestnut-brown hair looked even richer and more lustrous than ever, and his pale blue eyes reflected the flames.

"Good evening," he said, his eyes sliding over her.

Iris's mouth went dry. "Good evening," she managed to reply.

After a short hesitation, Phineas went to the screen she'd changed behind, and she heard him remove his clothes. When he reappeared, he was in his shirt sleeves and breeches. Iris had never seen a man in such a state of undress, and it made her heart hammer painfully in her chest. He crossed to the chair at his dressing table and sat down on it, then turned to gaze at her.

“Don’t be nervous,” he said, his voice as soft as velvet.

“I’m not nervous,” she lied. He raised an eyebrow, clearly not believing her, and she laughed. “Well, all right, maybe I’m a little nervous. We have never shared a bed before, after all.”

For a moment, his eyes swept over her, and she saw something sharpen in his expression, almost like a primal hunger.

Then his jaw tightened and he shook his head. “That changes nothing,” he said tightly. “Our marriage is still a business transaction.”

“Of course,” she said, trying to sound as if she hadn’t been wondering exactly this. “I know you are an honorable man.”

He opened his mouth as if to respond, then closed it again. The look on his face was... touched.

“That is a true compliment,” he admitted quietly. “Especially coming from you.”

“From me?” She let the covers slip down from her chin as she gazed at him.

“Yes. The way you protect and look after your sisters is very honorable.”

“Well, I’m all they have.”

“Still.” Phineas’s eyes blazed. “Family is everything, and I admire your commitment to yours.”

“I’m not committed to my father,” Iris pointed out, her lips quirking up.

“No,” he said with a small snort, “I suppose not. Speaking of which, the solicitor seemed optimistic when I spoke to him today—before you arrived in such a dramatic way and cut the conversation short, I might add.”

His expression was difficult to read, but Iris could tell from the slight amusement in his eyes that he was teasing her.

“That’s wonderful.” In her fear and panic over her sister’s betrothal, Iris had quite forgotten the reason why Phineas had been meeting with the solicitor. “What did he say, exactly?”

“Well, apart from admiring your legal knowledge of contracts, he agreed that there may be a case to fight the legitimacy of the bill of sale. Not only was it not notarized, as you pointed out, but he is hopeful your mother could testify that it was forged.”

Iris nodded but said nothing. She had a feeling she knew what Phineas was going to ask her next.

He leaned forward, resting his hands on his knees as his eyes continued to study her face. “He did worry that your father would be able to intimidate your mother and convince her not to testify. I had to assure him they do not live together.”

“Was he shocked by the realization?” Iris asked, unable to keep a touch of bitterness from her voice.

“Perhaps at first,” Phineas replied, smirking slightly. “But then he remembered to whom he was speaking, and he adjusted his reaction.”

Iris felt a rush of gratefulness for her husband. Even in the smallest of ways, he was always protecting her—even from the judgment of a solicitor whose opinion she should not care about.

Phineas stood up, stretched, and walked over to the basin on the dressing table, where he bent over and began to splash water on his face. Iris watched him covertly out of the corner of her eye. She was impressed that he hadn't asked anything further about her mother.

It felt as if he were trying to tell her that he was willing to listen, should she wish to tell him about the unusual situation, but that he wouldn't pry if she preferred not to. And as she watched his strong hands dab the towel on his face, she felt the powerful urge to open up—perhaps for the first time in her life.

“My mother lives with her sister,” she revealed.

In the mirror on the dressing table, Iris saw Phineas freeze. He then slowly raised his head so that his eyes met hers in the mirror. Setting the towel down, he turned to face her. His expression was soft, open, and Iris felt a rush of confidence. He would listen to her, she knew, patiently and without judgment.

“She left when I was thirteen,” she continued shakily. “I don't know why she left, even after all these years. Father would never talk about it. Now that I know him better, I realize he must have been difficult to live with. I'm sure she was deeply unhappy in their marriage. But she didn't leave any sort of note, any explanation. For many years, I thought she left because...” Iris felt her throat tighten and tears prick her eyes. “Because of me. And my sisters. I thought she must have hated being a mother.”

Phineas moved slowly toward the bed. When he reached the edge, he sank down onto the covers near her feet. His expression was still tender, even a little concerned.

Iris drew her knees up and hugged them to her chest. It made her feel safe to confess these secrets to him when she was curled up into herself like this.

“Father got worse after she left. He was never easy to deal with, but after she left, he became unbearable. That’s when he started threatening to marry me off to horrible old men whenever I misbehaved. To be fair to him, I did act out quite a bit after she left. I missed her so much, and I was so angry...”

“That’s no excuse for him to make those threats,” Phineas said sharply. “You were only a child missing her mother. Of course, you acted out. It must have been terrifying to be threatened with marriage, especially when you were still so young.”

“It was terrifying,” Iris mumbled, her heart hammering again at the look of righteous anger on Phineas’s face. “And you’re right, I didn’t deserve it.”

“You didn’t,” he agreed, and he tentatively placed a hand on her knee. Even through the blankets, she could feel the warmth of his touch. “I wish I could go back in time and protect you from that,” he murmured.

“It was my mother’s job to protect me from it,” Iris said, “and she didn’t. Eventually, I learned that she’d gone to my aunt’s. She didn’t keep in touch, but my father let it slip once, during one of our arguments. After that, when I realized she was so close, that she could come back whenever she wanted, I became an exemplary daughter. Never again did I get in trouble, except when Father was being unreasonable and blamed me for things I hadn’t done. I thought that if I were a good girl, then he might tell Mother, and she would come back.”

Iris had to stop for a moment. Her voice was choked, and it took several deep breaths to keep the tears from falling. At the same time, she felt Phineas’s hand tighten on her knee.

“But of course, she never came back. She never even wrote. So, I became for my sisters what she should have been for me. I protected them as she should have. And that’s why I would do anything to keep them safe.”

Phineas nodded as if he understood. “You want them to feel as if they have a mother,” he murmured.

“I suppose I do,” Iris mused. She’d never quite thought of it that way, but it made sense. “They don’t remember her as well as I do—Violet was nine, and Rose was only eight—so they don’t miss her as much. And I think I told myself that I could replace her, for them, so they wouldn’t have to carry around the heaviness that I carry. The feeling of abandonment.”

“You’re very strong,” Phineas said, and she looked up into his eyes. They were shining with something akin to anger, but she knew it wasn’t directed at her. “But you shouldn’t have had to be,” he added.

Her breath caught in her throat. Phineas heard and leaned forward so that his face was close to hers.

“You were only a child yourself,” he whispered. “You shouldn’t have had to be a mother for your sisters. You should have had someone protecting you and letting you be a child.”

Iris could no longer hold back her tears. As she gazed into her husband’s eyes, a single tear finally spilled over, trailing down her cheek. Phineas reached forward and wiped the tear away with his thumb.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “Thank you for saying that.”

He smiled softly at her and then released her. He stood up and pulled the covers back up to her chin, tucking the sides in around her.

“Rest now,” he said, his voice as soft as a lullaby. “You’re safe.”

Iris closed her eyes, and moments later, she felt him lay down on the other side of the bed. He remained above the covers, but all night long, she felt his arms around her, holding her tight.

Chapter Ten

“He’s ordering you back to the house,” Iris said, slamming the letter down on the breakfast table.

It was the next morning, and she had just received a most unpleasant missive from her father.

Across the table from her, Violet and Rosalie looked at one another, then at her.

“Well, we have to go home, at some point,” Violet pointed out. “We can’t stay here forever.”

“Everything will be better now,” Rosalie added. “Father must know that the engagement has come to an end and that he isn’t to cross His Grace again by promising us to someone like Lord Redfield.”

“Father is cunning,” Iris said, crossing her arms. “He’ll find another way to punish you if he can’t marry you off.”

She glanced at the head of the table, where Phineas was watching this scene unfold. His expression was apprehensive.

“What else does he say in the letter?” he asked.

“Well, he’s clearly furious,” Iris huffed. “He said he discovered the broken engagement last night and that Lord Redfield told him, The men of the ton now know

your daughters are under the protection of the Duke of Eavestone. ”

Phineas, to her surprise, smirked. “Well, I’m glad he got the message,” he said.

Violet and Rosalie laughed.

“All of you are taking this far too lightly!” Iris hissed, staring between her husband and her sisters with incredulity. “This is our father we’re talking about. The man is not going to give up just because Lord Redfield is a craven who can’t stand up to my husband.” She glanced at Phineas and smiled apologetically. “Not that many could, of course.”

He gave her a sardonic look. “Obviously.”

“I understand your concern, Iris, I really do,” Violet said. Beside her, Rosalie heaped another helping of porridge into her bowl. “I just don’t know what the alternative is. We have to go home, eventually.”

Iris sighed. She couldn’t deny the truth of this statement. As much as she would have liked to keep her sisters with her forever, the truth was, their place was at their father’s home.

“You are both welcome back whenever you’d like,” Phineas assured.

“Really?” Iris looked at him in surprise. She hadn’t gotten the impression he was overly fond of having his home invaded by two young ladies.

He frowned at her, as if he didn’t understand the question. “Of course. They’re your sisters.”

Her heart fluttered uncomfortably, and she turned back to her sisters. “Please come

back whenever Father becomes intolerable.”

Rosalie made a face. “He’s always intolerable. But all my things are at home... And he has promised to take me to Bond Street soon to get a new dress for my debut next year.”

Iris couldn’t feel any of the excitement that lit up Rosalie’s face. The sooner Rosalie came out, the sooner their father could try to marry her off. Unless what he said was true, and the men of the ton knew that she was under the Duke’s protection...

But even then, there might be some men who wouldn’t be scared of Phineas. Men who would be willing to face his wrath if it meant making an alliance with her father and his profitable coal mines...

Iris was still thinking about this later as her sisters were packing their things. Phineas was in his study, and she took the opportunity to visit him there.

Knocking quietly on the door, she entered at the sound of his grunt of permission. He looked up as she entered, and a small, secret smile flitted across his lips. As it did, Iris realized that this was the third time she had seen her husband smile in the past day. Considering that he hadn’t smiled once when she’d first met him, this was especially gratifying.

And truthfully, she felt a little flushed and warm as she smiled back. Last night, something seemed to have changed between them. She couldn’t say what, exactly. All she knew was that as he’d held her in his arms the night before, she’d felt truly safe for the first time in her life.

“I had a thought,” she said, approaching his desk, “at breakfast. We should visit my father’s mines and see if they’re really as profitable as he says they are.”

Phineas set down his quill and rubbed his eyes. “You think we could get his investors to pull out if we prove he’s lying about his profits? I wouldn’t be surprised if he did manipulate the numbers, to be frank...”

“Yes.” Iris nodded, excitement seizing her. “Or maybe we can prove the mines are too dangerous and get them shut down that way.”

“I think it’s worth a try,” Phineas said. He cocked his head to the side and studied her. “Who knew that I’d end up with a wife far more clever than I am?”

“Well,” Iris quipped, “I didn’t know it was you, but I knew whoever I married would end up thinking as much.”

An hour later, Violet and Rosalie had left back to their father’s house, and Iris and Phineas were on their way to the mines. Fortunately, these mines were not located as far north as the rest of the Eavestone estate in North Yorkshire, but it would still be a day’s journey to South Wales.

Iris felt invigorated by the trip, rather than exhausted by the prospect of a long day in the carriage. It was her first journey with her husband, and anyway, it felt good to be out doing something. Sitting around and waiting for her father to make a move only made her anxious. She wanted to be on the offensive, not the defensive.

It was late when they arrived in the small mining town of Cwm in Blaenau Gwen, and Phineas suggested they get some rest. After a hearty dinner of potatoes and steak and kidney pie at the local inn, they went straight to bed. It was the second night that Iris had shared a bed with her husband, but this time, she barely had a chance to feel excited or embarrassed, as she was so exhausted from the journey that she fell asleep right away.

The next morning, she and Phineas struck out for the mines, where they hoped they

would be able to speak to some of the workers without provoking their employers' ire.

When they arrived at the mine, they were greeted by the foreman, a stout, ruddy-faced man with a large mustache called Mr. Greaves.

"A pleasure to meet you," Phineas said, shaking his hand. "I am the Duke of Rhinebeck."

The foreman's eyes widened, and he wasn't the only one. Iris also had to hide her surprise. The Duke of Rhinebeck was one of her father's most illustrious allies, and one of the few Phineas didn't seem hell-bent on ruining. From everything Iris had heard about him, he was a man of honor, despite his association with her father.

Father has always been able to be charming when he needed to...

"Your Grace!" the foreman sputtered, bowing low. "It is an honor to have you visit our mines. His Lordship has told me you are an investor of the soundest judgment. I hope that you will be impressed today by our little operation."

"I have no doubt I will be," Phineas said graciously. "And this is my wife, the Duchess of Rhinebeck. She will also be touring the mines today."

The foreman couldn't quite keep the disapproval from his face as he bowed to Iris. "Her Grace will be accompanying us?" he asked uncertainly.

"My wife is the one with the most astute judgment," Phineas explained smoothly. "Without her, I would have made many unwise investments."

Iris couldn't help but smile. She liked this version of her that Phineas painted.

“Very well,” the foreman said reluctantly. “But I should warn you, it is not a pleasant place for ladies.”

He wasn’t wrong about that.

Iris had never thought of herself as a particularly fearful person. After all, she’d had to be brave to protect her sisters from their father for all those years. But as the door to the cage that would take them down to the mines closed, and the pulley system jerked and began to carry them down into the darkness, she felt fear creeping up her spine.

She determinedly didn’t take Phineas’s hand, but she barely breathed for the whole journey down into the mine. Once they had reached the bottom and the door was pulled open, her fear only grew.

“The tunnels are very low,” Mr. Greaves informed them as they exited the cage. “You’ll have to crouch in order to walk.”

Phineas glanced at Iris, but she shook her head. “I’ll be fine,” she murmured.

Crouching, she stepped out of the cage. All around her was thick dust, and immediately, her eyes watered. Her lungs burned, and she coughed loudly.

It was very dark in the mines, but the men were carrying lanterns. These illuminated just a little ahead of her so that she was able to make out turns just as she reached them, but they also cast large shadows on everything, which made the tunnels more spooky.

Meanwhile, the sound of hammers hitting coal was all around them, reverberating through her head. After a quarter of an hour crawling through the tunnels, Iris felt as if the sound had seeped into her, rattling her very bones.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Phineas whispered to her as they crept along another dark, damp tunnel. In the torchlight, his eyes looked soft and worried.

“I’m not as fragile as I look,” Iris muttered back.

Truthfully, she was afraid. She felt it would be unbearably inconsiderate to admit that, especially when she’d been here for only a few minutes, while the miners had spent most of their lives down here.

Phineas smiled slightly. “Of that, I was already certain.”

Then they turned a corner, and a horrifying sight met her eyes. Men were hunched over, their hammers raised, chipping away at the coal inside the tunnels. Their faces had turned completely black from the coal dust that filled the air. In between the sounds of their hammers, she could hear their hacking coughs, which seemed to accompany every single one of their movements.

Worse still were the people who were running back and forth, stacking the coal into wheelbarrows and then wheeling them away, to somewhere, she assumed, where the coal was lifted up into the daylight. The people running these wheelbarrows were—

“Children!” she gasped.

It was unmistakable. Children were scurrying back and forth, covered from head to toe in soot, coughing and squinting through the dark to see where they were going. The one closest to her, who was stacking coal into a wheelbarrow, looked as if he couldn’t be more than seven years old.

“Those are children,” she said to the foreman, who was holding his lantern up high to inspect the work.

“Yes, Your Grace,” he confirmed, nodding disinterestedly. “Children are the ideal height to run the coal, as they don’t have to bend over in the tunnels. They can move quickly. See? They don’t have the strength to hammer, though,” he added, shaking his head, as if it caused him much grief to think he couldn’t employ children for every task in his mine. “It’s a right shame because we can pay them a pittance compared to the adults. The mines would be a whole lot more profitable if we could have children hammer. But, alas, it just ain’t possible.”

“Yes, what a shame you can’t exploit children even more abominably than you have their parents,” Iris snapped.

The foreman gaped at her, clearly shocked by her words. Then his face reddened.

“Excuse me, Your Grace,” he snarled, “but if your husband means to invest, you should be thankin’ us that we have found such clever means to cut costs. Do you know how much it costs to keep this mine goin’? It’s a fortune, and every chance we get to save money and make more for our shareholders, we take it.”

Iris felt a sick feeling rise in her stomach, and she had just opened her mouth to give the foreman a piece of her mind when Phineas put a hand on her elbow. Jerkily, she turned to stare at him. Very subtly, he shook his head no. Iris shut her mouth and turned away from the foreman as best she could, making her way, crouched down, over to one of the children close by.

“Forgive Her Grace,” she heard Phineas say. “She has a soft heart.”

“I think it very unwise to allow a lady down into the mines,” the foreman grunted. “Especially a duchess.”

She didn’t hear Phineas’s response. The child near her had just looked up, and the pain in his eyes was enough to erase every other thought from her head.

“Are you all right?” she asked, reaching out a hand instinctively.

The child flinched and leaned away from her.

“I won’t hurt you,” she soothed, lowering her voice to a soft whisper. “My name is Iris. What’s yours?”

The child looked up at her with big, uncertain eyes, and she smiled.

“Thomas,” he mumbled and then looked back down at the ground.

“It’s nice to meet you, Thomas,” Iris said firmly. “I was wondering if you could tell me how old you are.”

“I’m ten, Milady,” he replied, his eyes still downcast.

He must have heard her accent and realized she was from the peerage. Iris’s heart ached. Even down here in the dark and misery of the mines, this little boy had to treat her as if she were his superior. Worse still, she knew there were some people—people like her father—who would be offended that he hadn’t used the correct honorific. It was then that Iris felt a stirring of hatred in her chest for her father and all those who exploited the vulnerability of others, especially children.

“And how old were you when you started working here?” she asked.

“Eight, Milady.”

“Eight?!” Iris felt her blood boil, but she tried to keep her voice calm and steady.

“And are you treated well here?”

At last, Thomas looked back up. But instead of looking at her, he glanced over her

shoulder to where the foreman was still speaking to Phineas. His expression was fearful.

“Yes, Milady,” he mumbled.

Iris leaned a little closer so that their foreheads were almost touching. “You can tell me the truth,” she whispered. “My husband is very powerful, and if you say you are treated poorly, he can make things better for you.”

Thomas swallowed and shook his head. “I ain’t treated bad, Milady. Mr. Greaves is good to us.”

Feeling that the boy would not speak ill of the foreman while he was so close, Iris changed tactics. “And the dust down here, does it not bother you?”

“I get sick a lot,” Thomas admitted, his voice lowering slightly. “And Ma says it’s from the coal dust. I cough up blood sometimes.”

“That’s terrible!” Iris gasped. “Have you seen a doctor?”

“We can’t afford a doctor, Milady,” Thomas mumbled, looking back down at his toes.

“Even with the extra wages you make working here?”

“Ma takes me to the local healer,” he said. “Soon I’ll be old enough to go to London and work in a factory. Ma says that will be better for my lungs.”

Iris gaped at him. “But you’d have to leave your family.”

“The factories give us room and board,” Thomas said, shrugging. “I just want to help

my family. Pa can't work anymore ever since his injury on the farm..."

Just then, he began to cough. It was a hacking cough, so powerful that it shook his whole body. He raised a hand to cover his mouth, and Iris saw the tears that had sprung to his eyes. It took everything in her not to reach out and take him in her arms.

"I should get back to work," he wheezed, once he finished coughing.

"Thank you for speaking with me," Iris said reluctantly. "It was nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too, Milady." Thomas bobbed his head, grabbed the end of his wheelbarrow, and turned away from her. Soon, he had disappeared around a bend in the tunnel.

Iris watched him go with a knot in her stomach. She had never felt so much anger in her life, except perhaps when her father had promised Violet to Lord Redfield. The injustice of it was infuriating.

This was what her father did, over and over again—he exploited children. First her, with his threats of marriage to vile older men, then Violet, by promising her to Lord Redfield as a means of punishing Iris, and throughout it all, these little boys, who should have been out enjoying their childhoods, not working in dark, dangerous mines.

Iris was quiet for the rest of the tour. Phineas remained calm and cool, talking to the foreman politely, asking questions and making comments about the possible pros and cons of investing. He didn't so much as glance at her, even though she was sure he had seen the dark, angry expression on her face.

Doesn't he care that we are surrounded by so much human misery?

Didn't he care that she was on the verge of tears? Didn't he care about anything other than his revenge?

By the time they emerged from the mines half an hour later, Iris was incensed at the world and all the powerful men who controlled it, including her husband. Her rage fueled her purpose. Never in her life had she been so determined to take down her father—and shut down his mining operations once and for all.

Chapter Eleven

“Y ou’ve been very quiet today,” Phineas noted that evening, as he watched his wife picking at her food. “I know it was difficult to see what we saw today.”

Iris looked up at him, a surprised expression on her sharp, beautiful face.

“Do you?” she asked, her tone accusatory. “I got the impression that you weren’t affected at all by what we saw today.”

Phineas raised an eyebrow. Her words stung, although he wouldn’t let on that they hurt. “I was acting,” he reminded her. “I didn’t want to raise the foreman’s suspicions by getting upset by what we saw.”

“It didn’t seem like acting to me,” she snapped.

Reaching for her wine, she took an unsteady sip. When she set the glass back down on the table, her eyes were filled with tears.

Phineas took a long sip of his wine before responding. It was a surprisingly good wine for an inn of this size in the south of Wales.

They were in the dining room of the inn, where the innkeeper had insisted they sit at the largest table and enjoy the most lavish meal the cook could prepare—Venison, Phineas noted with pleasure. The innkeeper had been beside himself when he’d realized that a duke and duchess would be staying at his inn. He’d given them the finest bedroom and ensured them that they would want for nothing. The experience

might have been relaxing, even romantic, if it weren't for the specter of the mines hanging over them.

Iris's sadness was not unexpected. Her care for others was part of what Phineas admired so much about her. She always put other people first. Watching her today speaking to the young boy in the tunnel had moved him more than he cared to admit. Not only had it touched him deeply that she'd been so concerned for the boy, but he couldn't help but think what she might look like talking to their own son... Not just talking to him, but protecting him from the cruelty of the world, advocating for him just as she'd clearly wanted to advocate for the boy in the mine.

In truth, the image had affected Phineas so powerfully that it had taken a great deal of strength not to ask for a moment alone so that he could collect himself.

But of course, he hadn't. If he had, Mr. Greaves might have been suspicious and kicked them out of the mines.

"It was very difficult for me not to say anything," he said. "I was disgusted by what I saw in those mines. The exploitation and abuse not only of children but of all the workers... It sickens me. This is not what my father had in mind when he thought about converting the land into mines."

"Do you mean it?" Iris croaked, her eyes still wet.

"Of course I mean it," he said, a flare of annoyance coloring his voice.

Who does she think I am?

"There were moments during that tour when I wanted to break character and tell Mr. Greaves exactly how long I'd make sure he went to prison for what he was doing to those children. Him and your father, of course."

Iris was gazing at him with a strange expression on her face. It was almost like admiration, and it emboldened him further.

“In fact, I might have, if it hadn’t been for you.”

“Me?” She looked taken aback. “What did I do?”

“You spoke to that little boy. If you hadn’t, I wasn’t sure I could bear it. But once I saw you speaking to him, I knew that I had to keep Mr. Greaves distracted so you could get the real story. It gave me purpose.”

Iris was quiet for a moment. “I’m very impressed,” she said finally. “You are a good man, Phineas.”

Phineas almost choked on his food. No one had ever said this to him before, and to his horror, he realized he was blushing. Iris seemed to notice because she changed the subject quickly.

“I always knew my father was evil,” she rushed to say, “but I never really knew the extent of it until today.”

“Unfortunately, he isn’t that different from most other landowners,” Phineas said, eager to seize the new topic. “Many gentlemen I know would use their land and positions of power in exactly the same way. And the truth is, coal mining is difficult and dangerous work. It has revolutionized the country and keeps our fires lit and our houses warm, but the cost to human life and dignity is severe.”

Iris set down her fork and knife, her expression troubled. “Then what can we do? Close down the mine?”

“That’s one option.” Phineas frowned. “But then the miners would lose their jobs.

Many of them, in fact, would be against the closure of the mines.”

“Even if it improved their quality of life?”

“Their quality of life would hardly go up if they had no income,” Phineas pointed out.

Iris fidgeted in her seat, clearly trying to wrap her mind around all this. “But the way things are... they can’t go on.”

“No, they can’t,” Phineas agreed. “The way your father runs his mines is particularly egregious. The miners should be receiving three times what he is paying them, and child labor should be banned.”

“But won’t the parents object to losing that income?”

“Not if the adults are paid what they’re worth.”

“Hmm...”

Iris stroked the rim of her wine glass, lost in thought. It struck Phineas suddenly that the last time he’d watched her thinking, he’d thought she looked eerily similar to her father. But he no longer thought this. Whenever he looked at his wife now, he saw only her. The resemblance to her father was gone.

He wondered if he had imagined it, or if he simply was starting to associate her thoughtful expression with her loveliness and intelligence and not her father’s villainy.

“We could probably report to the authorities the unsafe working conditions of the mines,” Iris suggested after a moment. “Get inspectors out here from the government. Even alert child labor charities in London. They could picket the mine, make running

it so unprofitable and cumbersome that he gives it up—or at least sells it to someone better.”

He leaned forward so that no one around them could hear him. They weren’t alone in the dining room, although the other diners were giving them a wide berth. Most, he suspected, had never seen a duke and duchess before.

“That’s not a bad idea,” Phineas said, impressed by her astute thinking.

Iris smiled and picked up her fork again. All night, she’d been picking at her meal, unable to eat. Now, she finally began to eat in earnest, and Phineas was glad to see some color return to her cheeks. She looked so beautiful when her pale cheeks were stained red from happiness, embarrassment, or...

Phineas swallowed. He couldn’t let himself think about how else he’d like to see his wife blush scarlet.

“You really thought I didn’t care about the miners?” he asked, trying to force himself not to let his mind wander in a dangerous direction.

She blushed, and his thoughts immediately became unwholesome again.

“I didn’t know what to think,” she admitted. “There are not many wealthy dukes who would spare a thought for poor, miserable miners. And especially dukes with...”

“With my reputation?” he finished, trying not to sound resentful.

She looked up sharply, clearly afraid she had offended him, and he gave her his most ironic state. She laughed.

“You are not exactly known for your kindness and generosity,” she pointed out.

“Although in the days since our wedding, I have never seen you act in any way that would justify the cruel rumors about you.”

Her gaze was soft, and Phineas felt the back of his neck tingle. “You know I have ruined people,” he muttered, his voice a low rumble. “You once accused me of bankrupting innocent men.”

“Yes... but if they were anything like my father, then I know now that they deserved it.”

“They did. But It’s important you know this about me, Iris. I am not a saint.”

She stuck her chin out defiantly. “I know that. But I don’t want you to be a saint. I just want you to be open with me.”

“I am open,” he said, a little taken aback. “Open enough.”

“Not enough,” she retorted. “I want to know the full you, Phineas. All the good and all the bad. I’m tougher than you think. I can take it.”

“I think you’re tough,” he whispered.

She smiled, a hard, sly smile. “Then show me.”

Phineas was finding it difficult to breathe. The force of her gaze, and the honesty and bravery of her words, winded him. There was so much he wanted to tell her, but the idea of opening up to her even more was terrifying. But if she could tell him what she really wanted, surely he could be open with her as well.

“What is it?” she asked, leaning instinctively toward him. “You can tell me.”

Phineas exhaled slowly. Her eyes were beseeching, even tender. They were trying to tell him he could trust her. And he wanted to, so badly.

“You know my parents died when I was young,” he said at last. She nodded, her eyes still wide. “What is less commonly known is that they were killed during a tragic carriage robbery. The men who set out to rob them also robbed them of their lives.”

Iris clapped a hand over her mouth. When she lowered it, she whispered, “Phineas, I’m so sorry...”

“It was a very difficult time.” He swallowed. There was a throbbing pain in his chest, as there always was when he spoke of his parents’ deaths, and he had trouble meeting her eyes. “I was plunged into a deep state of melancholy. For weeks, I could not sleep or eat. I was like a ghost, half-dead, haunting the halls of Eavestone Castle. I couldn’t think, I couldn’t handle the responsibility of the estate.”

“You were grieving,” she murmured.

“Yes. During that time, your father was a comfort to me. He’d been close to my father, and I thought he was on my side. But it turned out that he used his closeness to my family to sell off many of our valuables, as well as small parcels of land, to his friends. It started small at first, little things I wouldn’t notice or miss, so he could gain favor with other powerful business owners. It ended with this land—the land with the mines. And this, your father kept for himself. It was the real prize, I understand now. The thing he had wanted all along.”

Iris shook her head. “So you have spent the last ten years going after the men who bought what my father stole?”

Phineas nodded. “Your father is the last among them. He is also the most well-protected, which is why it has been harder to take revenge on him. His wealth has

insulated him from attacks. He employs protection officers and has many of the Bow Street Runners on his payroll. And he and his friends are well-connected in the ton. Meanwhile, I spent years too angry and grieving to socialize much with the peerage. As a result, I am considered an outsider, an unknown entity. It wasn't hard for your father and his friends to paint me as a dangerous, villainous man, especially when I was so hell-bent on bringing them down."

They were both quiet for a moment, looking at each other. Iris seemed calm and understanding, her breathing deep and rhythmic.

"I am so sorry for all that happened to you," she said at last. "I'm sorry that your parents were killed, I'm sorry for what my father did, and I'm so sorry that you had to spend years isolated and despised, when what you really needed was love."

Phineas's breath caught in his throat.

Did she just say love? Does that mean she...

But he couldn't even finish the thought. It was too much to hope for. After ten years without love of any kind, Phineas could not allow himself to believe that this beautiful, brilliant, compassionate woman could love him.

Iris seemed to realize the implication of the word because she blushed and looked away, and for the rest of the meal, they spoke only of trivial matters.

After dinner, they retired upstairs. The chamber that had been prepared for them was simple but comfortable, with a large bed and a dressing table, water basin, and screen, behind which Iris changed into her nightdress.

Phineas changed quickly as well, and by the time his wife emerged from behind the screen, he was already in bed with a book in his lap. However, he couldn't read. All

he could concentrate on was his wife's movements, which he watched out of the corner of his eye. She went to the wash basin, where she splashed water on her face. She then sat down at the dressing table and began to brush her pale blonde hair.

The movements were mesmerizing. Phineas had never known that a woman brushing her hair could be so bewitching. But now, he couldn't tear his eyes away from her delicate wrist, her shiny hair, and the glimpse of her face in the dressing table mirror.

Iris finished brushing her hair, then stood up and came to the bed. She wasn't looking at him as she slipped under the covers. Phineas tried to read the words written in front of him to no avail. All he could think about was the scent of her perfume—like vanilla and roses—and how it was wafting toward him from her side of the bed.

At last, he set down his book and looked at his wife. She was staring determinedly at the canopy above them.

"You were wonderful today," he said. She turned to look at him. "Your care for others is truly inspiring."

"You're the one who cares for others," she returned. "You're the one who is trying to break my father's hold on the mines."

Phineas shook his head. "Yes, but until today, my goal for doing so was purely selfish. I wanted to ruin your father's business in order to take back my family's land. It was about revenge and nothing else. It's not that I didn't care about the plight of the miners, I just hadn't considered it. But after today... Well, I'm not merely fueled by revenge. I'm also fueled by compassion—the need to make the miners' lives better."

Iris's eyes were shining, and Phineas reached out and touched her cheek very lightly. Still, it seemed to send a shiver through her.

“You inspired that,” he murmured. “Your concern for the miners changed me. You changed me, Iris. From the moment we met, you have challenged me to think more about others and put those less fortunate before myself. You have made me a better person, and for that, I am forever grateful.”

Iris opened her mouth, then closed it again. At last, she murmured, “I don’t know what to say.”

“Then don’t say anything,” he said, before he leaned forward and kissed her.

Iris’s lips were soft and warm, and the moment he kissed her, Phineas felt as if an electric current had shot through him. He wasn’t sure what exactly had made him kiss her, except that he didn’t know how else to express the feelings that were welling up inside him. All he knew was that he couldn’t go a moment longer without kissing the woman who had changed his life so much.

And what a kiss it was. It was soft and sweet, unlike any kiss he’d had before. For a moment, Iris seemed to freeze beneath him, and he felt a thrill of fear run down his spine. But then she kissed him back. The moment she did, happiness flooded him. This was what he was meant to do—to shower this woman with affection and love. This was his purpose.

Then he stopped thinking entirely, and for a long moment, neither of them pulled away, lost in the kiss and the moment and one another.

At last, Phineas pulled away. He didn’t want to push her too far or rush her into anything. He still wasn’t entirely sure what he wanted. As much as a part of him desired for them to live together as man and wife, the prospect was still daunting, especially in light of the feelings that were currently raging through him. If he told her how he felt—if he truly put himself out there—she could reject him. And he wasn’t sure he could handle the disappointment.

“What was that for?” Iris whispered.

She was gazing up at him with a starry-eyed expression. Her cheeks and neck were red, and it pleased him to see how the kiss had affected her.

“For changing my life,” he said. “And that’s all I’ll do for now. I just wanted you to know how deeply you have changed me. Goodnight, Iris.”

“Goodnight, Phineas.”

But after he’d extinguished the candle—after Iris’s breathing had become shallow and he knew she was fast asleep—Phineas lay awake, wondering what he was waiting for. He was married to the most brilliant, beautiful, and compassionate woman he had ever known. They were partners. They were friends. So why was he hesitating? Why was he holding himself back? Was it only fear?

And by the time he was drifting off to sleep, he’d determined that when morning came, he would tell Iris how he felt. He wouldn’t let fear hold him back.

I’ll tell her she has brought love into my life . I’ll tell her I love her.

The next morning, however, Phineas never got the chance. He woke up to someone shaking him. Startled out of sleep, he pushed them away, then sat bolt upright. For a moment, he looked around in confusion, then he realized that it was Iris who had been shaking him, and he relaxed slightly.

When he saw the expression on her face, however, his worry came rushing back.

“What is it?” he asked at once.

“It’s my father,” she whispered. “He found us.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

“I want to speak to Eavestone now! If you keep me from him, I’ll make sure you are out of business by year’s end!”

The roar came from downstairs, and Phineas could hear it, followed by more yelling, as he pulled his clothes on as quickly as he could. There was no time to ring for his valet. Lord Carfield was here, in South Wales. He’d discovered what they were up to at the mines—or he suspected what they were up to.

But how? Phineas silently wondered as he hastily tied his cravat. Who could have told him?

Even if the foreman had suspected something, it would have taken another day for a letter to reach London and another day for Lord Carfield to arrive in Wales. The Viscount had arrived just a day and a half after them, which meant he must have discovered that they’d gone to Wales half a day after they’d left.

But who could have told him?

Was it possible that Iris had told her sisters, before they left Eavestone House, that they were going to the mines? Had she foolishly let something slip? Or—it was unthinkable—was it possible that she was still helping her father spy on Phineas?

The thought left him cold, and he tried to put it out of his mind as he threw on his jacket.

At last, Phineas was dressed, and he wrenched open the door and hurried down the stairs with as much dignity as possible, Iris following in his wake. He could feel her fear, could sense it like she was a deer and he a wolf, and it sparked every instinct in him to protect her.

Downstairs, a livid, red-faced Lord Carfield greeted them. The innkeeper was hovering nearby, looking worried and deferential, and Phineas immediately tried to put him at ease.

“Everything will be all right,” he reassured him. “Lord Carfield and I simply have business matters to discuss. Can you show us to your parlor?”

The innkeeper nodded and wordlessly escorted them to a small parlor off the main hall. Phineas was careful to keep himself between Lord Carfield and Iris the whole time. Once the innkeeper had ushered them inside, he retreated as quickly as possible, leaving the three of them alone.

Phineas turned to face Lord Carfield. The man looked older and more unkempt than he had at the wedding. Living without his eldest daughter—whom he seemed to have treated simultaneously like a wife and a servant—had obviously not done good things to him. His hair was grayer, his face more lined, and his clothes disheveled.

Lord Carfield’s face was still red with fury, but when he spoke, it was with a measured calm.

“Well, I believe felicitations are in order,” he said, his eyes flicking between Phineas and Iris. “I did not realize, when my daughter married you, Your Grace, that she was marrying a man she admired and cared for so much.”

“What are you talking about?” Phineas asked sharply.

Lord Carfield’s eyes sparkled with maliciousness. “It is clear that a bond has formed between the two of you,” he snarled. “I’m touched, truly, to see that Iris has found happiness. Especially since I was the one who brought you two together.”

The sarcasm of the comment sent a jolt of fury through Phineas.

“Bringing us together is the only good thing you’ve ever done in your life,” he snapped, before he could think better of it.

Lord Carfield’s lip curled. “So, it’s true. You really are in love. How... quaint.” Next to him, Phineas felt Iris stiffen. “I suspected as much, as the reports that I have received of your marital bliss have been exceedingly nauseating.”

Phineas’s face felt very hot, and he refused to look at his wife. He may have thought the words I love you to himself last night, but this was not exactly the moment for a romantic declaration—especially when it came from Lord Carfield’s mouth.

“What do you want, Carfield?” he demanded.

The Viscount sneered. “I heard you were visiting my mines?—”

“—on my land?—”

“On my land. And I wanted to let you know that I know you have combined forces.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

It was the first time Iris had spoken, and she didn’t sound nearly as afraid as she had looked upstairs. Her voice was strong, and when Phineas glanced at her, she looked determined.

“It means what it means,” Lord Carfield said. “You are no longer spying on Eavestone for me. You are working with him to take me down. It would take a fool not to see it.”

Phineas swallowed.

Was it really so obvious?

“Now... I don’t know exactly what you are doing here,” Lord Carfield continued. “But as soon as I heard you were visiting the mines, I knew that you had decided, together, to try and harm my business. I’m here to tell you that it won’t happen. And that you both have been banned from ever stepping foot on my land again. Do you understand? If you come onto my property again—any of my properties—I will have you arrested for trespassing.”

He leaned threateningly toward them, and Phineas put a protective hand on Iris’s arm.

Lord Carfield’s eyes narrowed as he watched the movement. “I also have these,” he added as he reached into his bag and pulled out a sheaf of papers, which he shoved toward Phineas.

Phineas took them, and his heart sank as he quickly scanned the front paper.

“What is it?” Iris whispered.

“They’re documents certifying that my mines have been thoroughly evaluated and found to be safe and profitable,” Lord Carfield replied instead. “So whatever you are trying to do here to undermine me, it won’t work. I am a respectable business owner, and if you try to bring false accusations against me, you will see me in court.”

He straightened up, then turned to go. At the door, he paused and turned back around.

“And one last thing. You may have blocked my attempts to marry off Violet for now, but you haven’t heard the last of me. Good day.”

And then he slammed the door shut behind him and left.

After her father left, Iris started to shake. She seemed to have lost control of her legs, and she felt as if she were about to collapse.

Before she could, however, she felt Phineas's arm wrap around her waist, and she looked up to see the calm blue eyes of her husband gazing down at her.

"Are you all right?" he asked, leading her over to the small sofa and helping her down onto it.

"I think my father just said I can never return to my childhood home," Iris whispered. She knew she was in shock. Nothing felt real, least of all her father's words. She looked up, and tears pricked her eyes. "He's banned me from visiting my sisters!"

"Then they'll come to us," Phineas reassured her. He looked so resolute that she felt a glimmer of hope.

"You really think he'll allow it?"

Phineas cocked his head. "I'm a duke, Iris, in case you haven't noticed. I won't take no for an answer."

Despite her panic, Iris couldn't help but laugh. "You're really not scared of him?" she asked.

Phineas shrugged. "I'm wary of him. I don't underestimate him. But no, I'm not scared of him." He frowned, and she could sense that he was less optimistic than he let on. "These documents, however... if they're as airtight as the bill of sale he forged, they may be harder to fight."

"Do you think they're legitimate," she asked, "or forged as well?"

“They have to be forged... There is no way your father’s mines are as safe as these say they are. Human suffering is evident to anyone who visits. It can’t be legal, let alone acceptable. But he is excellent at forging legal documents, as we know... I’m not sure how we would prove that these are forged, especially if he has paid off prominent solicitors to certify the legality.”

“Don’t give up,” Iris said at once, placing a hand on his arm.

The touch thrilled her, and all of a sudden, the memory of their kiss the previous night flashed in her mind. She blushed and removed her hand. The arrival of her father this morning had pushed the memory of the kiss out of her mind, but now it was difficult to think about anything else. It was her first kiss, after all, and it had been everything she had ever hoped for. It was romantic and sweeping.

It had also meant more to her than she could express that Phineas had stopped after the kiss. After all, there was still so much to learn about one another, and she didn’t want to rush anything. But when he’d kissed her, she had felt something she had never felt before—pure contentment and happiness. She had never believed that someone could ever make her feel that way, but with Phineas, she felt sure that he would always protect and respect her. And his kiss had said that perhaps he could do more than respect her... perhaps he could even love her.

“I won’t give up,” Phineas vowed, pulling her out of her thoughts. “But if we can’t shut down the mines, we’re going to have to turn to your mother. Do you think you’re prepared to speak to her again after all these years?”

Iris swallowed. The idea of speaking to her mother after so long brought up complicated emotions. There was dread and fear, of course, and also anger. Worse still, part of her was also excited and hopeful at the thought of seeing her mother again. But this only made her more angry—her mother didn’t deserve it, after all this time.

“I know,” Phineas said gently, and she felt a rush of gratitude. “I know it’s scary, the thought of seeing her again. But you’re brave, Iris. Even after years of your father trying to scare you into submission, you still found ways to fight back against him. And you don’t need to be afraid anymore. Not of seeing your mother, and not of your father. Things are different now.”

“How are they different?” she asked, although she thought she already knew the answer.

His eyes sparkled, and he reached down and cupped her chin, angling it up so that she was looking directly into his eyes. “Because you have me. And I will never let anything happen to you. Now, what do you say we get back to London before your father has us arrested.”

She laughed, despite herself. “I suppose I should reach out to my mother,” she said with a sigh.

“Yes,” he agreed. “But before that, there’s something else I want to do with you.”

She looked at him curiously. He was grinning, a mischievous look in his eyes. “What?” she asked cautiously.

“I want to take you to a ball.”

“A ball?” She gaped at him, completely shocked by his idea. “Do you think we have time for a ball, when we have so much to do to bring down my father?”

“Iris, you deserve to have a little bit of fun. We’re the Duke and Duchess of Eavestone, after all, and the ton is expecting us to make our debut in Society—especially after the scandal of our marriage. And more importantly...” Phineas’s eyes glittered, and she felt herself redden again. “I want to show you off.”

Five days later, Iris and Phineas attended Lord and Lady Southerby's ball at their large townhouse in Grosvenor Square. As their names were announced, Phineas couldn't help but reflect on the fact that just a month ago, he had been at another ball with Iris, although back then, he had barely even been aware of her existence. But because of that ball, he had been linked to her forever.

While a month ago this had been a horrifying prospect, he was now more grateful than he could ever say for the chance encounter that had brought them together. Accidentally ending up married to Iris was the best thing to ever happen to him.

The Southerby Ball was well-attended. All of London's most fashionable ladies and gentlemen were there. Phineas had been a little nervous that Lord Carfield would be there, but he needn't have worried. The Viscount rarely attended balls.

While Phineas sometimes attended balls, he wasn't particularly comfortable at them. He usually went only to meet with business partners in the back rooms, where gentlemen drank scotch and played poker to avoid dancing. Never before had he danced with a young lady at a ball. More than a few marriage-minded mamas had tried to coax him into asking their daughters to dance. A few had even tried to entrap him. But he had always avoided dancing—and young ladies in general. Marriage had never been something he thought about.

Which is perhaps why so many heads turned in their direction when they were announced and glided into the hall. The entire hall fell silent as people stopped their conversations and turned to stare at them. Then a low buzz broke out again as the onlookers began to whisper to one another.

Next to him, Iris looked nervous. "They're all talking about us," she murmured through her polite smile.

"Naturally," he responded with a chuckle. "We caused quite the scandal in the ton, if

you remember, and then married quickly and suspiciously. Of course, we are the topic of many conversations.”

“I was hoping there would have been another, more salacious scandal since then,” Iris said. “And that everyone would have forgotten about us.”

“They’ll grow bored of us, once they realize we aren’t as interesting as they thought.”

Phineas directed his wife over to the lemonade stand. The people around them nodded politely but didn’t approach. If anything, they seemed to be giving them a wide berth.

“It’s mortifying,” Iris added as he handed her a lemonade. “All these people think that I would engage in an affair with a man without the promise of marriage. They probably think you only married me because you got caught. That you are resentful of having to be married to me.”

“Hmm.” Phineas did not like that one bit. It was important to him that everyone knew he was the most happily married man in all of London. “Then why don’t we show them that I’m quite content to be married to you?”

Iris barely had time to look surprised and pleased by his words before he had bowed before her, taken her hand, and pressed it to his lips.

“Duchess,” he murmured, “would you do me the honor of the next dance?”

“But... it’s a waltz,” she breathed. “It’s already considered the most scandalous of dances.”

“Which is exactly why I want to dance it with you.”

She laughed even as she blushed. The sight made his heart beat faster in his chest. She looked so adorable with pink cheeks and sparkling eyes.

“It’s unseemly for married couples to dance with one another,” she pointed out, although she didn’t sound convinced by her own argument.

“I don’t care.” Phineas was determined, and she could tell.

The music from the previous dance ended, and with another blushing smile, she set her cup of lemonade down on the table and allowed him to steer her to the dance floor. They took their positions, the music began, and they started to waltz.

“For someone who never dances, you’re quite good at this,” Iris remarked as he whisked her across the dance floor with graceful ease.

“I always loved to dance,” he said. “As a child, my favorite lessons were with my dancing instructor.”

“That’s unusual. Most gentlemen I know hate to dance and have to be talked into it.”

Phineas chuckled. “I remember telling my mother once that I planned to be the kind of gentleman hostesses love to invite to their parties because they actually like to dance with all the eager debutantes.”

Iris laughed. “You would have been the most popular gentleman in the ton, under different circumstances. You probably never would have noticed me.”

Phineas shook his head. “I would have noticed you.”

“You didn’t,” she pointed out. “It took my father’s scheming for you to even realize who I was.”

“But that’s because I avoided marriage altogether. After my parents’ deaths and the loss of my land, I became so single-mindedly hell-bent on revenge that all thoughts of romance went out the window. But if I had been allowed to have a normal life—if I had gone to balls without that grief and thirst for vengeance hanging over my head—then believe me, I would have noticed you. And I would have asked you to dance at every single ball. Twice.”

He twirled her expertly, and when she faced him again, her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were soft.

“It would have caused much gossip,” she murmured. “I think you would eventually have had to marry me.”

“There is no alternate version of life where I don’t marry you,” Phineas said.

He hadn’t meant for this to come out with quite so much heaviness, but the moment he said it, he could feel the air between them grow warmer. It was the closest he had come to confessing his feelings for her, and from the way her eyes grew wide, he knew she’d taken it as a declaration of sorts.

And then suddenly Phineas couldn’t bear it any longer. He couldn’t wait a moment longer to tell his wife exactly how he felt. If anyone knew that life was short, it was him. And he wasn’t going to waste any more time he spent with her without telling her what was in his heart.

“Iris,” he murmured, “there’s something I have to tell you.”

Iris gazed up at him steadily. He took a deep breath. The words were on the tip of his tongue. All he had to do was say them.

It would be all right. Iris wouldn’t reject him. He could do this.

And then suddenly, unbidden, an image of his mother and father flashed before his eyes—the two of them waving goodbye from the carriage as he stood on the steps of Eavestone Castle, their smiling faces, the last time he ever saw them alive.

He couldn't do it, he realized, as he stared down into the hopeful, expectant eyes of his wife. Everyone he loved had left him. It was better to cut off all emotion than to feel the pain of losing those he loved.

His mouth was open, but he didn't know what to say. He couldn't do it.

But then Iris reached up and placed a hand on his cheek. She smiled. "I love you, Phineas," she confessed.

And everything else fell away. Suddenly Phineas didn't feel as if he was in a hot, crowded ballroom, surrounded by onlookers. It was just him and Iris, alone in their little universe.

"I love you too, Iris," he said.

The words rushed through him. Nothing had ever felt so right in his life. Nothing he'd said before had ever been so true.

"I love you!" he repeated, more loudly, as if shocked by the realization. Really, he just wanted to hear it again, to ensure that she understood he was serious. "I love you so much!"

Iris laughed, then stood up on tiptoe and pressed a small kiss to his cheek. It was scandalous, they both knew, for a married couple to show so much affection to one another in public, but clearly, Iris no longer cared.

They gazed into one another's eyes as they finished the dance, completely lost in the

magic of the moment.

“Let’s go home,” Phineas suggested as he led her off the dancefloor. “I want to be alone with you.”

“Yes,” she breathed. “Let’s go home.”

“And, Iris...”

“Yes?”

“I know I said that we would not live as man and wife, but I would like to change our arrangement if you are amenable to it. I want to live with you, and love you, as a proper husband. But you can take your time to think ab?—”

“Of course, I want to,” Iris interrupted. Her eyes were now shining, and Phineas thought she might cry. “It’s what I want more than anything.”

“Are you sure?” Phineas asked anxiously.

He wanted to be sure that she meant what she said and that she didn’t feel any pressure one way or another.

“I’m sure,” she replied, and he could hear the conviction in her voice. “I want to start a family with you, Phineas. To show our child the love that your parents showed you.”

Those were the best words he’d ever heard in his life.

In the carriage, Phineas couldn’t keep himself from kissing her again, and this time, without anyone watching, they were able to stay entwined for some time.

At last, the carriage arrived home, and the two of them stumbled up the stairs, giggling and finding any excuse to touch each other.

The butler opened the door, and they fell through it. Phineas was about to ask the butler to bring them some champagne when he caught sight of the man's troubled expression.

“What is it, Malloy?” Phineas asked sharply.

“You have a visitor,” Mr. Malloy announced, his voice as strained as his expression.
“Bridget Crampton, the lost Viscountess Carfield.”

Chapter Twelve

“My mother is here?” Iris stared at Mr. Malloy. She was sure she was in shock. Her whole body had frozen, and she felt as if someone had just dumped cold water over her head. “Where?”

Mr. Malloy looked at her warily. “I’ve put her in your parlor, Your Grace.”

Iris swayed on her feet. She thought she might faint. Her mother was here, in Eavestone House. After all these years, she was about to see her again.

What would she be like? Would she recognize her? And what if her mother didn’t like her?

“Iris? Are you well?” she heard Phineas ask. His voice sounded far away. She couldn’t even bring herself to look at him.

“Take me to her,” she managed to utter. “Take me to my mother.”

Mr. Malloy bowed and motioned for her to follow him.

As Iris passed Phineas, he reached out and touched her arm. “Let me come with you.”

“I’ll be all right,” she said at once.

His expression remained soft. “I don’t want you to have to face this alone.”

She hesitated for a moment, then relented. As much as part of her feared letting Phineas see so much deeper into her soul, she feared facing her mother alone even more.

The butler led them up the stairs to the small parlor. He pushed open the door, and Iris stepped into the room.

Her mother was sitting on the sofa. The moment Iris and Phineas came into the room, she stood up.

Lady Carfield, to Iris's astonishment, smiled. "Iris!" she gasped. "My daughter, you look so beautiful!"

She hurried across the room to Iris. As she approached, Iris took her in.

Her mother looked much older than the last time she had seen her. Her once blonde hair was now streaked with gray, wrinkles lined her face, and there was a weariness to her that Iris couldn't help but note. But still, even after more than ten years apart, there was so much that was familiar—the warm, laughing eyes; the easy smile; and the way she smelled, like flowers in a spring garden.

Lady Carfield made to pull her into a hug, but Iris flinched and pulled back. There was an awkward moment where her mother stood with her arms outstretched. Then she dropped them to her sides. To Iris's embarrassment, her mother's eyes filled with tears.

"I have missed you so much," Lady Carfield murmured. "After all this time, here you are. My little girl, my firstborn, all grown up... it's unbelievable." Tears began to stream down her cheeks, but she didn't bother wiping them away. "I know it has been too long, and that you probably cannot forgive me for?—"

“You abandoned me.” Iris surprised herself with the venom in her words. “You abandoned me, you abandoned Violet, and you abandoned Rose. How could you do that? You left us at the mercy of Father’s whims, when you should have protected us from him. How can you ever justify that?”

Lady Carfield’s mouth opened slightly, and the tears continued to fall from her eyes. Iris felt nothing but disgust at the sight.

“I would never try to justify it,” her mother began quietly. “I can only explain why I behaved the way I did, even if I can never forgive myself for what I did.”

“Oh, it’s been hard to forgive yourself, has it?” Iris spat. She was so angry that she was shaking. “And what about me and my sisters? Have you even spared one thought to consider how hard it has been for us to forgive you?”

“Yes, darling, I know, and I want?—”

“Do not call me darling !” Iris screeched. “I’m not your darling. I’m not even your daughter. Perhaps you are my birth mother, but you have not acted like a real mother to me in more than ten years.”

Lady Carfield hung her head. There was a long moment of silence, then she looked back up. “I know, Iris. And I want to explain. All of it. You don’t have to forgive me?—”

“Good, because I never will.”

“—but I do hope that you can listen to my explanation and, perhaps someday, understand why I did what I did.”

“Is that what you came here for?” Iris demanded. “To explain why you left me? Or

did you hear I married a duke and decided that now was a good time to reingratiate yourself? Did the money that was set aside for you when you married run out, and you thought you should try and get a loan from your daughter, the Duchess?”

Lady Carfield was shaking her head, a horrified look on her face. “No, Iris, that isn’t the reason at all. I would never?—”

“Or is it my husband’s protection you want? Did you think he would protect you from Father’s wrath after all these years?”

Behind her, Iris felt her husband shift. Very softly, he laid a hand on her shoulder. He was probably trying to comfort her—or to tell her she had gone too far—but she didn’t care. She didn’t want to be comforted right now. She wanted to rage .

“I don’t want to hear your feeble excuses for why you left,” she snarled. “And I don’t want to hear your explanation for how you could spend the next ten years never reaching out, never writing, never trying to see me, never even checking up on your daughters.”

“But—”

“I will not demand that you leave tonight, as it is already late and it would be inhospitable to make you pack your things and go. However, first thing in the morning, I want you out of here. Do you understand?”

Lady Carfield had stopped crying, but her eyes were full of tears as she stared at her daughter. “I understand,” she murmured.

“Good.”

And without another word, Iris turned on her heels and stormed out of the parlor. She

half expected Phineas to follow her, and she was relieved when he didn't.

For the first time since she'd met her husband, she'd found something he couldn't protect her from—her own rage.

Phineas's first thought, after his wife left, was that he should go to her. Then he stopped himself. She was clearly angry and needed a moment or two to clear her head. Instead, he studied the woman in front of him—the woman who looked so much like his wife that it was almost eerie. An older version of his wife, yes, but still frighteningly similar.

Was this what Iris would look like in twenty years? If so, then he felt very fortunate. Lady Carfield was still very beautiful.

Lady Carfield seemed to be sizing him up as well, and at last, she spoke. "So. You're the Duke my daughter has married."

Phineas nodded.

Lady Carfield's eyes narrowed. "And is it true what they say about you? That you're one of the most dangerous men in England?"

"I wouldn't believe the things your husband says about me," Phineas said coldly.

Lady Carfield waved a hand dismissively. "I haven't spoken to my husband in more than ten years. Your reputation precedes you, Your Grace, without his help"

"And so what if I am dangerous?" he challenged.

Lady Carfield folded her arms. Her gaze had all the intensity of her daughter's, and it unnerved him. "I married a dangerous man myself when I was young," she said.

“And I’ve regretted it very much. I want to make sure that my daughter hasn’t made the same mistake I did.”

“If you wanted to keep your daughter safe, then you shouldn’t have abandoned her at the tender age of thirteen,” Phineas pointed out, his tone light even though his words were accusatory.

“I had my reasons,” Lady Carfield said. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t regret my decision every single day.”

Phineas didn’t have time to listen to her tale of regret. He needed to find his wife.

“The butler will show you to your room,” he said stiffly. “I trust you will honor your daughter’s request and leave here first thing in the morning.”

He was at the door when Lady Carfield called after him. “Just don’t hurt her,” she said as he turned back to her. “Give her a better life than either I or her father ever could.”

Phineas stared coolly at his mother-in-law, resentful that she even needed to say this, then left the parlor in search of his wife.

Iris, a maid told him, was in her bedroom. Phineas only realized that the maid meant Iris’s original bedroom and not the one they now shared when he entered his bedchamber and found it empty.

He went to the door connecting their rooms and tried the handle. It was locked.

“Iris?” he called through the door, knocking lightly. “Iris, are you there?”

There was no answer. After waiting a minute, he tried again.

“Iris? It’s me. Can we talk?”

This time, he thought he heard the rustle of skirts from the other side of the door. He knocked again, then again.

“Iris, please open the door,” he called gently. “I’m worried about you.”

“I don’t want to talk,” Iris called back at last. Her voice sounded muffled and choked, and he wondered if she’d been crying. “Just leave me alone.”

“I can’t leave you alone,” he said, pressing his forehead against the door. “You’re my wife, and I won’t let you suffer in there by yourself. Please, let me help you.”

There was a short silence, then he heard her stand up and walk across the room to the door. However, she didn’t open it.

“Is she still here?” she asked through the door, her voice small.

“Yes. I’ve put her in the bedroom farthest from ours. You won’t have to see her again if you don’t want to. And from now on, I’ll tell Mr. Malloy that she isn’t welcome here.”

“Do you think I’m being too harsh?” Iris asked. “Should I listen to her and hear her side of things?”

“I don’t know,” Phineas sighed. “Sometimes it helps to hear someone’s side of things. Other times, what a person did was so unforgivable that it doesn’t matter what they say. And just because she needs to tell you something doesn’t mean you need to hear it.”

“That’s very wise.”

Phineas smiled. “I’m a very wise person.”

He heard her laugh through the door.

“I understand if you need space,” he added quietly. “I’ll stop bothering you. But if you do want me, I’m here for you. I need you to know that.”

Another moment passed, then Phineas heard the sound of a key turning in the lock, and then the door opened. His wife gazed up at him, her eyes puffy and her cheeks stained with tears.

“Will you hold me?” she whispered. “Hold me like you did all those nights ago?”

Phineas didn’t need to ask which night she was talking about—it was the night she had first told him about her mother and they had shared a bed for the first time.

He cupped her chin and stroked his thumb across her jaw. “Of course, I will.”

Iris woke up the next morning wrapped in her husband’s arms. For several moments, she lay still, pretending to be asleep. She felt so warm and safe in his strong arms, and she didn’t want the moment to end. At last, she blinked her eyes open, and she took in the sight of Phineas, fast asleep, the morning sun illuminating him as he held her. He looked so handsome and peaceful that she felt as if her heart was breaking with love.

And with that love flowing through her, she felt a sense of resolve that she hadn’t felt last night. She would listen to her mother’s story, even if just to hear her side of things. It was possible that her father had lied to her about her mother and not given her the full story. After all, she knew now how untrustworthy he was.

Phineas shifted, then opened his eyes. The moment he saw her, he smiled.

“Good morning,” he murmured.

“Good morning.” She wiggled closer to him and kissed the tip of his nose. “I’m going to talk to my mother this morning, before she leaves.”

He looked surprised, and then he nodded. “I think that’s a good idea.”

“I don’t think I can do it alone, though,” she said softly. “Would you come with me?”

Phineas raised an eyebrow. “Haven’t you learned by now that the answer to that is always yes?”

That is how Iris and Phineas found themselves, twenty minutes later, sitting across from her mother at the breakfast table.

The atmosphere in the room was tense. Lady Carfield was watching them both with a wary expression. She was eating little and said even less. Iris couldn’t eat either. She felt nervous and angry and hopeful all at once, and the feelings drove all other thoughts out of her mind.

“I have decided to allow you to stay a little longer,” Iris began. “And, after much consideration, to hear your side of the story.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” her mother said. She looked tired, as if she hadn’t slept all night. “There is so much I want to tell you.”

She took a deep breath, as if stealing herself, and then began to speak.

“I always knew I’d married a hard man,” she began. “Back when I married your father, young ladies had even less choice in whom to marry than they do now. And I was young and naive. Your father was rich and handsome, and my father convinced

me it would be a good marriage. I believed him. It didn't take long for me to realize how wrong he was.

"The first years were difficult. Your father was cruel and vindictive. But then I gave birth to you, and you gave me something to live for. I doted on you, loved you unconditionally. And although my marriage left much to be desired, I was happy as your mother. Then Violet and Rosalie came, and my life felt full. Your father, of course, wanted a son, but I was content with daughters. What if a son turned out like him? The thought chilled me to the bone.

"I always knew your father was involved in shady business dealings, but I was never involved in any of them until shortly after the death of his friends, the Duke and Duchess of Eavestone. I'd met them many times and had never understood how such good people could be friends with him. I assumed he had never shown them his true colors.

"Anyway, after their deaths, he asked me to be a witness to the signing of a land purchase deal. I was surprised to be asked and even more surprised when I discovered I wouldn't be witnessing the new Duke's signature. My husband told me that you, Your Grace, had already signed it. When I questioned this—wasn't the point of a witness to witness both signatures?—he called me an ignorant, stupid woman. His bullying was relentless, and, eventually, I signed the document.

"But I knew something was wrong, and after that, I began sneaking into his study to investigate his business dealings. That's when I learned how corrupt he truly was. The things he had done... they frightened me deeply, and I knew I couldn't stay with him. He was a bad man, and I couldn't allow my children to be brought up by him."

Tears sprang to her eyes, but she wiped them away and continued her story.

"But when I tried to leave him, he forbid me from taking you and your sisters with

me, Iris. He threatened me, told me that if I left with you, he'd marry you and your sisters off—when the time came—to the worst men of the ton as punishment. I was scared, alone, and unsure of my power. So I capitulated. He let me leave, but without you, and he told me I was never allowed to contact any of you again.

“All these years, I have been trying to find a way to contact you, but he has blocked me at every turn. I wrote letters, but he destroyed them. I tried to meet you in public places, but he sent protection officers to threaten me. The only contact I had was through your governess. Do you remember her?”

Iris nodded. She was petrified by this story, barely able to move or think.

“She was a lovely woman and hated your father. She would give me updates on all of you, assure me you were safe. That's how I knew you had married, Iris. And then, of course, I read it in the papers.”

Lady Carfield leaned forward, and it seemed for a moment as if she would take Iris's hand, then she thought better of it. “I know now that I was wrong to leave you and your sisters. Even if living with your father was torture, I never should have left you alone with him. And I'm so sorry, Iris. I can't tell you how deeply I regret it, how much I want to make it up to you. But it is important that you know I never forgot you. I tried every day to contact you. And you were in my thoughts every moment of every day.”

As she looked deeply into her mother's eyes, Iris realized she was crying. She reached out and took her mother's hand. Her mother looked surprised, but then she smiled gratefully.

“I'm so relieved to hear this,” Iris whispered. “All these years, I thought you just didn't love us.”

“I loved you so much,” her mother whispered. “More than anything on earth. I still do.”

“Don’t leave again,” Iris pleaded. “Please, just promise me that. Promise you’ll stay and get to know me as I am now. You can even stay here if you want.”

She glanced at her husband, who nodded in approval.

“Nothing on earth could keep me from you again,” Lady Carfield reassured her. “And that’s a promise. But...” Her eyes slid to Phineas. “There is another reason for my visit. And this one concerns His Grace.”

Iris blinked and looked at Phineas. He seemed taken aback.

“What is it?” she asked quickly. “We already suspected that Father had forced you to sign the contract, so if that’s?—”

“It’s not that,” Lady Carfield interrupted. Her eyes were still fixed unblinkingly on Phineas. “It’s about the Duke’s parents. They weren’t killed during a robbery, as the world was led to believe. They were murdered on Lord Carfield’s orders.”

Chapter Thirteen

“Not only were they murdered, but I have the correspondence to prove it.”

A ringing silence followed these words.

Moments before, all Phineas had been able to think about was his concern for his wife. Seeing her cry at her mother's story had filled him with sadness and anger on her behalf. It had made him want to leap to her rescue. Now, he couldn't think at all. A white-hot, searing pain was filling his chest, as if he had been stabbed in the heart.

From somewhere far away, he thought he heard his name. He thought it might be his mother, calling out to him. Then he blinked and realized it was Iris.

He had stood up. His whole body was rigid, frozen. Iris was staring up at him, concern etched on her face, calling his name.

“Phineas, can you hear me?” she called. “Are you all right?”

He tore his gaze away from his wife to stare at her mother. The Viscountess was watching him carefully. She should have looked frightened, considering the level of anger that was now pulsating through him. He wanted to flip over the table and send all their dishes scattering across the floor. The strength of this hatred and violence scared him, and he tried to take a deep breath before speaking.

“How long have you known this?” he demanded. His voice thundered through the room, shaking the teacups in their saucers.

Lady Carfield remained calm. “I’ve known since shortly after I signed the forged bill of sale. There is a safe behind the portrait in Lord Carfield’s study. After weeks of searching the house, I finally found the key, and inside the safe, I discovered a letter between him and the man he’d hired to kill your parents. The moment I read it, I knew I had to leave him.”

“Leave him?” Phineas stared at her incredulously. “You should have gone to the authorities and had him arrested!”

“I know,” Lady Carfield said, “but you have to understand. My husband is and was a very powerful man. He pays off men in the Bow Street Runners. I didn’t know where to turn, or who was safe to tell. And I was so scared that he would hurt my daughters. I felt trapped and powerless.”

Phineas was shaking his head. He didn’t care about this woman’s excuses. His parents had been murdered. The searing hot pain throbbed in his chest, and he clenched his fists to keep from crying out. After all these years, he never thought that his parents’ deaths could cause him any more pain than they already had. But here was evidence that he could feel even worse than he ever thought possible.

“I was the one who was trapped and powerless!” he shouted. “I was fifteen, and Carfield was stealing my family’s ancestral land! I was all alone in the world, without family, because your husband had murdered them.”

Phineas knew he was being unreasonable, but he couldn’t stop. He was so angry that he wanted to burn down the world.

“I know,” Lady Carfield said, truly meaning it. “But the murder was the one thing I had over my husband. He didn’t know I knew, but I could use it against him if he ever tried to hurt the girls. If I told people but no one believed me, I’d lose my one chance to protect my daughters.”

“I can’t hear this anymore,” Phineas snapped, turning and striding to the door. “I’m leaving.”

In the doorway, he paused and turned back. “Do you have the letter in your possession?”

Lady Carfield nodded.

“Good. Then give it to Iris, and she will make sure it is locked in my study. And Lady Carfield...”

She swallowed. “Yes?”

“You should have found a way to tell me this before now. I deserved to know the truth, and I could have helped you, protected you. But now... I only despise you.”

And without even looking at Iris, Phineas stormed out of the room, slamming the door shut behind him.

“Good God, man, what happened to you?”

Phineas looked up to see James standing over him. His old friend’s brow was furrowed in concern, and his eyes were probing.

It was such an unusual expression for James that Phineas almost didn’t recognize him. James was usually so determined to be cheerful that he never let anything bother him. But now, he looked more worried than Phineas had seen him in a long time.

Grunting, Phineas motioned for his friend to join him. He was at his club, where he’d been all morning and afternoon, sitting in one of his favorite wingback chairs in a dark corner, drinking heavily and smoking cigar after cigar. It was the kind of

behavior he hadn't exhibited since his parents died—since his parents were murdered , he had to remind himself—and he wasn't altogether unsurprised that James seemed so shocked.

“What, no jokes?” Phineas snarled as James continued to stare at him with a mix of pity and alarm. “No quip about how my marriage has turned sour so soon, or how my wife has driven me out of my home with her incessant nagging?”

“I would never speak about Her Grace so ungenerously,” James said gently. “She has been nothing but the most gracious hostess to me, and I have seen the way you two look at each other. You have something special, and I wouldn't mock that.”

Phineas didn't reply. He twirled his cigar in his fingers and stared off into the distance. He didn't want to think about anything right now, and certainly not the ‘something special’ between himself and his wife. The anger and pain that the revelation about his parents had brought him was so all-consuming that he was afraid to think too much about Iris, in case it tainted her by association.

“Phineas,” James called.

Phineas looked back at his friend. James rarely called him by his Christian name. Usually, he referred to him as Eavestone, or mockingly as Your Grace . It must mean something serious if James was calling him Phineas.

“What?” Phineas grunted.

James sat down on the chair opposite him and looked at him pensively. “Tell me what's wrong. Did you and Her Grace have a fight?”

“No.”

“Is it Carfield, then? Did he try to harm his daughters again?”

“No.” Phineas snorted. “He wouldn’t dare.”

James frowned. “Then what is it, old friend?”

“I don’t want to get into it,” Phineas snapped.

He knew he was being rude and hurtful, but everything felt so twisted up inside of him that it was hard to care.

James sighed, stretched, motioned for the waiter to bring brandy, and then looked at Phineas with the most serious expression he had ever displayed.

“I understand you don’t want to talk about whatever’s wrong,” he began. “I know you’re a private person who holds his cards close to his chest. But if you push me away, someone who has known you your whole life, then what is to stop you from pushing Iris away next? And I know you love her, Phineas. Don’t try to deny it. But if you stay on this path, the one of vengeance, silence, and resentment, then you will lose her. You do understand that, right?”

Phineas fidgeted. He knew James was right, but he didn’t know how to untangle all the spiteful feelings inside of him.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he retorted. “Iris’s mother came to see us. And she told us...”

He wasn’t sure if he could get the words out. James had been there for him after everything that had happened to his parents. He’d seen him in his darkest place. And now, for the wound to be reopened... Part of Phineas feared James wouldn’t stick around for this. It was just so heavy and dark.

“She said that my parents weren’t killed in a robbery gone bad,” Phineas finally choked out, not looking at his friend. “She said that Carfield had them murdered so he could take their land.”

James’s reaction was swift and earnest. His mouth fell open, then his face flushed with anger, and his hands clenched into fists.

“What?! Phineas, I can hardly even believe it! We should call the Bow Street Runners, have him arrested at once!”

“Keep your voice down,” Phineas hissed, glancing around to make sure no one was listening. “We’re talking about a member of the peerage. It will be difficult to bring him down, and we will need evidence. We will need to be strategic.”

“But you are going to bring him down, aren’t you?” James asked.

“Of course. Lady Carfield says she has proof of the plot.”

“I am incensed,” James said, and he really looked it.

It gave Phineas some relief to see his friend so angry on his behalf. It helped to know he wasn’t alone in this feeling.

“That man is pure evil! And for Lady Carfield to know all these years but not tell you. It’s unconscionable.”

“She wanted something to hold over her husband, in case he tried to harm their daughters,” Phineas explained, unsure why he was defending the Viscountess.

James snorted. “And yet she didn’t come forward with it after Iris married you.”

“I have never harmed Iris!” Phineas said indignantly.

James chuckled. “I know that. But your reputation isn’t exactly spotless.” He grew more somber. “How is this news affecting your relationship with your wife? I know you care for her, but now to find out her father murdered your parents... and her mother kept it from you all these years? I can imagine it is disrupting your marital bliss.”

“I’m trying not to let it affect how I feel,” Phineas said slowly. “Iris means everything to me. I don’t blame her for her father’s actions, and I know she despises him as much as I do. Her mother... well, I suppose she’ll be staying with us now from time to time, and I’ll just have to get used to her presence.”

James shook his head. “That’s very generous of you.”

“I’m trying to think what my mother would have done,” Phineas admitted. “Would she have kept that information secret in order to protect me? I think she might have. And I understand that Lady Carfield was scared and didn’t know what to do. But...”

“I know,” James said. “I would find it hard to forgive her as well.”

Phineas sighed. Truthfully, it felt better to open up to his friend. For the first time since Lady Carfield’s confession this morning, the searing pain in his chest had eased a little.

“I’d do anything for Iris,” he murmured. “Even forgive her mother.”

James was about to reply when a manservant arrived with a letter. “For you, Your Grace,” he announced, holding out the silver tray.

Phineas took the letter. It was from Iris, and he felt as if his heart stopped and

restarted at the sight of her name.

He ripped open the letter and stared down at the words. Then, in a moment, he was on his feet.

“Tell my man to prepare my horse at once,” he shouted at the manservant. “I need to return to Eavestone House without delay.”

“What is it?” James asked, aghast. “What’s happened?”

Phineas crumpled the letter in his hand, his heart beating wildly in his chest. “I have been robbed.”

The house had been ransacked. It was the first thing Iris had noticed when she’d returned home from her outing with her mother. There were papers littering the hall, where they had been scattered as the thieves left Phineas’s study, the door to which had been knocked off its hinges.

The parlor was a mess as well. Tables and chairs had been overturned, books had been thrown off the bookshelves, and even the drapes had been pulled down. It was clear from even a cursory glance that whoever had broken into Eavestone House hadn’t just been there to steal valuables—they’d been looking for something specific.

The timing of the robbery couldn’t have been more perfect as well. Iris and her mother had been out visiting Violet and Rosalie, as it was important to Iris that her sisters reconnect with their mother. Because both Iris and Lady Carfield had been banned from Carfield House, they had met at a teahouse Iris used to frequent, then walked along the Serpentine. It had been an emotional reunion, with tears, recriminations, and also hugs, and Iris had been feeling warm and tender when she and her mother had arrived back home.

The shock of finding the house torn apart had been almost too much to bear.

“They came in just ten minutes after you and Lady Carfield left,” a terrified Anna had whispered after Iris finally persuaded her to come out of the broom cupboard, where she and the other maids had been hiding. “It was like they knew you had left. And they just started pulling apart everything. We were able to hide, but Mr. Malloy got the worst of it.”

Iris had found the butler in the dining room, bludgeoned over the head. He was unconscious, but as soon as the doctor arrived, he was revived.

It was only after Iris had started searching Phineas’s study that she realized what exactly was missing.

“They took the evidence you had of Father’s guilt,” she whispered to her mother as they brought Anna some smelling salts and a large cup of sherry. “You put it in the study after he left, to keep it safe. Now it’s gone. Along with the forged document.”

Her mother’s eyes were wide with horror. “But how could they have known it was in there?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they guessed you’d brought it to Phineas when you came here last night. Or they suspected he had something in his study they could use...”

Iris wasn’t sure. She didn’t have any answers. All she knew was that after she and her mother had searched the study, the correspondence between Lord Carfield and the man he’d hired to kill Phineas’ parents was gone.

Iris penned a quick note to Phineas, which she had delivered to his club, where she assumed he had gone after storming out that morning. She also called the Constable, and once he arrived, she tried to answer all of his questions as honestly as possible,

although it wasn't possible to tell him everything.

For example, she couldn't mention that she suspected her father of orchestrating the theft. It might not be safe to admit this to the Constable. After all, he could be one of the many Bow Street Runners who was reportedly on her father's payroll.

The Constable was just asking if he could interview the maids when Phineas burst in through the front door of the townhouse, followed closely by James. Her husband cut an impressive figure, his cloak billowing behind him and his eyes flashing. And for the first time since meeting him, Iris understood why people said her husband was the most dangerous man in England.

Phineas looked as if he were capable of taking down a single army by himself. His jaw was set, his eyes were bulging from his head, and there was a cold fury radiating from him that chilled Iris to her very bones. She was sure that her mother and the Constable could feel it as well. Her mother took a step back as Phineas came into the hall, and the Constable shrank slightly.

Iris, on the other hand, felt a surge of relief. Her husband had arrived, and now everything would be all right. If anyone could figure out how to fix what had happened, it was Phineas.

Chapter Fourteen

“What has happened here?” Phineas boomed. His piercing eyes found Iris’s, and he rushed over to her. “Are you all right? Were you harmed?”

He took her hands in his, and she smiled and shook her head. “My mother and I were out when the men broke in,” she reassured him. “We are all right.”

“And my servants?” Phineas asked sharply. “Were they harmed?”

“Mr. Malloy took a blow to the head, but he’s fine now.”

Phineas’s eyes blazed again, and he released Iris’s hands and turned toward the Constable. “Who were these men? What did they want? And what did they take?”

“We are still trying to determine that, Your Grace,” the Constable replied quickly. His voice was oily and obsequious, which made Iris dislike him even more. “From the report your butler gave, we believe the men are hired bandits. They were too organized and too violent to simply be a team of petty thieves. Thieving gangs are usually made up of children, often vagrants, and they never strike during the day, when they could be seen.”

“Get to the point,” Phineas snarled, and the Constable coughed and stood straighter.

“These men clearly knew how to cause the maximum amount of damage in the shortest amount of time. They didn’t try to pick any locks, they broke down doors. My best guess is that they work for one of the larger criminal organizations south of

the Thames.”

Phineas’s jaw tightened, and Iris thought she saw a vein throbbing in his temple. She had never seen him so angry—not even at her mother this morning, and that had been deeply frightening.

“And why,” Phineas said, his voice sharp like a knife, “are members of a large criminal organization breaking into my house and stealing from me? It is my understanding that men like that only work for the gang boss that employs them. I have no quarrel with any gang bosses, so tell me, why were they here?”

The Constable swallowed audibly. “These criminals have also been known to... well, sell their services... to wealthy members of the ton. It’s possible that someone like that could have been responsible for this attack.”

Phineas’s nostrils flared. “Aren’t you and your associates at the Bow Street Runners supposed to be watching these gangs? Don’t you know when they make moves into Mayfair? How could you allow something like this to happen?”

“We can’t keep an eye on everything they do,” the Constable whined.

Phineas glared at him so ferociously that he flushed and stopped speaking.

“Not only did these men come into my home and injure my staff,” Phineas growled, “but had they arrived just a few minutes earlier, they would have encountered my wife. Do you have any idea what would have happened if they had harmed one hair on her head? Do you understand what the consequences might have been?”

“Your Grace, I promise you, we will do everything in our power to uncover who did this and bring them to justice.”

“What did they take?” Phineas asked, changing direction in the blink of an eye.

The Constable blanched. “We will have to take an inventory of everything here and cross-reference it against an inventory of your valuables from before. I’m sure your butler will have such a list...?”

Iris stepped forward. She knew that the words she said next would anger her husband, but she just had to hope he would be able to rein in his temper.

“The correspondence that my mother brought you this morning is gone,” she said quietly. “I checked myself. As is the bill of sale that my mother witnessed.”

Phineas’s jaw clenched, but he didn’t look surprised. It was possible that he had also guessed who had ransacked his house.

“At least you weren’t hurt,” he said more quietly. “We were lucky in that regard.”

“I don’t think it was luck,” the Constable interjected, shaking his head. “According to witness statements, it seems the burglars purposefully waited until after Her Grace and Lady Carfield had left. They very much wanted the Duchess to be gone.”

“And what if she had returned early?” Phineas demanded, staring incredulously at him. “They might have?—”

He broke off. He was staring at the Constable, but he wasn’t really looking at him. There was a strange look on his face, as if he had just solved a puzzle. As if realization had dawned on him.

There was a moment of silence, then Phineas turned to face Iris. She was expecting him to give her a look of conspiratorial excitement, then grab her, pull her aside, and share with her what he had just realized. Instead, he was looking at her as if he had

only just realized who she really was and did not at all like what he had discovered.

Iris drew back, fear suddenly seizing her. She had never seen her husband look at her like this.

Phineas turned back to the Constable, his body language stiffer and angrier now. “I think you should go.”

The Constable began to splutter at once. “But, Your Grace! I still need to interview the servants! I can’t possibly leave now! This is an open investigation and?—”

“I said,” Phineas growled menacingly, taking a step toward him, “you should go.”

His tone brooked no argument, and the Constable had no choice but to give in. Grumbling, he gathered up his things and showed himself out.

Once the door had swung shut behind the Constable, silence filled the hall. Iris held her breath. She didn’t know what was coming, but she knew it was bad. Phineas wasn’t himself right now, and while she didn’t blame him, it frightened her.

At last, he spoke.

“You planned this,” he murmured. His voice was soft, but it was filled with venom, and to her shock, he was staring directly at her. “You planned this with your father.”

Iris gasped. She almost thought that he was joking, except that the look on his face was so serious. “Phineas!” she cried. “How can you say that? You know I would never plan anything with my father. I despise him as much as you d?—”

“Don’t lie to me!” Phineas shouted.

Spittle flew from his mouth, and his eyes bugged out of his head. He looked absolutely deranged with anger, and Iris took an instinctive step back. Next to her, her mother reached out and touched her arm, as if to offer some support, but Iris could barely feel it. She was so shocked and hurt by her husband's reaction that she couldn't think of anything else.

"And do not presume to call me by my Christian name," Phineas continued. "That familiarity is reserved for those who have earned my trust and respect."

"Phineas, how can you say that?" Iris gasped. "After all the intimacy we have shared?!"

"It was an intimacy I gave when I thought you were loyal to me!" Phineas yelled. "But you have been deceiving me this whole time, haven't you?"

"N-no, I haven't!"

But Phineas wasn't listening to her at all. "You never stopped working for your father," he shouted, gesticulating wildly with his hands. "You have been spying on me this entire time! How else would he have discovered that we had gone to the mines?"

"What?" Iris had no idea what he was talking about.

He laughed ruefully. "At the time, I wondered if perhaps you had let slip to your sisters that we were heading to the mines. But now I see you purposefully relayed the information to your father. How else do you expect me to believe the coincidence of his appearance, just a day and a half later? And how do you expect me to believe this theft was also a coincidence? That the robbers arrived just as you were gone from the house, and only after you had finally discovered the one thing they needed most—evidence of your father's crimes against my family?"

Iris was shaking her head. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. It was beyond the pale that Phineas should think these things about her. And yet... she knew how untrusting he was. Her mother's confession earlier must have driven him out of his mind with paranoia.

Instead of shrinking back, therefore, Iris stepped forward, a pleading expression on her face. She had to make him understand. She had to reach him through all his anger and grief and distrust.

"Please, Phineas," she murmured, "you must know that I would never do these things. I haven't been working with my father, nor have I been spying on you. I don't know how my father discovered we were at the mines, but I never told him—or anyone! Even if I had told my sisters, they never would have betrayed me. As for this theft, I had nothing to do with it! Maybe it seems suspicious that I was out when it happened, but I can only put that down to the cunning of the thieves, not my guilt."

"Lies!" Phineas shouted.

"Come now, Phineas," James said, stepping forward at last. His usual warm, easy smile had been replaced by a mix of anger and worry. "Think about what you are saying! Her Grace has only ever been a loyal and loving wife to you. These coincidences are not proof that she was working with Carfield. You do her an injustice by making these accusations!"

Phineas rounded on his friend. The force of his anger was so strong that James also took a step back.

"You don't know her like I do," Phineas hissed. "You don't know how she had me wrapped around her finger. She knew exactly what to say and do to get me to open up to her, to get me to trust her. I'm sure her father told her all about me and my... weaknesses. So she could sink the knife in. But I will not be weak anymore. I will be

strong now, for my mother and father, and I will never allow Carfield to win.”

“Please, Phineas...” Tears had welled up in Iris’s eyes, and as she took another step toward her husband, she had to fight to keep from bursting into tears.

“I know what you’re doing,” she pleaded. “You know we’re getting closer, and it terrifies you. And after my mother’s revelation this morning, you are feeling particularly distrustful. But I promise you, I am not who you think I am! I know you know I would never side with my father, after everything he has done to you. To both of us!”

Phineas didn’t respond, and she took this as a sign that maybe he was softening.

She took another step forward, until she was standing right in front of him. “I love you, Phineas,” she whispered. “And I would never, ever hurt you. Please, don’t push me away. Just let me love you.”

She reached out a hand to cup the side of his face. For a fraction of a second, he froze, and the anger seemed to seep out of him. It was as if, for a moment, he had stopped hating her. But then, as her fingers touched his face, he flinched away from her, and the cold fury returned to his eyes.

“I will be staying with James for the next few nights, until I can figure out the best step forward. James!” His friend jumped at the sound of his name, then scurried forward. “We’re going to pack my things.”

“Phineas,” James said pleadingly, “this isn’t necessary. Surely we can stay here and figure this out.”

Phineas turned and stormed across the hall to the stairs. James ran after him, throwing a shocked and apologetic glance at Iris that did little to comfort her.

Iris waited in frozen shock as she heard them moving around upstairs, arguing. Then Phineas had returned, with a footman dragging his suitcase behind.

Her husband didn't even look at her as he strode across the hall, wrenched open the door, and left her.

As the door slammed shut in front of her, Iris felt her knees give way beneath her. She seemed to have lost the ability to stand, and she fell forward, her knees hitting the marble floor with a hard thud. Her mother rushed forward and wrapped her arms around her, but it didn't make any difference.

Iris opened her mouth. She thought she might cry, but instead, she let out a heart-wrenching wail. It reverberated off the walls, echoing through the house.

The sound might have sent a shiver down her spine if she hadn't been the one making it. Never before had she known such pain. It was heartbreak on another level. And she was sure, as she continued to wail on the floor, her mother rocking her gently, that her heart had been torn out of her chest, and that she would never get it back.

Chapter Fifteen

“That,” James said, as the carriage rattled around them, “was the stupidest thing you’ve ever done. And you’ve done a fair number of stupid things over the years, my friend.”

Phineas glowered at him from across the carriage.

They were en route to James’s residence, the carriage clattering over the uneven London cobblestones, jolting them painfully. And it wasn’t just physical pain that Phineas felt.

In his entire life, he had never felt so awful. Which was saying something, considering how many awful moments he’d experienced in his life, including the recent discovery that his parents had been murdered. But what struck him about the feeling he had now, as opposed to the ones he’d had in the past, was that before, he had been the victim of terrible events. That had been catastrophic, of course. Being subjected to the whims of fate or others’ cruelty made one feel powerless, a feeling he couldn’t stand. But for the first time in his life, Phineas was experiencing what it felt like to not be the victim, but the perpetrator of injustice.

Yes, he had brought down half a dozen men of the ton. But those men deserved every single thing they got. Iris, on the other hand, hadn’t deserved anything he’d said to her.

Phineas tried to swallow down the feeling of intense guilt and self-loathing that was threatening to spill out of him. He couldn’t get the image of her hurt, still hopeful

eyes out of his head. She had looked so scared and yet still so strong, trying to reach out to him and convince him that she hadn't done what he'd accused her of.

"Are you listening to me?" James snapped.

Phineas started and stared at his friend. He'd been so lost in his thoughts that he'd completely forgotten about James. To his surprise, his friend's expression was even more furious than before.

"You just behaved like a madman!" James shouted. "Your wife was pleading with you, begging you to believe her, and you continued to berate her and accuse her of betrayal with absolutely no evidence!"

"I never knew you had such a soft heart when it came to someone's lies," Phineas muttered, looking away.

"I have a soft heart when it comes to someone telling the truth when accused of grievous crimes."

"Grievous crimes! Don't be so dramatic. I didn't accuse her of trying to have me murdered."

James tutted with impatience. "You accused her of aiding and abetting a man who did commit a murder! So, yes, I do think that's how your accusation came across. And believe me, it is not lost on her that you would lump her in with a man who hired a man to murder your parents."

"Well, I can't help it if she is working with her father!" Phineas snarled.

He didn't very much appreciate being lectured by someone who knew so little of the circumstances. After his wife's betrayal, he wanted someone on his side.

James, however, did not look sympathetic. “She isn’t working with Carfield!” he shouted, banging a fist down on his seat. “She’s innocent!”

“And how do you know that?” Phineas challenged. “It would be very easy for her to have continued spying for her father. And there is circumstantial evidence to prove it. How else do you make sense of how Carfield knew we were visiting the mines? She must have told him!”

“That’s it?” James rolled his eyes. “That’s the evidence that points to your wife’s guilt? Come on, Phineas... anyone could have told him! The people at the inn probably recognized you or the crest on your coach. It hasn’t been that long since the Eavestones owned that land. They’d remember you, and if Carfield had asked them to send word if you ever visited—which wouldn’t surprise me at all—then they must have written to him right away.”

“I didn’t use a coach with the Eavestone crest,” Phineas snapped. “I’m not an idiot.”

James’s eyes widened, as if to say, Oh, aren’t you?

“Well then,” he countered, “one of your servants could have been paid to spy on you. It’s not such an unusual thing. They’re underpaid as it is.”

“I pay my servants very well.”

“And Carfield would pay more, now that he knows his daughter isn’t spying on you anymore. You don’t think he’d just give up on his plan to spy on you, do you? No, of course not. He’d find someone else.”

Phineas didn’t know what to say to this, so he turned away and stared out the window. Not that he really saw anything. All he could see was the scene at his townhouse playing out in his mind’s eye over and over again. He wasn’t sure what to

believe or think anymore. All he knew was that as he'd been speaking to the Constable, it had dawned on him what might have happened to Iris had she been in the house during the robbery. And as that had hit him, he'd been filled with a blinding rage that he didn't know where to direct.

But do you really believe she was spying for her father? a little voice whispered in the back of his head.

I don't know , he inwardly snarled back at it. It's possible.

But it was easier to be mad at Iris and believe the worst of her than to feel the other feeling that was battering inside of him, trying to force its way out into the world. It scared him too much.

"It was definitely a servant," he heard James say. "How else do you explain how Carfield knew you and Iris were falling in love?"

"What?"

"You told me that when he came to the mines, he said he'd heard rumors of the affection that was building between the two of you. How else can you explain how he knew, if it wasn't a servant spying on you? It's not as if you and the Duchess had been seen in public much together, where others could gossip about you falling in love."

"Don't use those words," Phineas snapped, glaring at him. "We are not... in love."

James snorted, looking completely unconvinced. "Right. And I'm not the cleverest gentleman in the ton . "

Phineas shot him an irritated look. "Well, right now, I'm seriously doubting that

moniker.”

The carriage jolted to a stop, and Phineas looked out the window. They had arrived at James’s accommodation. His friend was currently lodging at the Albany, where he leased a set of apartments for one hundred pounds per annum. It was a large sum for the second son of an earl, but James liked to live in style. And nowhere was more stylish than the Albany. All of London’s most fashionable bachelors lived there—as well as a few married men who no longer lived with their wives.

As Phineas stepped down from the carriage, it suddenly struck him that if a man left his wife, he could still rent or buy a fashionable apartment in one of the most exclusive residences in London. If a lady left her husband, however, as Lady Carfield had done, she was ostracized from all of Society and barely even spoken of.

It went a long way toward reminding Phineas that Lady Carfield had made big sacrifices to leave her husband. Not only had she given up seeing and speaking to her children, but she had been barred from the society she had spent years being part of. She must have lost all her friends. And all to leave Lord Carfield because he had paid someone to murder Phineas’s parents.

For the first time since he’d discovered the truth, Phineas felt a rush of gratitude and admiration toward Lady Carfield. She had given up everything, and all because she couldn’t live with a man who would do something so evil. He wasn’t sure she had made the right choice, in the end—or that it had been worth it to hurt Iris and her sisters like she had—but it did go a small way toward redeeming her in his eyes. And it explained why she hadn’t come forward with the truth earlier. She’d given up so much, and she wanted to hold onto the last vestige of power she could.

Once they were inside James’s rooms, Phineas went immediately to the bar. The arrival of Iris’s note saying they’d been robbed had sobered him up significantly, and now he needed a stiff drink.

“Pour me one, too,” James called as he threw himself down on the sofa in his parlor. “My closest friend is being the world’s greatest arse, and I need to drown out some of my anger at him.”

Phineas gritted his teeth but said nothing as he poured himself and James two glasses of scotch. He then sat down on the sofa opposite his friend and handed him his drink.

They both sat in silence for a moment, sipping their drinks. Then James set his glass down on the table between them.

“Tell me truly, old friend,” he began, his tone less angry and indignant than it had been before. “Do you really think Iris is working for her father?”

“I... I don’t know,” Phineas admitted.

He looked down into his drink, afraid to meet his friend’s eyes. He was sure that if he did, he’d see his own doubt and hurt in them.

“Why did you make those accusations against her if you weren’t certain?”

Phineas shrugged, still not looking at James. “I suppose it’s easier to think she’s spying on her father than to think... that she could have been hurt.”

“Been hurt?”

“By the men who had robbed the house. I keep thinking what might have happened if she’d been there. I know she would have tried to stop them. And then they could have beat her. They might have hit her over the head like they did Malloy. That could have killed him, and if they’d done it to her... they might have killed her as well.”

He wasn’t quite sure why he was admitting this to James, but he suspected it had to

do with his revelation about Lady Carfield. He felt a little calmer now, less muddled up and angry.

James considered this. “Would it be easier to accept her being hurt if you believed she was guilty of betraying you? Would you think she deserved it, if that were the case?”

“I’m not sure. Perhaps.” But the thought brought such an immediate wave of nausea that Phineas immediately shook his head and looked up. “No, it’s not that. There is no circumstance where I would want her to be physically harmed, even if she is guilty of everything I accused her of.”

“Well, in that case...” James frowned. “Maybe, if you believe that she was in on the robbery, then you can tell yourself she wouldn’t have been hurt by those thugs had she been there when it occurred. Because why would they have hurt someone who was working with them? Maybe they’d superficially injure her, to convince you she wasn’t in on it, but they wouldn’t cause any lasting damage. And she certainly wouldn’t have died.”

“I... I don’t know,” Phineas stammered out.

What James was saying made sense, but Phineas still felt so confused and unsure of everything he was feeling. The image of Iris, dead on the ground, kept filling his mind, making it hard for him to think.

He’d never forget what a dead body looked like as long as he lived. He could remember it like it was yesterday, the day his parents died. The robbery had taken place not far from their castle in Yorkshire, shortly after his parents had left on a trip to London. When they hadn’t arrived at the residence of their friends, the Stockwells, that night, a search party had been sent out. And when the bodies were found, they’d been taken to Eavestone Castle, which was closest.

It had been a cold, rainy night when Phineas had heard the clattering of carriage wheels on the gravel of the drive. He'd been asleep, but it had jolted him awake. Somehow, even then, he'd known something was wrong.

He'd run to the window, where he'd seen a carriage bearing the Stockwell crest racing up the drive. Then the butler ran out of the castle, carrying a torch. There were shouts. There were screams. Phineas felt fear go through him like a knife.

He'd thrown on his dressing gown and crept out of his room and down the stairs. In the hall, a sight like nothing he'd ever seen had met his eyes—his parents' twisted bodies being carried inside by footmen. The smell of blood was thick in the air. Some of it still glinted on his father's coat as it caught the light from a torch. And his mother—his beautiful, kind mother—whiter and paler than he'd ever seen her, her lifeless eyes staring at him.

She was the only one who'd seen him, crouched at the bottom of the stairs behind a suit of armor. But she couldn't say anything to him. She couldn't comfort him. She couldn't respond as the hurried cries of Fetch a doctor, at once! filled the hall. She couldn't say that it was too late.

Phineas had never forgotten that face. He sometimes saw it, from time to time, out of the corner of his eye. And he'd seen it again at Eavestone House when Iris had looked at him with her big, round eyes, so full of fear.

Across from him, James sighed, and he was pulled out of his thoughts. To his surprise, James was smiling, if a little sadly.

“Well, I think I do know,” he said. “Because listen to what you just said, Phineas. ‘I know she would have tried to stop them.’ Deep down, you trust her. Deep down, you know she wasn't working with her father, that she would have tried to prevent you from being robbed by her father—again—and from losing the evidence that would

have allowed you to finally seek justice. Deep down, you know she's innocent."

Phineas blinked. He hadn't even realized that he'd said this. The words had just come out, instinctively. But James was right. Deep down, he knew that Iris would have defended his home—their home—and tried to stop anyone who wanted to steal the evidence that would allow him to get justice for his parents' deaths. Which meant that he did believe she was on his side.

"But then why am I accusing her of working with her father?" he wondered out loud. "Why did I subject her to the barrage of slanderous accusations?"

James opened his eyes wide and sighed. Phineas frowned at him. He knew James had his theories for why he'd done what he'd done, but Phineas didn't want James's theories. He wanted to figure out why he would inflict so much pain on his wife.

"If Iris had been home when the robberies had taken place," he began slowly, "then the men easily could have killed her and made her look like it was an accident. And yes, it does seem like they waited until she was gone to ransack the place. She could have come back early, of course, but that isn't the point..." He frowned.

What was the point?

Across from him, James sat back and took a long sip from his scotch. He had a half-amused smile on his face, and Phineas got the impression his friend was enjoying watching him piece together his feelings. After all, piecing together and admitting emotions was not something Phineas normally did. He wasn't very experienced at it.

"The point is, we're dealing with Carfield. He's already proved over and over again that he's dangerous. That he would do anything to get his way. I mean, look at what he did to my parents! He and my father were best friends! I can't believe all of that was disingenuous. They used to hunt together every week since they were teenagers.

But somewhere along the way, Carfield realized that my father being alive was less useful to him than my father being dead. His greed became so great that he was willing to kill him, and my mother, in order to achieve his aims.”

Phineas looked up at James, who was watching him closely. Realization was dawning on him. Fear was flooding him. All of a sudden, everything made sense.

“And if a man can kill once to achieve his aims, then he can kill again,” he whispered. “Especially someone whom he has already grown to hate, like the daughter who betrayed him. He wouldn’t hesitate to kill her if it allowed him to recover the evidence that he had my parents killed. He might even do it just to take revenge on the two of us.”

Phineas stood up. He was suddenly so restless that he needed to be moving, to try and get rid of some of the stagnant fear inside of him.

“I realized all this—albeit subconsciously—when I was talking to the Constable. I realized that letting Iris be part of my life is dangerous for her. Not only does it put her at risk of being killed if she gets in the way of Carfield’s plans, but it tells Carfield that she is precious to me. And this man has made it his life mission to take away everything that is precious to me—my parents, my land, and now maybe even my wife. If I allow Iris to live with me, if I love her like I want to, then she will always have a target on her back. Carfield will use her to get to me.”

“Bravo!” James said, setting his glass down on the table and clapping his hands together. “I must admit, I didn’t think you’d get there that quickly. That was some excellent bit of insight into your own tortured mind, my friend. Your wife must have taught you how to do that.”

“She has made me more in touch with my feelings than I ever thought possible,” Phineas grudgingly admitted. “But tell anyone that?—”

“Yes, I know. You’ll have me killed. A la Carfield and his closest friend.”

Both of them sobered up. Phineas suddenly felt very tired. All the restless energy left him, and he slowly sank back onto the sofa.

“What am I going to do?” he murmured. “Just because I understand now why I pushed Iris away doesn’t mean I know how to fix this. I almost wish I had accused her of those things because I actually believed them, or in order to protect my own heart. If that were the case, I could simply apologize to her and beg her to take me back. But now that I know the truth... going back and apologizing wouldn’t help. She would still be at risk from Carfield.”

James sat forward and looked at him very seriously. “I think you know what you have to do to protect your wife, and hopefully, if it’s not too late, earn her forgiveness,” he said. “You have to take down Carfield once and for all.”

Chapter Sixteen

“I always knew it was too good to be true,” Iris whispered as she allowed her mother to help her to her feet. “He could never trust me, after everything he’s been through.”

She wasn’t sure how much time had passed since Phineas had left them. All she knew was that she had been in a state of shock for some time, kneeling on the floor, either crying or staring off into nothing. Lady Carfield had at last pulled her to her feet, and now, her brow was furrowed with concern as she stroked the side of Iris’s face.

“Let’s get you some tea,” she murmured at last. “That always helps when I’m upset.”

“All the servants are traumatized from the break-in,” Iris objected. “I can’t ask them to make me tea.”

“Then I’ll make it,” Lady Carfield declared. “I’m your mother, after all, and I can make my child a cup of tea after such a shock.”

That is how, ten minutes later, Iris found herself sitting in the cozy kitchen of Eavestone House while her mother busied herself with a kettle. As she watched Lady Carfield fill the kettle, then light the stove with a matchbox not different from the one Phineas used to light his cigars, it struck her that she had never seen a woman of her own station do this kind of domestic labor before.

“How do you know how to do that?” Iris asked quietly as her mother began to search through the cupboards above the stovetop.

“Make tea?” Her mother gave her a baffled look. “It’s not exactly difficult. You just boil water and pour it over—ahh, here it is.” She had opened a cupboard full of pots. After sifting through them, she pulled out a glass one that had been stuffed full of tea leaves. Taking it down and opening it, she sniffed the contents. “Mmm, Earl Grey tea. Perfect.”

Lady Carfield scooped out several spoonfuls of tea leaves into a strainer and then set the strainer inside a teapot. Turning back around, she laughed at the astonished look on her daughter’s face.

“When you fall from grace in the eyes of every one of your acquaintances, you learn to stop living like them,” she explained. “After leaving you, I went to live with my sister, as you know. Her husband lost most of his fortune to gambling debts before he died, and she couldn’t afford many servants, so I would sometimes help around the house—doing the mending and ironing, cooking some of the meals, that kind of thing. The servants she still had found my attempts very amusing, and eventually, we became friends. They taught me a great deal about life and the sort of people who live in this world, and I found a new appreciation for people who use their skills to provide for themselves.”

“And your sister allowed that?” Iris asked, amazed. “She didn’t find it undignified of you?”

Her mother shrugged. “I think she knew I needed to be kept busy. And what else was going to distract me? I could hardly spend my days doing needlework, reading, or playing the pianoforte. None of those idle pursuits would have been able to keep me from obsessing over what I’d done to you and your sisters. I needed hard, menial labor so I didn’t go mad. Mind you, there were still days when I felt as if I were going to end up in Bedlam. But I always managed to throw myself into my work. And it’s useful, knowing how to take care of yourself.”

Iris narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean?”

Her mother sighed. “I think if more women knew how to take care of themselves, if they could work and make their own money instead of relying on their husbands’ wealth to ensure their comforts, then the world would be a much better place. As it is, women of our social status are held captive by their husbands. We don’t know how to survive on our own or how to earn our own money. So, no matter how miserable our marriages are, it is usually impossible to escape.”

“You did, though,” Iris pointed out.

“Yes, but to do so, I had to learn practical skills and apply myself at a trade, work that most members of the ton would describe as demeaning.” Lady Carfield smiled to herself, as if sharing some private joke. “But I never found that kind of work demeaning. In fact, I found it empowering to take care of myself. And I always wished I could have taught you girls how to be self-sufficient. Because I think when we women stick together, and take care of ourselves and each other, we can actually be quite powerful in a world that wants us to be powerless.”

The kettle began to make a high-pitched hissing sound, and she used a rag to remove it from the flame, which she then blew out. She poured the water into the teapot, and as the hot liquid covered the tea leaves, a wonderful smell filled the kitchen. Iris closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, letting the scent of bergamot wash over her. Her mother was right, a cup of tea helped.

Lady Carfield located a cup of sugar, took two teacups from the hutch near the table and a bottle of milk from the ice box, and then transferred the teapot to the table. Finally, when the tea was steeping in front of them, she sat down and fixed her daughter with a sharp expression.

“Now,” she said firmly, “tell me what is going on with your husband. Is there any

truth to his accusation that you are working with your father to bring him down?"

"No!" Iris shouted at once, indignation making her furious. "How can you even ask me that after everything Father has done to all of us?"

"Well, he could have something on you," Lady Carfield pointed out carefully. "Perhaps he's threatening one of your sisters if you don't help him?"

"It's not true," Iris insisted, tears of frustration springing to her eyes. If her own mother wouldn't believe her, how could Phineas? "I would tell you if he was threatening Violet or Rose, and I certainly would have told Phineas. He already helped once, when Father threatened to marry Violet off to Lord Redfield."

"Redfield?!" Her mother looked aghast. "That man is despicable! How could Carfield care so little for our daughters that he was willing to marry Violet off to someone like that?"

"Well, Phineas stopped him, and he made sure all the men of the ton know that my sisters are under his protection. It was... the most noble thing a person has ever done for me."

Iris dropped her head, no longer able to keep the tears at bay. When she had collected herself, she looked back up. Her mother was watching her thoughtfully.

"Father is evil," Iris whispered, "and I would never help him."

"Good, that's what I thought," Lady Carfield said, tutting slightly as she poured them both cups of tea and added milk and sugar. "But you can simply never be too careful when it comes to your father. However, I believe you, so let's move forward. Why does your husband think you're spying on him?"

Iris explained briefly how her father had arranged her marriage by coercion and then tried to get her to spy on Phineas, how she had decided to strike a deal with Phineas instead, and everything that had followed that. Her mother listened closely, nodding along. When Iris was finished, the Viscountess looked impressed.

“I am proud of your industriousness and bravery.” Lady Carfield beamed at her. “It makes me happy that even though you were without me, you found ways to fight back against that man.”

Iris’s heart clenched. Even though she’d forgiven her mother, it still meant more than she could admit to hear her say she was proud of her.

“But considering all this,” her mother continued, “I’m surprised His Grace would have such a violent, angry reaction to the break-in. It appears as if you have done everything you can to earn his trust and prove you are on his side.”

“Phineas doesn’t trust easily, though,” Iris explained. “His parents’ deaths left him feeling abandoned, I think, and he now believes others will abandon him as well.”

“It’s not as if they abandoned him on purpose,” Lady Carfield said indignantly. “They were murdered.”

“He knows that. But when you’re at that age, I think the feelings you have about it are not quite reasonable. He is afraid to let himself love because he believes those he loves will leave him in some horrible way or another. So he doesn’t trust anyone and is quick to assume the worst about people. And now that he’s learned Father murdered his parents, well... I think he’s paranoid that Father set all of this up to take me away from him, too, just as he had become close to me.”

Lady Carfield’s eyes swept over her daughter’s face, and she reached out and touched her hand. The gesture was soft and sweet—maternal. “You really care for him, don’t

you?” she murmured. “The formidable, dangerous Duke of Eavestone. You really love him, don’t you?”

“I do,” Iris whispered, her throat suddenly clogged with emotion. “I love him more than anything on earth. And now it’s too late. He doesn’t trust me. In fact, he hates me.” Tears began to spill down her cheeks, and she didn’t even bother wiping them away. “Father was right in the end—marriage really is pain. Worse than that, he got his way. He married me off to a man who has made me miserable, just not for the reasons he intended.”

Lady Carfield took her in her arms, and for a long moment, she let Iris cry against her chest. It was one of the most comforting moments of Iris’s life. She couldn’t remember the last time she had cried in her mother’s arms, and it eased the knot in her chest just a little to feel her mother’s arms around her and know she wasn’t alone.

Finally, Lady Carfield kissed her forehead and held her at arm’s length, looking deep into her eyes. “I’m so sorry, Iris,” she whispered. “This is all my fault. If I had just told your husband the truth all those years ago, he could have had Carfield arrested, and none of this would be happening now. But I was afraid... His Grace was only a boy at the time, and even with the evidence, Carfield could have found a way to thwart him.

“And I felt powerless. When someone has made you feel as small and insignificant as your father made me feel, you start to believe them. Even the most confident person in the world couldn’t get through years of marriage to a man like that without starting to wonder if they really are as worthless as he says they are. And I was so young when I married your father, so impressionable...”

She hung her head, and Iris patted her hand in what she hoped was a comforting manner.

It was frightening to think of her mother being bullied by her father, and Iris tried to take a deep breath and calm herself. At least she was no longer crying. Her old instinct for strength and preservation was kicking in, and a determination she hadn't felt before was starting to flood her.

From nowhere, she remembered her father's promise that he would take them down, that he would break them. Perhaps it had been his plan all along to sow discord between her and Phineas. Well, if it had been, then he had succeeded. At least for now. But there was still fight left in Iris.

"What's done is done," Iris stated, with more determination than she had felt even moments before. Her mother looked up at her, her gaze curious. "What we need to figure out now is how to help Phineas bring Father down. Because Phineas is no longer a boy, and I know he is smart enough and strong enough to thwart our Father. What he needs, what we can help him with, is evidence."

Her mother blinked, then shook her head. "But the evidence is gone..."

"It's not gone," Iris insisted. Her brain had begun to whirl, and she was thinking hard. "Father has it. And I am willing to bet anything that he has it in the safe where you found the letter between him and the murderer he hired."

"But how can we get into the safe? Lord Carfield has surely moved the key, after all these years. And you're not allowed on his property."

"I'm not sure yet." Iris held up a hand as a thought occurred to her. "What was it that Phineas said? That I must have been spying on him because Father knew we were at the mines?"

"Yes..." her mother said slowly. "He seemed to think Carfield had arrived too quickly at the mines to have been told of your presence by someone who had to send

the information all the way to London. He was convinced Carfield would have had to learn where you were going ahead of time.”

“And he thought perhaps I’d told Violet and Rose by accident, but I didn’t. I knew better than to mention anything to them, in case Father forced it out of them.”

Her mother’s eyebrows knit together. “Who might have told him, then?”

Iris considered this. There were several people who had known they were going to the mines, namely the butler and the groomsmen, who had been required to prepare the carriage and horses. Other than that, it was only Phineas’s valet... But Phineas would have vetted his staff. He would be entirely sure that none of them were spying for her father. Anyway, why would Lord Carfield have needed Iris to spy on Phineas if he already had a man on the inside?

Unless...

Unless it wasn’t Iris he wanted to spy for him. Unless Iris was the decoy, the distraction from the real spy, who would have arrived with Iris right underneath Phineas’s nose.

Iris looked up at her mother, her mouth hanging open. “We need to talk to Anna, right now.”

It didn’t take Anna very long to confess.

Iris and Lady Carfield found her upstairs in the guest bedroom Iris had insisted she rest in. When they came in, she was drinking the sherry they’d brought her earlier and staring vacantly at the ceiling.

The moment Iris walked through the door, a blazing look on her face, her lady’s maid

burst into tears.

“I’ve wanted to tell you for ages and ages,” Anna sobbed not ten minutes later as she sat on the edge of the bed, a handkerchief pressed to her face so that she wouldn’t have to make eye contact with her mistress. “There were so many times I almost told you, Your Grace—you have to believe me.”

“I’m not angry, Anna,” Iris sighed, although she couldn’t promise that her husband wouldn’t be. “I simply want to know why you did it.”

Anna looked up. Her face was blotchy, her eyes were bloodshot, and her cheeks were swollen from crying. Tears were still streaming down her face, but she managed to brush them away before she spoke again.

“It’s my brother,” she explained. “He’s very sick. And I can’t afford the hospital bills. Your father offered me money if I just brought him information on how the marriage was going, if you and His Grace seemed to like one another. I didn’t understand the need for it, but I didn’t understand the harm in it either. Of course, coming from His Lordship, I suspected it wasn’t a good reason, but I couldn’t fathom what it might be. And then he started demanding more and more information, and suddenly I was in over my head.”

“But if it was money you needed, why didn’t you come to the Duke and me?” Iris asked, unable to keep some of the astonishment from her voice. “You know that His Grace is a wealthy man, and I believe I have always been generous to you.”

“I wanted to, but....” Anna’s eyes filled with tears again. “His Lordship said that if I told anyone, he’d make sure my brother suffered an accident in the hospital. I was scared, Your Grace. His Lordship has always been a frightening man, and... I didn’t know what to do.”

“I understand,” Lady Carfield said, laying a comforting hand on the maid’s shoulder. “I felt the exact same way. Lord Carfield has always used his power to intimidate and get his way—against all those he opposes, but especially women, whom Society has already rendered so powerless. It isn’t your fault that he did the same thing to you.”

Anna nodded, and then her eyes flicked to Iris’s. “I’d do anything to help you, Your Grace. Anything at all. I’ve looked after you since you were a little girl, and I care for you very much. I never meant for any harm to come to you.”

“I know that,” Iris said. She gave her maid a reassuring smile. “And I don’t blame you. As long as you work with us to take down my father.”

“Of course,” Anna whispered. “I’ll do anything in my power, even if I have none.”

Iris looked at her mother, her words from earlier ringing in her ears. “Even us women can have power,” she murmured, “if we work together.”

Chapter Seventeen

“ I never thought I’d step foot in here again,” Iris said as she stared up at the front door of her father’s townhouse. “After he banned me from entering any of his properties, I assumed I’d seen the last of this place.”

Anna, who was standing beside her, looked at her nervously. “Are you sure you want to go in, Your Grace?”

“Yes.” Iris squared her shoulders. “I have to do this. For my mother, for my sisters, and for Phineas.”

And for myself .

With a determination that she didn’t fully feel, Iris stepped forward and knocked firmly on the door.

Several long seconds passed, and then the door swung open. Mr. Jones, the butler, blinked at her.

“Your—Your Grace!” he stuttered, his eyes widening. “What are you doing here?”

“I’ve come to see my father,” Iris declared, drawing herself up as tall as she could and flashing the butler her most imperious look.

“But—” Mr. Jones looked nervously over his shoulder, then lowered his voice. “His Lordship has forbidden you entry into his home.”

“Believe me,” Iris said, stepping forward so that she was halfway across the doorstep, “he wants to hear what I have to say.”

Mr. Jones hesitated, as if he couldn’t make up his mind about what to do next. Iris could see him considering his options. She even felt a little guilty. Mr. Jones’s job could be on the line if he let her into the house. And her father had probably given him permission to throw her out of it if she tried to enter. But she knew that the kindly, aging butler would not dare to harm her.

And she was right, because after several more tense seconds, he relented and stood aside. Iris smiled with satisfaction and swept into the hall, Anna following close behind her.

“I’ll go get His Lordship,” Mr. Jones murmured, and he practically flew out of the hall.

The moment he had disappeared into the interior of the house, Iris turned to Anna. “Go now,” she whispered. “This might be our only chance.”

Anna nodded, then hurried up the stairs. She had just disappeared around the corner when a door at the end of the hallway flew open and her father strode out, looking irate.

“I thought I told you that you were never allowed to step foot on my property again!” he shouted as he barreled toward her.

His face was red with anger, and his eyes seemed to be bugging out of his head. Iris felt a grim satisfaction at knowing that so far, the plan was working. Her father was so distracted by her presence that he would not stop to consider if she’d come alone, and if not, where her maid might be.

“I meant all of my properties,” he snarled as he came to a stop just inches away from her. “Including this one.”

“I was well aware of what you meant,” Iris said coolly. Even with him raging and so close to her, she didn’t feel afraid. She knew what he was capable of, but all her fear had evaporated. In its place was cold contempt. “But I felt this was important.”

“You should know I’ve already sent Jones to fetch the Bow Street Runners,” he warned, spittle flying from his mouth and landing on her cheeks. With as much dignity as possible, she wiped it away.

“If anyone should call the Bow Street Runners, it’s me. I know what you did.”

“Oh?” The Viscount raised an eyebrow. “And what’s that?”

“You hired ruffians to ransack and rob the Duke’s house. My house.”

Her father sneered. “Yes, I heard about the break-in. I trust nothing important was taken?”

“Just some... precious items,” she replied, watching his face for a reaction. He gave none.

“I’m sorry to hear that. But if you’ve come here with empty accusations of my involvement, then I have no time for you. You have no evidence that I did such a thing. Your husband has many enemies, and any number of them could have staged a robbery.”

Iris rolled her eyes. At the same time, her father’s mouth opened slightly. In all her years, she had never rolled her eyes at her father—or done anything so disobedient and unladylike—and it was worth it for the shock on his face.

“I know it was you,” she affirmed. “But I didn’t come here to argue the point.”

Lord Carfield folded his hands in front of his chest. “Then why did you come here?”

“I came here to make a deal with you.”

Her father blinked. She’d caught him off guard, she knew, and she relished the momentary confusion that flickered across his face. He took a step back and surveyed her, his eyes crawling up and down her frame as if looking for some secret that might be hidden in her person.

“Why would I make a deal with you, when I am, so far, winning in my battle against you and your husband?”

“Are you winning, though?” Iris smiled serenely. “Because, as I’m sure you know, I recently reconnected with my mother. And she had some very interesting things to tell me.”

“Such as?”

“Such as the fact that you had the late Duke and Duchess of Eavestone murdered.”

There was a beat, during which the hall seemed to ring with the weight of her accusation. Her father continued to gaze at her, a calculating expression on his face. At last, he shifted.

“What a preposterous accusation,” he said smoothly. “I’m assuming your mother has evidence proving this?”

“Yes, she does,” Iris lied.

She kept her cool, her eyes wide and innocent, but she could feel sweat beading on the back of her neck.

“Oh?” Her father seemed wholly unconcerned. “And what exactly does she have?”

“A letter, from you to the man you hired, detailing your crime.”

The Viscount smiled. It was a cold, cruel smile. “That isn’t possible, as I never sent any letter to the man who killed the late Duke of Eavestone.”

“It is possible, and I have the letter.”

Her father narrowed his eyes. “And here I thought that such precious items had been stolen from the Duke’s residence.”

“The one that was stolen was a copy,” Iris said with a shrug. “Not the original.”

For a split second, her father’s facade cracked, and the briefest hint of doubt flashed across his face. Then it was gone, replaced by cool indifference.

“If that were true,” he countered, “then you wouldn’t be here telling me about it. You’d be using it to try and ruin me.”

“Well, that’s why I’m here.” Iris squared her shoulders again and raised her chin in defiance. “I am ready to give you back the original letter if you help me.”

Her father stared at her. “Help you?” he repeated.

“Yes.” Iris took a deep breath. “After our home was ransacked, His Grace—who believes as I do that you were responsible—decided I must still be working with you to spy on him. He accused me of betraying him, of working with you to take

everything from him. No matter what I said, I could not convince him otherwise.”

Tears sprang to her eyes, and she wiped them hurriedly away. Her father’s eyes followed the motion with interest. “He left me right then and there, and I do not believe he will be back. After everything he has been through in this life, he doesn’t trust easily. And now his trust in me is broken.”

Her father tutted impatiently. “And what does this have to do with me?”

“You were right,” Iris said, “about our connection. We have grown close. I... I love him. And I would do anything to earn his love again.”

Lord Carfield stilled. “Anything?”

“Yes, anything. Including giving you back the original letter.”

A beat passed, during which Iris held her breath. Then her father shook his head. “But no such letter exists, since I did not commit this crime,” he maintained, although he didn’t sound as convincing as before.

“Regardless,” Iris said with a shrug, “I would give you back the letter, and you could safeguard it and ensure that no one ever sees it if you tell my husband that I am not working with you. Prove it to him.”

“And how would I do that?”

“You’d find a way.” Iris snorted. “You always find a way.”

“You’re bluffing,” her father said slowly. “If such a letter existed, why wouldn’t you simply show it to the authorities in order to prove your loyalty to your husband? Why give it back to me, with no guarantee I could convince your husband of your

innocence? Why not just ruin me once and for all?"

"For my mother's sake," Iris replied at once. "She could have gone to the authorities years ago with the letter, but she chose not to. And why not? Because it shows her own complicity in the murder. She witnessed the forged bill of sale, and it wouldn't be hard for a prosecutor to argue she was also involved in the murder.

"She knows all this, which is why she has kept your secret. Not just out of fear for her own freedom, but out of fear that if both your reputations were ruined, her daughters' reputations would be tarnished as well. And I want to protect her, as well as my sisters. Which is why I would prefer to deal with you directly, rather than involve the Crown."

"And all this... in exchange for me telling your husband you weren't spying on him for me?"

"In exchange for convincing him," Iris insisted.

Lord Carfield drummed his fingers on his leg. He looked thoughtful, but not wholly convinced. "Of course, there is no legitimate letter," he began slowly. "But I suppose your mother could have forged such a document. In which case, it would be helpful to make sure she doesn't distribute it and try to ruin me."

"Then you'll do it?"

"I'll think about it," he snapped.

Just then, a knock sounded at the door, and Mr. Jones scurried out of wherever he'd been eavesdropping to answer it. He pulled it open, and in walked the Constable who had come to Eavestone House after the robbery. He looked surprised as he surveyed the scene.

“Your Lordship,” he said, bowing low, “you said you needed help removing a trespasser?”

“That won’t be necessary,” Lord Carfield replied smoothly, looking at Iris. “Her Grace was just leaving. Isn’t that so, Iris?”

“It is,” Iris confirmed. “My lady’s maid accompanied me here. I sent her to the kitchen. Mr. Jones, would you please tell her we are leaving?”

Mr. Jones nodded and left the room.

Several moments passed, during which no one looked at each other. Then Mr. Jones and Anna emerged from the kitchen. Anna briefly glanced at the Viscount, but he didn’t so much as look at her. Iris tried to act natural. There was no reason for her father to suspect his spy of doing anything other than going to the kitchen to see her old friends, right?

After a brief nod to Mr. Jones and the Constable, Iris turned and swept past the Constable and out of her father’s house for what she hoped was the last time.

Lord Carfield stood still for a long moment after his daughter left, listening to the echo of the slammed door bouncing through the hallway and then slowly fading to nothing. At last, he went to the window and drew the curtains. He couldn’t see any sign of Iris outside, but he checked for a moment or two before finally turning and making his way up to his study, ignoring the bumbling inquiries of the Constable, whom he left standing alone in the hall.

Once he was in his study, he went straight to his desk. On top of it was a small bronze statue of an eagle. He twisted the right wing of the eagle, until it unscrewed, revealing a small hollow inside the bronze. From this, he pulled out a silver key.

Turning, he grabbed the edge of the large portrait of himself that hung above his desk and pulled forward. Instead of falling off the wall, the portrait swung outward, revealing a small space in which a safe was hidden. Inserting the key into the safe, he clicked open the lock.

Inside was a bundle of documents. He retrieved them and spread the papers out on his desk, rifling through them until he found the one he was looking for—a letter that he had written to the man he'd hired to rob and kill his old friend and nemesis, the late Duke of Eavestone, along with his wife.

Lord Carfield raised the letter to the light and squinted at it. The ink was faded, but there was no doubt that it had been written in his hand. He would recognize his penmanship and signature anywhere. There was no way that this was a forgery. No one could replicate his handwriting so well.

Lord Carfield sat down slowly, continuing to stare at the letter, thinking hard. If this wasn't a forgery, then that meant it was the original. And if it was the original, then his daughter had nothing to threaten him with. It was as he had expected. She had been...

"Lying," he murmured out loud to the room. "But then, what is she playing at? Why lie about having the original, when she knows I would be able to tell if it was a fake?"

It wouldn't be right to say that Lord Carfield was scared of his daughter, but she had certainly proved to be more serious a foe than he had anticipated. Her marriage to the Duke of Eavestone had made her more willful than he had realized it would. The Duke's arrogance had rubbed off on her, undoubtedly. And he didn't like not knowing why she had lied to him. Lord Carfield couldn't see what her endgame was, and that unnerved him. He had never suspected his daughter of being able to outwit someone, let alone himself.

“It must be one of Eavestone’s plots,” he muttered. “But what is he trying to do?”

No one answered him. He was speaking out loud to himself, after all, and he was alone in the room.

Or so he thought.

As he carefully folded up the papers and locked them securely back in the safe, he didn’t notice the slight sway of the long, velvet curtains that he always kept closed over the windows. Even if he had, he would have thought nothing of it.

And he never would have suspected that peeking out from a small crack in the curtains was his middle daughter, Violet, who had been informed by Anna of Iris’s plan and had just had time to hide away in her father’s study and discover exactly where he kept the key to his safe.

Chapter Eighteen

“It shouldn’t be long until Father reaches out to you to find out exactly what’s going on,” Iris said in the carriage ride back to Eavestone House. “He has to be suspicious.”

“But what if he asks me in a letter to tell him what you’re conspiring to do?” Anna fretted, pulling at the strings of her bonnet as she spoke.

She was pale from nerves, and truthfully, Iris was nervous as well. As they spoke, Violet was risking possibly her life by spying on their father. And it all might be for naught if Lord Carfield didn’t lead her to the key to the safe. But Iris was sure he would. Her claim that the letter had been a fake would surely push her father to check the document, and Iris was sure it was in his safe.

If it wasn’t there, well then... things might get harder. But Iris had a feeling that he would keep the letter as close as possible. Especially now. She had changed sides, many of his allies had fallen by the wayside, and she was sure he no longer knew whom to trust. The only person he would truly trust—the only person he’d ever cared about or protected—was himself.

But if her father discovered Violet, or if Violet stole the letter and he suspected her, it could risk her very life. It hadn’t been easy to ask her to take such a risk. Iris would have preferred to do it herself. But there was no one else in the house to do it. And she knew that after the failed engagement to Lord Redfield, Violet would want to take action. She wouldn’t want to sit passively by and wait for their father to torment her further—she would want to fight back.

“I still don’t understand why we couldn’t have just explained everything to Miss Violet in a letter,” Anna said, wringing her hands in her lap.

“Because,” Iris explained for what felt like the hundredth time, “I am sure that Father is watching all of the mail in and out of the house. That must be how he knew what time Mother and I would be gone to meet Violet and Rose. I can’t imagine why else he would have allowed them out of the house without chaperones. And it’s too perfect, the timing with the thieves. They surely had an approximate time of our departure ahead of time.”

Anna looked confused, and Iris shook her head.

“I just hope it worked,” she muttered, more to herself than to Anna. “We need you back in the house to pick up the letter from Violet...”

And sure enough, when they arrived at the house, there was a letter waiting for Anna. With trembling fingers, she took it from the butler and broke the seal.

“It’s from His Lordship,” she whispered, looking up at Iris with a fearful expression on her face. “He wants to see me at once.”

“Then you must go,” Iris urged as she removed her gloves and handed them to the butler.

“Did he take the bait?” Lady Carfield asked as she came into the hall. She looked about as nervous as Anna.

Iris gave her a reassuring smile. “We think so. He’s asked to see Anna.”

“That’s good.” Her mother put a hand to her forehead as if overcome with a dizzy spell. “And Violet? Did she agree to help?”

“She said she would wait in Father’s study, see what she could discover.”

“I don’t like to think of her putting herself at risk like that.”

“We all have to do our part,” Iris said determinedly, squashing the small jolt of fear in her stomach. “And Violet is brave and smart. She can do this.”

“Should I go, then?” Anna asked, looking between them.

“Not yet,” Lady Carfield said. “It would be unusual for you to leave Her Grace right after returning to the house. It might arouse Carfield’s suspicion if you were to do something so out-of-character. Wait until the afternoon, when Her Grace is supposed to be out calling.”

“That’s wise,” Iris agreed. “After all, he can’t suspect that I know anything.”

Still, the waiting was interminable. And every minute that Violet was alone in the house with her father was another minute that her safety was at risk. At last, Anna departed for Carfield House, and Iris and her mother sat together in the parlor, trying to talk about anything else.

When they’d run out of small talk, Lady Carfield fidgeted on the sofa, then fixed Iris with a serious expression.

“I have to ask. How did you convince your father that you’d rather trade the letter for his help than let me use it to arrest him?”

Iris bit her lip, then looked away. “I told him you knew having a murderer for a father would ruin your daughters’ reputations. That you were trying to protect us. But mostly... I told him I was afraid it would implicate you in the murder. That I was protecting you. ”

“And he believed that?”

“I don’t know. But...” Iris looked back at her mother, and to her surprise, she realized there were tears in her eyes. “It’s true, Mother. I would protect you if that’s what you wanted.”

Lady Carfield stood up and crossed the room to her daughter, kneeling down in front of her and taking both her hands in her own.

“You don’t have to protect me, Iris,” she murmured. “In fact, I should have been the one there, protecting you. I know, after everything that’s happened these past few days, that forgiving me is the last thing on your mind. But I hope you know that from now on, you don’t need to take care of your sisters anymore. I will do that. And you don’t need to take care of yourself either.”

“You’ll take care of me?” Iris asked, a little taken aback.

Her mother smiled. “No, darling. Your husband will.”

Iris swallowed past the lump in her throat. “If he ever forgives me,” she whispered.

“He will,” her mother assured her, and the conviction in her voice gave Iris just an ounce of hope. “Because he loves you.”

“Not anymore.”

“Yes,” Lady Carfield murmured, smoothing back a curl that had fallen loose from Iris’s coiffure. “He still does. How could he not? You are brave and kind. Far braver than I ever was. And I have no doubt that he will realize he’s made a grave mistake and come begging for your forgiveness.”

“Perhaps...”

Iris couldn't let herself get her hopes too high. She had to focus on the task at hand: making sure her sister got them the information that would lead to their father's arrest. Then, and only then, could she consider how it might allow her to win back her husband...

At last, the doorbell rang, and Iris and her mother both stood up so quickly that Iris gave herself a head rush. Moments later, the door to the parlor burst open, and Anna practically fell through it. Her cheeks were red, and her eyes were very bright.

“I've got it!” she cried, before Iris even had a chance to ask her. “Miss Violet got it!”

And then she started babbling. Something about a statue of an eagle, Violet hidden behind the curtain, and a clandestine meeting with Violet in the scullery, where she had handed over the document. Iris didn't follow all of it, but she got the gist: they had succeeded. Violet had discovered where Lord Carfield kept his safe's key, she'd stolen the key, and she'd opened the safe to find the letter inside.

And as Iris took the faded, tattered papers from her lady's maid, her heart soared with more hope than she had dared let herself feel since the moment Phineas had turned on her. Then she realized the paper was thicker than she had thought it would be. Suddenly curious, she opened it.

“Does Lord Carfield suspect anything?” Lady Carfield asked as Iris read over the contents of the papers in her hands.

“He wasn't sure what Her Grace was up to and knew she didn't have the real letter,” Anna said, “but I told him I didn't know anything about it. I'm not sure he believed me, but what could he do? He needs me here to keep an eye on you. And Miss Violet said she returned to the key to its original hiding spot, with him none the wiser.”

Iris looked up, her heart hammering in her chest. “Violet is brilliant!” she whispered.

Both her mother and Anna turned to look at her.

Iris could barely contain herself, and she grinned at both of them. “She didn’t just get the letter and the bill of sale! She also got this—look!”

She thrust the piece of paper at her mother, and Lady Carfield bent to read it.

“What is this?” she asked, her brow furrowed. “A report on the safety of your father’s mines?”

“It’s proof that it didn’t pass the inspections!” Iris said gleefully. “He was lying when he told Phineas and me that it did. And the papers he gave us were forged. Violet didn’t just steal the documents, she actually read through them, looking for more evidence! She’s... well, she’s always been too smart for her own good.”

“How will it help you?” her mother asked, still confused. “You’ll already have him arrested.”

“Yes, but this way we can also make sure the mines are shut down, not sold off to someone worse, while the legal documents go through to ensure the lands are returned to Phineas.”

Iris was beaming, and briefly, she felt a deep pang in her heart that Phineas wasn’t there. He would have understood her excitement at the prospect of being able to ensure the miners’ safety. This document would save lives. Then, eventually, when Phineas got his land back, he could reopen the mines if he wanted to and make them safer. But in the meantime, there would be no more ten-year-old children working in them.

“Well then,” Iris said, feeling a rush of pleasure at having hoodwinked her father, “I think it’s time we get these to a notary as quickly as possible. I will need sworn statements from both of you saying exactly what you know. That, along with the letter and the bill of sale, should prove once and for all that Father isn’t just a thief, but a murderer.”

Within an hour, the three of them had arrived at the Duke of Eavestone’s solicitor’s office. Iris hadn’t known where else to take them, as this was the only solicitor’s office she had ever been to before, but she assumed it was as good as any. It took Mr. Hargrove several minutes to realize what was happening. Iris suspected that three scared and exuberant women had never burst into his office before demanding that he notarize documents of a sensitive nature.

“This looks legitimate to me,” he said after she had shoved the forged bill of sale under his nose. “But you want me to notarize a statement saying it is false?”

“It is false,” Lady Carfield insisted, stepping forward. “My husband had me sign it many years ago after telling me that the new Duke of Eavestone had signed it. But even then, I knew something wasn’t right. If I was the witness to the sale, why was I not asked to witness the Duke’s signature? It’s taken me many years to realize that my husband lied to me, that the sale never went through, and that he had forged the young Duke’s signature.”

“That,” Mr. Hargrove said, a shocked look on his face, “is a very serious accusation.”

“There’s more as well,” Lady Carfield added. “As you will hear in my statement.”

The solicitor still looked uncertain, but at last, he took out a sheaf of paper and dipped his quill in the inkpot.

“All right, My Lady, what would you like to say?”

Slowly and deliberately, Lady Carfield recited everything she had told Iris and Phineas about the bill of sale. The solicitor wrote everything down diligently. He only paused when she got to the part about finding out that her husband had paid for the Duke and Duchess of Eavestone to be murdered.

And hearing the story again, Iris couldn't blame the man for his shock. It was a chilling tale, and even she felt slightly sick to her stomach. It was unbelievable that someone could do such heinous things, but it had to be believed because it was real.

Anna was a rapt audience member as well. She gasped and cried out at all the right moments, and even Mr. Hargrove, who had surely heard many ghastly tales over the years, looked pale by the end of it.

At last, when Lady Carfield was done, she looked as if a huge weight had lifted from her shoulders. She sighed and smiled—Iris could have sworn she had lost at least five years from her face.

“I-is that everything?” Mr. Hargrove asked, looking up at her with a slightly pained expression on his face.

“That’s everything,” the Viscountess replied. “And we have the documents to prove it, which we would like notarized.”

“Very well.” He pushed the piece of parchment across the desk towards her. “The only thing left to do, then, is to sign it.”

Lady Carfield picked up the quill and bent over the parchment. She was about to sign it when the solicitor cleared his throat. She looked up at him, and he reddened and fidgeted.

“There is one other thing to consider,” he began slowly. “Which is that if you sign an

affidavit to the effect that you signed this original bill of sale under false pretenses, then you are also making yourself liable to legal action. I'm not sure I can recommend that a woman of your position put herself in such a vulnerable position... you might be arrested for falsifying a legal document and for assisting in the theft of a serious piece of property."

Lady Carfield's eyes glittered as she stared down at him. "That is a risk I am willing to take."

"Mother—" Iris began, but her mother cut her off.

"No, Iris, this is on me to fix now," Lady Carfield insisted, shaking her head fervently. "I won't let anyone else suffer for the mistakes I made."

"Couldn't she get leniency because she is coming forward now?" Iris asked Mr. Hargrove.

"It's possible, but it will depend on the judge who hears the case."

"Mother..." Iris turned to Lady Carfield and took her hands in her own. "After all these years, I only just got you back. Violet and Rose are finally getting to know you, to spend time with you. I can't let you get arrested and taken from us again. I won't let it!"

"What good will it be to get to know you if your father remains free?" Lady Carfield whispered. She rested her forehead against Iris's. "This is how I protect the three of you, after ten years of letting you down."

"But... the letter proving he had the late Duke murdered should be evidence enough to put him away," Iris argued. "You don't need to risk your own freedom."

“If your father is arrested, his lands will pass to his heir. It will not revert to your husband. If you want to get this land back for Phineas—and prove to him once and for all that you have always been on his side—then this is the only way.”

“But Phineas isn’t more important to me than y?—”

“But he is,” Lady Carfield murmured. She stepped back, and the look on her face was fierce. “As he should be. He has been there for you when I couldn’t be. And I want you to choose him over me, Iris. He is the one who hasn’t let you down.”

She turned toward Mr. Hargrove and nodded. She looked so determined that Iris felt a surge of pride. Her mother, at long last, was protecting her—sacrificing herself for her. She hadn’t realized how much she needed it until this moment.

“I’m ready,” Lady Carfield stated. “I’m ready to sign an affidavit stating I lied on the original bill of sale.”

“That,” said a cold, piercing voice from behind them all, “would be a grave mistake.”

Iris, Anna, and Lady Carfield all turned on the spot to see Lord Carfield standing in the doorway, a look of pure anger on his face.

Chapter Nineteen

“Well, well, well, what do we have here?”

Lord Carfield stepped into the room, and the moment he did, a cold breeze seemed to follow him in, chilling Iris to the bones. Her father’s presence was large and looming, like a shadow falling across them all, and she had to do everything in her power to keep herself from shrinking back in fear. Now was not the moment to let him intimidate her.

“Lord Carfield!” she heard Mr. Hargrove murmur. “What are you doing here?”

But her father wasn’t looking at the solicitor. Nor was he looking at her. His eyes were fixed, instead, on her mother.

“Bridget...” he murmured, and his voice sounded like a prayer, if Iris could believe that her father had ever prayed.

“Jebediah,” Lady Carfield replied, much more frostily.

She stood up straighter, jutted her chin, and narrowed her eyes. There was an icy power to her that seemed to radiate throughout the room, and Iris wondered how her father could bear to keep looking at her with such an arrogant sneer on his face.

“We meet again.”

“What has it been?” Lord Carfield asked, pretending to count on his fingers. “Eight,

nine years?”

“Ten,” his wife replied.

“Ahh, yes. How time flies... I never thought I’d see you again. It is pleasant, indeed, to be wrong.”

Lady Carfield didn’t respond, but no one in the room had any doubt, from the look on her face, that she did not find it pleasant.

“What are you doing here, Father?” Iris asked, her voice snapping like a whip through the room.

Lord Carfield’s eyes flicked to hers, and the simpering sneer vanished, replaced by deep dislike. “Why, I am stopping you from trying to tarnish my good name,” he said, as if this were painfully obvious—which, Iris grudgingly admitted, it was. “As amusing as it is to see so many women mobilized for my downfall, I’m afraid that the jig is up.”

“What does that mean?” Iris snarled.

“It means that I know what you’re up to,” Lord Carfield said smoothly. “You cannot possibly get away with this. You do know that, don’t you? You are mere women, and I am the Viscount Carfield. Whatever evidence you think you have, I have five lawyers who will find a way to discredit it or declare it inadmissible. I have money, I have power, and I have a reputation as an honest businessman. What will your word matter against mine?”

“It won’t just be our word,” Iris snapped, her temper rising. “Phineas is also on our side!”

“Is he?” Lord Carfield looked amused. “Or is he at his club right now, drinking his sorrows away, and falling right back into the pit of despair that got him into this mess in the first place, when he originally signed the land over to me?”

“That’s a lie!” Iris yelled. “He never signed away the land.”

“Anyway,” Lord Carfield continued, “will he really be so quick to jump to your aid? The last I heard, he had left you after accusing you of spying on him at my request. What makes you think that he will come running to you now?”

“It won’t matter if he doesn’t trust me now,” Iris said.

But despite the conviction in her voice, she wasn’t entirely certain. Was it possible that Phineas wouldn’t help them if he still believed in her guilt? And where was he? How could he have stayed away for days, instead of coming home to her?

Even if he suspected me of helping Father, doesn’t he at least know that I love him? Shouldn’t he at least believe that I would only continue to help Father out of fear for my sisters?

“He’ll know what we’ve done soon enough,” she forced herself to add, swallowing her doubts, “and he will want to help ensure that you end up behind bars. Then it will be him against you, and no one is going to take the side of a viscount over that of a duke.”

The Viscount’s lips twisted—in anger or amusement, Iris couldn’t tell—as he stared down at her. “That’s very loyal of you to believe, my dear, but you forget that this particular Duke has made it his business to alienate every member of the ton. He is known for his cruelty, for his ruthlessness, and for his unrelenting vendetta against every respectable businessman in London. No one is going to take his side after he has spent a lifetime of not being on their side.”

Iris wasn't sure if this was true, but she didn't exactly know how to refute it either. It was possible there was some truth in it. The Duke had been known for trying to take down powerful members of the ton, and people might believe Lord Carfield was just another on his hit list. Which he was... but if they knew the truth, they'd understand why.

Her father continued, "I don't think we will have to let it get that far. I am sure that Mr. Hargrove here has no desire to notarize and sign documents that spread salacious lies about a member of the peerage, do you, Mr. Hargrove?"

As one, every person in the room turned to look at the solicitor, who blanched under the stare of so many people.

"I-I am deeply concerned by any accusation of dishonesty," he mumbled, stuttering over his words. "However, if the lady wants to make a statement, that is her right to do so..."

"Is it, though?" Lord Carfield took another step forward into the room. "Lady Carfield is my wife, and if I say she cannot sign a document accusing me of grievous—and most untrue—crimes, then I believe she does not have the right to do so."

Mr. Hargrove licked his lips nervously, just as Iris felt her stomach drop.

Is that true?

She turned to look at her mother. Lady Carfield looked similarly unsure, but she set her jaw and flashed a warning look at Iris that seemed to say, Give nothing away.

"If Lady Carfield wishes to make a statement, there is no legal requirement that she get permission from her husband," Mr. Hargrove stated.

“But if I order my wife home, then there is the requirement that she obey me, is there not?”

Mr. Hargrove pushed his glasses up his nose, which was beginning to sweat. “Technically, yes... a husband is entitled to his wife’s body if no formal separation has been declared.”

Iris gasped, and Lady Carfield shot her another warning glare.

Turning to Lady Carfield, the Viscount’s eyes seemed to glitter with malice. “Then I would like to insist that my wife accompany me back to my home,” he purred. “Unless, of course, she refuses to sign this despicable document.”

“Don’t listen to him, Mother!” Iris cried, banging her fist down hard on the desk, startling everyone. “Once he is arrested, he won’t be able to order you around anymore!”

“It will take several days for this flimsy piece of evidence to be brought before a judge,” Lord Carfield continued as if he hadn’t heard her, “who is the only person who can issue a warrant allowing the Bow Street Runners to make an arrest. That is if the judge is foolish enough to believe such things. But I’m sure there are not many who would, especially considering how friendly I am with the judges of our fine legal system...”

Friendly ...

Iris inwardly scoffed. So the judges were on his payroll as well.

“And in those few days, I am sure that there would be plenty of time for Bridget and me to... get reacquainted.”

“What are you threatening to do to her?” Iris hissed through gritted teeth, but she had a feeling she already knew.

Her father had already proven he was a killer. What would stop him from disposing of Lady Carfield and her witness statement, should he force her to return home with him? The thought filled Iris with sick dread. And then another thought came to mind—Violet and Rosalie! He could also threaten to kill them if Lady Carfield didn’t go home with him.

But she knew, deep in her heart, that her mother was the one he wanted dead. Iris knew it because Lady Carfield, and her signature, had the power to ruin him forever. And she knew it from the look of pure venom on his face. Lady Carfield had left him, after all, humiliating him in front of the ton. If there was anyone that Iris thought her father might hate more than her, it was her mother.

His next words only confirmed this theory.

“Oh, how I have longed for this day,” he murmured, taking another step towards her mother. He seemed to be in a trance, his eyes fixed unblinkingly on her. “All these years, I waited for you to return to me, biding my time, knowing that if I forced you at the wrong moment, I would lose the opportunity to turn it to my advantage. I knew where you were, of course. I kept tabs on you, had you followed, ensured that you never saw your daughters or were able to contact them. Of course, when you tried, I read the letters before I burned them. But still, throughout all that time, knowing where you were and what you did, I never forced you to return to me.

“In that way, I have been generous to you. I very easily could have forced you to return home to care for the children and husband you abandoned. Did you know it’s legal for a husband to sue his wife for leaving him and depriving him of someone to manage his home?” He laughed, as if this were amusing. “But no, I never did that. Instead, I waited, patiently, for the right moment, for an opportunity to both thwart

your plans against me and get my beloved wife back under my roof.”

“Beloved wife?” The disgust on Lady Carfield’s face and in her voice was palpable. “You have never thought of me as your beloved wife for even a moment! From the very first day of our marriage, you proved to be nothing but a cruel, vindictive man without an ounce of love or care in your heart!”

“How can you say that, my dear?” The Viscount’s smile was so twisted and terrible that Iris felt her stomach lurch in disgust. “I have always valued you highly.”

Lady Carfield tossed her head, her eyes sparkling with rage. “You valued me for the one thing you value women for—producing heirs! Even before you realized I would never give you one, you treated me with contempt, telling me how incapable I was of running your house, that I was not elegant or beautiful enough, that you only married me for my dowry. The only time the string of abuse ever let up was when I was with child. Even then, your care only extended to my physical comforts, never to my emotional well-being. And each time I birthed a girl, you greeted the news with even more hatred for me. You never valued me, My Lord. Maybe you might have if I had borne a son. But I am glad I did not, because it taught me your true character—a man who only values women for breeding.”

The look on Lord Carfield’s face had soured. “Well, what else are women good for?” he growled. “You were brought up to serve your husband and give him heirs, and you couldn’t even do that!” He looked around at Iris, the contempt on his face growing. “Three daughters! It is an unimaginable crime to give your husband only daughters and no heir! And you wonder why I didn’t cherish you.”

“An unimaginable crime is the one you committed!” Lady Carfield exclaimed. “And which you forced me to partake in. No, I will not say forced, for you never explicitly made me sign the bill of sale. But throughout years of making me feel small, of telling me what a disappointment I was to you and how much you despised me, you

made it impossible to advocate for myself and my daughters. I was beaten down.”

“Beaten down!” Lord Carfield scoffed. “You were born to a man whose father had been in trade and who had married up when he ran off with the daughter of a minor landowner. Marrying me was the best thing that ever happened to you! I elevated you! I gave you a place in Society. Without me, you would never have been able to move in the most exclusive circles in the land. Yes, I can be severe. I expect nothing but perfection from those who have the honor to bear my name. But you should have been grateful to me.”

Lady Carfield shook her head. “Well, I’m grateful for my daughters, but other than that, I have never felt an ounce of gratitude toward you. Except perhaps that you were so abominable that even children could sense it, and chose to grow up as different from you as was possible. For that, yes, I am grateful.”

“You witch!” Lord Carfield shouted. “I should have sued you for everything you’re worth years ago and had you locked away in a poorhouse!”

“Perhaps you should have,” Lady Carfield agreed. “Because now it’s too late. I am finally my own person, and I finally know what I am worth. And I will no longer allow you to mistreat me or our daughters. Nor will I allow you to get away with your crimes. I am signing this document, and there is absolutely nothing you can do about it.”

“Mother,” Iris interjected, and Lady Carfield turned to face her, “if you sign this, he will force you to return home. He will ki?—”

“I am doing this, Iris,” Lady Carfield said, laying a hand on her daughter’s shoulder. “And no one can stop me. It is past time that I redeem myself in your eyes, in the eyes of the Lord, and most importantly, in my own eyes. So that when I meet my maker, I can go to see Him with my head held high.”

And with that, she strode across the room, grabbed the quill from the desk, dipped it into the inkpot, and signed her name across the paper.

A deafening silence fell over the room as Iris, Anna, Mr. Hargrove, and Lord Carfield all stared at Lady Carfield. Iris was in shock, and simultaneous emotions were crashing through her—awe at her mother's bravery, worry that she'd made a dangerous mistake, and hope that maybe, at last, her father might be punished for his crimes.

"You will pay for this," Lord Carfield spoke into the silence. "You and your daughters will pay for this."

"I think you'll find," a voice suddenly said from behind them, "that the only one who is about to pay for their crimes is you."

Once more, Iris found herself turning towards the door to see the newcomer. But this time, it wasn't dread that filled her stomach, it was elation. Because standing in the doorway was her husband, and he looked as if nothing on earth could stop him.

Chapter Twenty

“Phineas!” Iris couldn’t help exclaiming as she took in the sight of her husband.

Phineas had never looked so handsome, and her heart swelled at the sight of him, standing in the doorway, his hair tousled, his eyes blazing, and a fiery look on his face. For a moment, she just gazed at him, taking him in. She couldn’t believe that he was here, that he had arrived just in the nick of time to save them.

“Your Grace,” Lord Carfield snarled, “I see you have arrived at last. Not drinking yourself into a stupor at your club anymore?”

“Oh, I was at my club,” Phineas said, smiling softly. “But only to keep you from knowing what I was really up to.”

Lord Carfield blinked. “And what was that?”

“For one, getting your daughters to safety. Well, not me, but my associates. I believe you remember Lords Bolden and Goldwin? They paid a visit to your friend, Lord Redfield, recently.”

Lord Carfield’s face paled. “What did they do with my daughters?” he hissed.

“They removed them from your residence so that even if you return there before you are arrested, you will not be able to harm them.”

“What?!” Lord Carfield roared, and he took a menacing step towards Phineas. “You

would dare to take my children from me?”

“I would dare to do the thing you should have done from the moment they were born—protect them. It’s an unfortunate state of affairs, in this country, that women and children have little to no legal protection from the very men who are supposed to be watching out for them.” Phineas cocked his head. “I’m half inclined to petition Parliament to amend the coverture laws, after dealing with you, Lord Carfield.”

Lady Carfield stepped forward, her brow creased with worry. “Are my girls safe?” she asked. “Are they well?”

“Yes,” Phineas replied, nodding to her reassuringly. “Lords Bolden and Goldwin are keeping them safe. They will not be in harm’s way, even if it takes time to bring Lord Carfield to justice.”

“There will be no bringing me to justice!” Lord Carfield shouted. “These letters that my daughter insists prove my guilt are fakes! All of them!”

Phineas frowned, then turned to Iris, a questioning look on his face. “What is he talking about? Weren’t the letters stolen during the robbery?”

“Yes, but...” Iris took a tentative step towards her husband, her heart beating rapidly in her chest. The fact that he was here and that he was turning to her for answers—without even a single accusatory look—made her hope that, perhaps, he finally believed she hadn’t been spying on him for her father. “Violet got them back for us. At great personal risk to herself, I might add.”

“You see!” Lord Carfield interrupted. “These documents were stolen from me!” He turned to Mr. Hargrove. “Doesn’t that render them invalid if they were stolen from me?”

“Not if you obtained them illegally,” Mr. Hargrove replied, frowning. “These documents belonged to Lady Carfield, and they were in the home of His Grace before they were stolen by hired ruffians. We have a report of everything that was stolen, including the letters. The fact that they were in your possession and that so many can testify to that fact, is already damning enough, My Lord.”

For the first time that day, Lord Carfield looked slightly afraid. His eyes widened, and a bead of sweat slid down his brow. He opened his mouth, as if he wanted to argue, then closed it again. He took a step back, his eyes darting all around him.

“I won’t allow this!” he finally shouted. “I am an innocent man!”

“You are innocent of nothing,” Phineas growled, and the attention of the room seemed to zero in on him. “You had my parents murdered. And now you are going to pay for your crimes, once and for all.”

“We will see about that,” Lord Carfield retorted, although his voice sounded a little weak. “I can still recall my wife to my home. I can still take her money. I can still?—”

“It’s too late!” Lady Carfield interjected. “You can recall me home if you want, you can beat me, you can lock me in a cupboard, you can even kill me. But I have signed the letter, and nothing will now keep you from justice!”

“And I will be going straight to the authorities with the definitive proof that you ordered my parents’ murder,” Phineas added.

“He’s been saying that they won’t arrest him right away,” Iris said, hurrying forward. “He’s been scaring us, making threats...”

“He is lying.” Phineas snorted, his eyes blazing.

He looked at Iris, and for a moment, the expression on his face softened. Iris's heart skipped a beat in response. Was it possible that he believed her? Then his expression darkened again, and he turned back to Lord Carfield.

"He will be arrested the moment we bring these documents to the authorities."

"You can't threaten me!" Lord Carfield seethed. "I am a viscount! I have rights!"

But there was a desperation in his voice now, and Iris had to work hard to keep hope from flaring inside her.

"Oh, but I can." Phineas advanced slowly on him, and the Viscount shrank back. "Did you know, Lord Carfield, that a peer accused of assassinating another peer can be stripped of his titles? That not only will he suffer the indignity of a ruined reputation and spending the rest of his life in prison, but he can have his lands taken from him, his heirs disinherited, and his family name blotted out from the peerage?"

Phineas laughed softly at the way Lord Carfield's eyes bugged out of his head. "Now, I won't recommend that the prosecutors follow this action, as it would deleteriously affect my wife and sisters-in-law, but I want you to understand that what you have done is serious enough to ruin even the most powerful man in the world—the British peer."

Phineas took another step forward, and Iris couldn't keep her eyes off him. He had never looked so tall and splendid, nor her father so small and pathetic. She was sure that when Phineas spoke again, it would be to shout at her father, to threaten him again, or to order him out of the solicitor's office. So she was surprised when, after Phineas had backed him into a corner, he spoke softly.

"There was a time when you were my parents' closest friend," he continued, and although his voice was quiet, it was also powerful. "A time when they trusted you

more than anyone else in the world. You were the person with whom they shared their secrets, their innermost fears and hopes. My mother once told me that when they realized I would be an only child, you were the one who comforted them in their grief at being unable to have more children.”

Something flickered in Lord Carfield’s eyes, but Iris couldn’t quite place it.

“When I was a boy, you were like a father to me,” Phineas admitted. “You would play with me, teach me how to ride horses and fence, comfort me when I scraped a knee or stubbed a toe, and bring me gifts whenever you visited. You were my favorite of my parents’ friends, and most of all because you treated me like an equal, even though I was only a child. You never talked down to me or made me feel small. Which is how, I realize now, you were able to manipulate me so well. And in doing so, to betray my parents even more deeply than you already had.”

Phineas cocked his head. “I’ve been wondering all these years, My Lord. Did you ever really love them?” His eyes bored into Lord Carfield’s. “Or was it all a ploy to get their land?”

“Of course, I loved them,” Lord Carfield barked.

“Then why?” Phineas murmured. “Why did you do it?”

“I...” Lord Carfield’s face reddened. “I don’t have to answer this. Nothing has been prov?—”

“Why?!” Phineas roared. “Why did you do it?!”

“Because they had everything!” Lord Carfield screamed. His face was contorted in his rage, and for a moment, Iris thought he looked like some medieval statue of a gargoyle. “Why should they have gotten everything—wealth, a happy marriage, a son

and heir—while I had nothing? I had a title and an old name, yes, but lands that had been sold off to cover my forefathers' debts, until our estate was so broken up that there was nothing left. I had a wife, yes, but one who was obstinate and disobedient. And only daughters. Three daughters, with an estate entailed away from the female line!"

"How can you call a wife and three daughters nothing?!" Phineas yelled. "You had four wonderful women in your life, and instead of caring for them and loving them, you only ever tried to hurt them."

"You wouldn't understand," Lord Carfield snarled. "You're just like your father—arrogant and unsympathetic to my plight."

Phineas scoffed. "You disgust me, Carfield. You killed my parents because you were jealous of them? You killed them and then betrayed me because you wanted to take from them what you believed you ought to have as well?!"

"I wouldn't have had to take the land if your father had just sold it to me!" Lord Carfield screeched. He looked demented by rage. "He knew I was flailing, that I needed money to save my family seat. But no, he wouldn't sell me his land, or even lease it to me, because he believed the mines I wanted to build were dangerous. It was pathetic. He was more concerned for the well-being of some penniless coal miners than for the survival of my family name and estate!"

Now it was Iris's turn to scoff. Her father rounded on her, and she drew herself up. "If you had actually met any of the 'penniless miners,' as you call them," she hissed, "then you would know they are more worthy of help than you have ever been!"

"My father was an honorable man," Phineas said, and Lord Carfield turned back to him. "He wouldn't sell you the land because he wanted to do right by his tenants. Perhaps he had even started to realize your villainy. I shall never know. But I am sure

he could sense that your heart was becoming as blackened as the coal you wanted to mine.”

Phineas paused, and to Iris’s surprise, a small smile spread across his face. “You know, all these years, I always thought it was the theft of my parents’ land that had dealt me the severest blow. Yes, my parents’ deaths hurt more, but that was something I couldn’t prevent. The theft of the land, though—that was my fault. And it filled me with such shame to think I’d let my parents down. So getting back the land became my focus, my obsession, the wound that informed every one of my decisions. And I told myself that if I could just get it back, if I could just take my revenge on you and the others who tricked me, I would be happy. But it was never about the land, I realize now.”

He glanced at Iris, his eyes blazing. “The severest blow you struck wasn’t taking my land, but taking my ability to trust. Because after everything you did, I thought that’s all I deserved from people. And I assumed no one in this world was trustworthy. If you could turn on me like that, then what would keep someone else, who had less reason to care for me, from turning on me?”

“So I closed off my heart. I made a cage around myself, and I never let anyone inside of it. Some days it was so lonely that I thought I might die. But I couldn’t see a way out of the cage. I thought I would spend my whole life alone, unable to form a strong attachment to anyone, because they would only hurt me, like you had.

Lord Carfield’s mouth was open again, but no words were coming out. The look on his face was inscrutable, but if Iris had seen it on anyone else, she might have called it stricken.

“And then Iris came into my life,” Phineas murmured. His eyes were locked on Lord Carfield’s, but Iris still felt his attention on her like a ray of light. “And to say that she saved me is an understatement of the highest magnitude. Because of her, because of

your daughter, I finally understand that I don't need to shut people out. I don't need to be so distrustful. I don't need to stay in the cage. Because you were the one who broke my trust. It was never a reflection on me or what I deserve."

Iris wanted to cry. She wanted to throw herself into her husband's arms and weep for what felt like days. And she might have done that, had her father not still been standing there, gazing up at Phineas with a strangled look on his face.

"And I think," Phineas continued, "that if my parents were alive today, they would be proud of me for realizing this."

"Why are you saying all this to me?" Lord Carfield asked after a long moment, and the way his voice cracked sent a chill down Iris's spine. She had never heard her father sound so defenseless and uncertain before.

"Because you need to know," Phineas said. "When you are arrested, as you will be, and tried for the murder of my parents, you need to know that you didn't just kill my parents, but you also almost took away my life—not my physical life, but any chance I had at a full, happy life." He blinked, then smiled softly again. "And you also need to know one other thing. While I will never forgive you for what you did to my parents, I also have to thank you. Because you brought me the best thing in my life. You brought me Iris. Now..."

The smile slipped from his face, and he drew himself up and pointed at the door. "I want you to leave my solicitor's office and never come back. From now on, you will never speak to me, Iris, Lady Carfield, Miss Violet, or Miss Rosalie ever again. And when you are arrested in the next few days, I want you to remember that it wasn't me who brought you down, but the women you have wronged."

And with that, a defeated Lord Carfield slunk, like a dog with its tails between its legs, out of the office, and out of Iris's life.

Chapter Twenty-One

“Well, I can’t quite believe that he actually left,” Lady Carfield admitted, breaking the shocked silence in the solicitor’s office. “I was expecting him to put up a fight for a while longer.”

“Even the most vicious predator will know when he’s defeated,” Mr. Hargrove said, although his voice shook slightly as he spoke. “In truth, I thought he would last longer. But something you said to him, Your Grace, seemed to finally beat him into submission...”

The solicitor was looking admiringly at Phineas, who smiled vaguely at him. His own thoughts were muddled, and he felt lightheaded and dizzy. He’d said everything he wanted to say to Lord Carfield, but he still felt thrown from the conversation. After all, he hadn’t expected the Viscount to be here.

He’d come to Mr. Hargrove’s office to try and discover what legal actions he could take against the Viscount without involving his wife or any other members of her family. He’d been shocked when he’d arrived at the office, only to be told by the secretary that Her Grace and Lord Carfield were inside.

It had terrified him, to think of Iris and her father in the same room, and he had rushed inside half-expecting to find Lord Carfield pointing a pistol at her.

But no, Iris was safe, and Lord Carfield was gone. He wasn’t just gone—there had been something in his eyes, when Phineas had begun speaking of his parents, that he hadn’t seen on the Viscount’s face since he was very small and used to watch him

and the late Duke and Duchess late at night, laughing together in the drawing room.

Is it possible that he feels regret? Or at least remorse?

It wouldn't stop Phineas from pursuing justice against him, but it was heartening to think that Lord Carfield could feel remorse and that he might have a chance at redemption—at least, redemption of his soul. As far as Phineas was concerned, the Viscount would never earn redemption from him or Iris.

Iris .

The word rushed through Phineas like the first hint of spring. Like dawn after a dark and stormy night. Like music after a lifetime of silence.

Where is she?

Phineas turned, and his eyes fell on his wife. She was still standing where she had been near Mr. Hargrove's desk, her back pressed against it, a nervous expression on her face. She was watching him, and as he looked at her, she colored slightly.

"Iris," he murmured, "my beautiful, brilliant wife. How did you figure it all out? How did you find a way to bring your father down?"

Iris blushed even more deeply. "The credit is not all mine..." she began.

Lady Carfield snorted in a most undignified manner. "Don't listen to my daughter's attempt at modesty, Your Grace," she said. "It is all her doing."

"Well..." Iris smiled. "I did discover who it was who had been passing information to my father about us. It was my lady's maid, Anna."

Phineas turned in surprise to look at his wife's maid. Until that moment, he had barely noticed the girl. She had kept to the corner, her head down during the whole interaction with Lord Carfield. Now, she looked up, and her eyes brimmed with tears.

"I'm s-so sorry, Your Grace," she whispered, staring at him beseechingly. "I r-regret it ever so much."

Before Phineas could say anything, or even ascertain his own emotions correctly, Iris cut in. "You mustn't be cross with her, Phineas. My father had threatened to kill her brother if she didn't comply. She was scared, and there were many times she almost came to me with the truth."

Phineas forced himself to take a deep breath. As much as his instinct was to rage at the maid for putting his wife's life in danger, he respected that Iris knew best in this situation.

"Anyway," Iris continued, "once I realized who was passing Father the information, I knew we were safe to find a way to get back the evidence he stole. So we decided to steal back the documents..."

Then she explained briefly everything that had happened since then, first with her going to her father, then Anna explaining the plan to Violet, Violet's stealing of the documents, and finally Anna bringing the letters back.

"As much as I don't approve of young ladies putting their lives at risk," Phineas said when she was done, "I must commend you for your bravery and cleverness. Thanks to all of you, Anna included, Carfield will actually see the inside of a prison."

"Do you really think so, Your Grace?" Lady Carfield asked. She glanced at Mr. Hargrove as well. "Will these documents really be legal and binding? Will a judge believe us?"

“Undoubtedly,” Mr. Hargrove replied at once. “Lord Carfield’s threats were hollow. These documents are ironclad. And with the backing of His Grace, I am confident that we will be successful.”

“That’s wonderful.” Lady Carfield beamed. Then her expression clouded. “And my complicity?”

“We will have to wait and see,” Mr. Hargrove said with diplomatic grace. “But we will strive to prove that you were a victim of Lord Carfield, not his collaborator.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hargrove,” Iris said warmly. She then turned back to Phineas and smiled nervously. “Violet also found letters showing that my father forged the report stating the mines are safe. So we can shut down the mine and ensure it doesn’t simply pass down to my father’s next male heir.”

“I am glad to hear that.” Phineas smiled. “Although once we prove the bill of sale was forged, I hope to get back my lands anyway. And then we can make all the improvements we want to the mines.”

“We?”

He could hear the hope in her voice, and it broke his heart. He had given her so many reasons to doubt him, and yet still, she had hope.

“Yes,” Phineas murmured. “We.” He then laughed. “I can’t believe it was your lady’s maid the whole time. More than that, I am astonished that James was right... I’ll never live this down. He really will begin to think of himself as the cleverest man in England.”

“James suspected Anna?” Iris asked, marveling.

“Not Anna specifically, but a servant. He never... he never believed that you would betray me.”

Iris studied him for a long moment. “And what do you believe?” she asked at last. “What you said to my father about how I’d made you feel you could trust again. Was that true?”

“Yes,” he said simply. “It was.”

“But...” Iris worried her bottom lip. “At Eavestone House, you accused me of spying on you for my father. You didn’t believe me, no matter what I said...”

Tears were filling her beautiful eyes, and Phineas wanted to reach down and wipe them away. He wanted to do much more than that if he were being honest. He wanted to take her in his arms right then and there and kiss her. But he couldn’t do that until he had done right by her.

“Iris,” he said very seriously, “I cannot apologize to you enough for what I said at Eavestone House. I was out of my mind with anger and pain, and I did not mean those terrible things I said. Even as I said them, some part of me knew I couldn’t possibly believe you would betray me, but I felt so twisted up and confused inside...” he trailed off.

He was going about all this the wrong way. He had to be honest with Iris if he was truly going to win her back.

“I was terrified,” he admitted, and behind him, he thought he saw Mr. Hargrove do a double take. The fearsome Duke of Eavestone did not readily admit to fear. “I was afraid that you might have been killed.”

Iris blinked, and her mouth hung open slightly. “Why were you afraid of that?” she

asked, baffled.

Phineas shook his head. “I kept thinking that if those vagrants had come even a little earlier, or if you had returned early from your outing, you might have tried to stop them. And then... who knows what they might have done? Perhaps Carfield had told them not to harm you, but men like that always give in to their basest, most violent instincts. And even if they hadn’t meant to kill you, something could have gone wrong, and then you might have been taken from me...”

His voice cracked, and he had to clear his throat before continuing. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mr. Hargrove and Lady Carfield exchange awkward glances, but he didn’t care.

“And then there was the possibility that your father wanted them to kill you,” he continued when he had composed himself. “He’s killed people he loved before. Would it really be such a surprise if he were to do it again?”

“I had the same thought earlier,” Iris whispered. “That he might kill Mother, or Violet, or Rosalie.”

“And when it hit me that you might have died, a deep, instinctual need to protect you kicked in. And to protect myself, I think. I had to distance myself from you, to keep myself from feeling the pain of your death. That’s why I pushed you away. And I think I also thought, unconsciously, that if Carfield believed I didn’t care for you, he might not harm you. You heard him earlier—he was jealous of my parents. He wanted to take away from them what he himself didn’t have. And you and I also have something he never had—a happy marriage.”

“We do?” Iris’s lip was quivering now, and it was the most adorable thing Phineas had seen in his entire life.

“Of course we do,” he murmured, and he reached up and touched her cheek very lightly. The feel of her soft skin sent a current of warmth through him. “We have the happiest marriage of any couple since my parents. I swear to you, I did not mean the terrible things I said. They were just me trying to protect both of us from Carfield.”

“And you really didn’t know what you were doing?”

Phineas shook his head. “James had to point it out to me.” He frowned and released her. “Perhaps he really is as clever as he thinks he is. But I’m glad he did because if it weren’t for him, I might still be stuck in my head, believing you are capable of such things.”

“I did all of this to show you that I was trustworthy,” Iris admitted, indicating the room at large. “I thought that by bringing down my father, I could prove to you that I hadn’t been on his side.”

“I’m glad we took your father down for your own safety,” Phineas said, “but you didn’t need to do anything to prove your innocence to me. It was on me to realize that there was no validity to my accusations, that you could never be guilty of treachery. I behaved like a fool, Iris, and I only hope that you can forgive me.”

She opened her mouth to speak, but he shushed her.

“You don’t need to forgive me right away,” he said softly. “But I promise you that, if you allow me, I will spend every day for the rest of our lives trying to make it up to you and prove my undying loyalty and love.”

“Love?” Iris whispered. She was smiling up at him with the most brilliant radiance he had ever seen. “You still love me?”

“I never stopped loving you,” he whispered, and his heart felt as if it were about to

burst out of his chest. He had never meant anything more in all his days. “And I will spend my life proving it with my actions. And I will keep proving it until my dying breath. If you will have me, of course.”

“Of course, I will have you,” she breathed. “You are everything I hoped for, Phineas. Everything I fought and suffered for. There’s nothing and no one I want as much as you.”

And then, propriety be damned, Phineas leaned down, took his wife in his arms, and kissed her for all the world to see.

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:29 am

One Year Later

“C ould I have this dance, Milady?”

Iris looked up from where she was seated on the picnic blanket to see a boy of about eleven gazing down at her. He looked healthy and happy, with ruddy cheeks, sparkling eyes, and a wide smile. A year ago, he had been gaunt and starved-looking, with sunken eyes and a haunted expression. But now he was all shy smiles and rascal charm, offering her his hand as he bent low.

“Of course, you may have this dance, Thomas!” Iris laughed, taking his proffered hand and clambering to her feet. “I’d been hoping you might ask me!”

Thomas grinned and blushed, and Iris had to suppress another laugh.

“Don’t embarrass the lad,” her husband said sternly behind her, where he was still sitting on the picnic blanket, watching the scene unfold with an amused expression. “I’m sure it was hard to ask a lady as beautiful as you.”

Iris reddened with pleasure. Even after a year of marriage, Phineas still had the ability to make her blush when he complimented her.

It was autumn, and she and Phineas were back in Wales with some close family and friends to oversee and celebrate the reopening of the mines. After a long year of hard work to improve working conditions, take into consideration the community’s needs, get input from miners, and build the best safety systems that money could buy, the coal mines were finally open again for business.

The town had wanted to commemorate the reopening, and since it had coincided with the annual August harvest festival, the two events had been combined into one.

All day, Iris and Phineas—accompanied by Violet, Rosalie, James, Nathan Goldwin, and Lady Carfield—had been tasting local delicacies from all the food stalls, playing lawn games with the local children, chatting with miners and their wives, and reveling in the feeling of jubilation that permeated the festival.

Now, it was early evening, and the orange sun was casting long shadows on the grass. Iris, Phineas, and their loved ones had been enjoying some refreshments on their picnic blanket when the dancing had begun rather spontaneously, when some local farmers struck up a jig. And Iris was glad to be dancing. She was even more glad to be dancing with Thomas, who, instead of working in the mines, was now attending a local grammar school. With the new wages his father earned, there was no need for him to work in the mines.

The band began to play another lively jig, and Thomas and Iris fell into step with the other couples. It was the first time Iris had danced with someone so much shorter than her, but Thomas turned out to be an excellent dancer. Soon, they were both laughing with delight as they whirled around the grass in time with the music.

When the song came to an end, Thomas bowed to her, and Iris curtsied.

“How is your cough these days?” she asked him as he escorted her back to the picnic blanket.

“Loads better, Milady,” he replied, smiling up at her.

Even though Thomas knew she was a duchess, he had never started calling her Your Grace, and Iris had never corrected him. She liked their little informal arrangement.

“Ma takes me to see Doctor Smith, and he prescribes medicines and herbs. I barely cough anymore, except when it’s very cold out.”

“I’m very happy to hear that,” Iris said, patting him on the head.

They arrived at the picnic blanket, and she curtsied to him. Duchesses weren’t really supposed to curtsy to sons of miners, but Iris knew it made Thomas feel very important.

“Thank you for the dance, Thomas.”

“You’re welcome, Milady,” he returned, and she thought he reddened slightly. Then he bowed low again and scampered off to play with the other children.

Iris smiled as she lowered herself back onto the picnic blanket.

Across from her, Rosalie smirked. “Careful, Your Grace,” she said, nudging Phineas, “I think you have competition from Thomas there.”

“Don’t be silly,” Iris scoffed as James and Nathan stifled their laughs.

“If that’s my competition, I don’t fancy my odds,” Phineas said, winking at her.

She smiled and reached out and took his hand. “I think the odds are in your favor,” she murmured.

“They certainly were the day your father decided to try and ruin my life by setting us up together,” Phineas said with a chortle.

Iris squeezed his hand, then looked away.

After a quick, two-month trial, Lord Carfield had spent the last ten months in prison for his many crimes, including, of course, the murder of the former Duke and Duchess of Eavestone. As glad as Iris was that her father was safely behind bars, it wasn't easy for her to think of him there. Nor did she like to remember all the pain and suffering he had caused her family.

She glanced at her mother, but the Viscountess was now laughing with Rosalie and didn't seem to be listening to their conversation. Lady Carfield had been mercifully acquitted of any wrongdoing and was now enjoying spending all her free time with her daughters.

Phineas seemed to know the direction of Iris's thoughts because he brought a hand to her chin and cupped it, turning her back to face him.

"I regret nothing in my past if it brought me to you," he said quietly so that no one else could hear. Then he leaned forward and very softly brushed his lips against the tip of her nose.

It wasn't exactly within the bounds of propriety, but neither of them cared. They were amongst friends, after all. And over the past year, they had deepened their relationship even more and learned to trust each other on a level Iris had scarcely thought possible. She had never been so happy, and she would risk a few whispers about her indiscretion for a moment of pure joy with him.

"Well then, now that the love birds are busy," James said loudly, interrupting the moment, "I think we should get in on the tug-of-war competition that's supposed to start in a few minutes."

He tossed aside the apple he'd been eating, stretched, and then bounded gracefully to his feet. Then, to Iris's surprise, he turned to Violet and bowed low.

“Miss Violet, would you care to partake in the game with me? I daresay we would make an excellent team.”

Violet, who had been reading her book on the blanket, looked up in surprise. “Team?” she repeated, looking confused.

“For tug-of-war,” James explained, smiling at her winsomely.

Iris couldn’t help but wonder how many women James had charmed with that smile.

Violet, however, seemed immune to it. “That’s not a game suitable for an unmarried lady, My Lord,” she stated gravely.

“Sure it is,” James said with a shrug. “At least, it is when there are no snotty members of the ton present to gossip about it later.”

“Are women even allowed to partake?” Violet asked, still looking doubtful.

“They are, in fact, encouraged. The rules state the teams must be divided equally by sex.”

Violet bit her lip. “I fear I don’t have the strength for such an undertaking... I would only be a liability to my team. You should ask one of the miner’s wives. They’re built much more solidly here.”

“Nonsense.” James shook his head in bemusement. “You’re as strong as any of these country women...”

At that moment, a large, burly woman walked by, accompanied by her six chubby, red-cheeked children. Every person in their party watched them go by in silence. Only once they were gone did they all burst into laughter.

“Vi, you don’t stand a chance!” Rosalie squealed. “They’ll crush you!”

“I think perhaps Miss Rosalie has a point,” Nathan Goldwin piped up. “These country women have an advantage over our delicate debutantes. But fear not, old sport, I’ll accompany you to the tug-of-war competition.”

“Jolly good,” James said, grinning as he helped Nathan to his feet, although Iris thought she detected a look of disappointment on his face. She decided to file that away for later consideration.

“While I am not interested in tug-of-war,” Phineas said after his friends had left, “I would enjoy a sunset walk. Iris, would you care to join me?”

“Indeed, I would.”

Iris clambered once more to her feet. Phineas offered her his arm, and she took it.

Together, they began to walk along the edge of the field where couples were still dancing, then made their way through the stalls of games, food, and crafts, until they were through to the other side of the fairgrounds. Here, they were greeted by the sight of rolling hills bathed in a golden evening glow. Little houses dotted the countryside, whose chimneys released lazy curls of smoke, giving the scene a bucolic serenity that was out of a painting.

They paused there, and Iris rested her head on her husband’s shoulder. “This land is so beautiful,” she murmured. “I can see now why you fought for so many years to get it back.”

She felt Phineas shift slightly, and she looked up at him. His expression was inscrutable.

“Do you think your parents would be proud?” she asked. “That you managed to get it back from my father?”

Phineas didn't answer for a long time. Only when the sun had begun to dip below the horizon, washing the fields in a crimson glow, did he speak.

“I think my parents wouldn't care about the land,” he said at last. He looked deep into her eyes, and her heart fluttered, as it still did when he looked at her like she was the only person in the world who mattered. “I think what they would be proud of is the man I am today and the woman who helped me find myself.”

“I know they would be proud of you,” Iris murmured. “For all of it.”

“It's strange, but for so long, all I thought about or cared about was revenge,” Phineas said, shaking his head and looking back out over the hills. “It was my sole focus, and every decision I made was driven by my goal of seeing your father ruined. But now that he's in prison, and I have my land back, and everything I wished for came true, I almost don't know what to do with my life anymore.”

“I feel the same way a bit,” Iris admitted with a bittersweet smile. “I wasn't trying to exact revenge, but I also wasn't able to make plans for my life. I was just trying to survive every day. It was impossible to have goals when I didn't know when my father might marry me or my sisters off to an awful man.”

Phineas nodded slowly. “So what you're saying is... we both need new goals?”

Iris laughed. “Yes, I suppose we do. Now that we have the opportunity to live just for ourselves and each other, we can define what we want our lives to look like.”

Phineas's brow furrowed in thought. “I suppose I have my businesses and my land,” he mused. “Those certainly occupy a great deal of my thoughts. But... I'd like to do

something just for us. For you. To show you how I feel about you.”

“I know how you feel about me,” Iris reassured him, touching his cheek softly. “You don’t need to prove anything.”

“It’s not about proving my love,” he said with an indignant tut. “It’s about showering you with the love you deserve.”

Iris laughed again. “And how do you plan to do that?”

Phineas pondered over her question for a long moment. “How about a trip abroad? And I don’t mean Wales. Somewhere exotic and romantic. Somewhere I can be free of the distractions of running the estate and be focused solely on you.”

Iris pretended to consider this, but her lips were already curling into a smile. “You can take me anywhere you want, Phineas, but the place doesn’t really matter to me.”

He raised an eyebrow, surprised. “Why not? You’re not curious about foreign countries?”

“It’s not that.” She leaned forward and brought her lips to his ear, enjoying the way his hands instinctively wrapped around her waist, pulling her close. “I just don’t plan on leaving the hotel very often.”

And laughing with wicked delight, she kissed her husband as the setting sun bathed them in the last tendrils of golden light.

The End?

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:29 am

The Rose Of The Ball

“Do not forget to smile, my darling,” Rose’s mother, Lady Cotswalts whispered, her lips barely moving. “You must seem excited to be here.”

“I didn’t know I was failing to convey my enthusiasm, mother.” Rose Pembleton said as she smiled softly. The practiced expression settling over her features once more.

They stood at the raised second level of the ballroom, overlooking the giddy young women of the ton.

She envied them. The women who were assured that having a second or third Season would bring no harm to them or their families. She tucked a brown curl behind her ear. As she did so, the well-crafted garnet necklace caught in her gown.

“Not again. This necklace is the most detestable thing I have ever had to wear. I wish I’d never agreed to it.”

“Stop fidgeting!” her mother helped her detangle the strand. “Olivier did an exquisite job with the new prongs, they make the rubies capture the light more and look brighter!”

Of course they were not rubies, but her mother would not admit to decorating her daughter with mere garnets.

The metal prongs held the stones further from the metal base, allowing the stones to catch the light and sparkle more. According to her mother that is how you attract the

right match: by looking the part. The only downside was that it caught on everything.

“Rose, stop biting your lip, you will ruin the lip stain!”

Her mother’s endless fussing with her posture, manners and looks had been the same at each of the three previous balls, and Rose expected it would continue until she was married.

Marriage. That’s what all this is for. A good match.

As if her mother had read her mind, she said, “There is so much at stake, my darling girl. A Season may seem like a long time, but it will fly by. We must capitalize on every moment.”

Because we cannot afford a second Season for any of our children.

The words hung between them, unsaid, but they weighed on Rose’s mind nonetheless.

“I will not let you down, Mother.” Rose squeezed her mother’s hands, ignoring the chafing feel of the necklace.

I will not let my sisters down.

The feel of her mother’s hand on her arm drew her back to the present.

“Rose! Look, over there! It is Miss Felicity Carstairs, and she appears to be in the company of George Gariston and David Blinky.” Lady Cotswalts nodded her head towards a lady and two men standing at the far end of the room. “Let us join them.”

Rose followed her mother’s gaze and spotted the familiar bright red hair and curls of

Felicity Carstairs. To her left was a shorter man with black hair and brown eyes dressed in fashionable tails, who had a crooked but pleasing smile.

Ah, David Blinkley.

On Miss Carstairs' right was a taller man who sported longer, curly blond hair that put Rose in mind of a fully grown cherub. His piercing blue eyes seemed otherworldly, and he had an air of confidence about him.

George Gariston.

"If I recall, you danced with both men at your last ball. I am sure they will not mind another chance to win your hand." Lady Cotswalts beamed and led Rose through the crowd towards the group.

"Yes, I believe you are correct, Mother. And I'm sure I would enjoy their company once more."

In truth, Rose could not remember much about both men, besides their appearances and names.

Mother will no doubt elaborate on the important details.

Predictably, Lady Cotswalts did just that. "I believe George Gariston is the Earl of Verimoor—a very fine estate, to be sure. And I have heard that his finances are most secure. I seem to remember that David Blinkley is the Baron Goldstone, but his estate is quite remote. I suppose either would be a fine match, but perhaps an earl would be more suitable, and Verimoor is certainly a very prosperous estate."

"Perhaps it would be best to keep an open mind, there may yet be other men who wish to dance with me." Rose smiled as she caught the eye of a dark-haired man to

her left.

She held his gaze for a second, as her mother had told her, before looking away and not allowing herself to look back.

It's all about keeping them interested but not seeming too eager. I must play the game and play it well.

She tried to ignore the way people seemed to stare at her as she made her way towards Miss Carstairs and her companions.

I suppose that is the price of being the Diamond of the Season.

The attention made Rose even more mindful of her appearance.

Am I smiling too much or not enough? What am I supposed to be doing with my hands?

She tried to focus on not letting the garnet necklace catch in her dress again, and on preparing to join the conversation with Miss Carstairs' group.

"... and of course, you know what they say about Lady Eleanor Whitsby. Apparently, it is not the strength of their love that has the happy couple seeking a special license, but something rather more... urgent ." Miss Carstairs raised her eyebrows suggestively to her companions. "Although I suppose one could argue it is perhaps a sign of their passion. Still, she is lucky that the Marquess is wealthy, for they are to be married within the week."

"Within the week?" Lord Goldstone exclaimed. "Goodness, that is very expeditious."

"Well the Marquess of Kimble is very well connected, so it is hardly surprising."

Miss Carstairs laughed, her eyes widening as she spotted Rose and her mother. “Lady Cotswalts! Miss Pembleton. How lovely to see you both!”

“Miss Carstairs, always a pleasure.” Rose inclined her head.

“Wonderful to see you, as always, my dearest Miss Carstairs.” Lady Cotswalts smiled.

“I am sure you know my companions.” Miss Carstairs gestured to the gentleman beside her. “I believe you danced together at the last ball, did you not, Lord Goldstone?”

“Indeed we did, and I would very much like the honor of another dance with you if your card is not already full?” Lord Goldstone smiled at Rose.

Rose opened her mouth to reply, but Lord Verimoor interrupted. “I am sure there is room on the good lady’s card for us both. Ah, yes, I think this dance will be more suitable for you, my good man. I know that you do struggle with the more modern numbers.”

Lord Goldstone flushed and smiled tightly. “How considerate.”

Lord Verimoor smiled and patted him on the back. “Think nothing of it, old chap. Actually, speaking of consideration, I daresay these ladies could use some refreshments. Perhaps you might signal for a servant or be so kind as to fetch some drinks for our new companions?”

Lord Goldstone nodded and bowed to the women, before disappearing into the crowd.

Lord Verimoor turned to Rose and her mother and stage whispered, “Never fear, the

good Lord Goldstone may not be much of a dancer, but he can at least avoid a woman's feet for the most part."

Rose smiled, unsure how she should respond. "I do not seem to recall him stepping on my feet."

"That is probably for the best. I daresay you cannot recall much about your dance with him." Lord Verimoor flashed her a dazzling smile. "I hope to make our own dance far more memorable. I believe a Diamond such as yourself should be with a partner that brings out her radiance."

"You are too kind, Lord Verimoor. I hardly know what to say." Rose felt a flush creep up her cheeks.

"I am not kind enough, I fear. There can be no words to express the joy your company brings to those around you. I confess, it is the thought of a dance with you that has most appealed to me this evening." Lord Verimoor glanced at Miss Carstairs and Lady Cotswalts, smiling earnestly at them both. "That is, of course, if your chaperone feels I am a suitable partner."

"I am sure my mother will be only too glad to permit me the pleasure of your company." Rose smiled at him.

"Wonderful. I promise to make every moment memorable." He flashed her another dazzling smile, artfully brushing a blond curl from his face as he did so. "After all, I am often complimented on my ability. While I do not like to boast, I think you will find I am much more enjoyable company than say... Old Lord Goldstone. Dear man, he does try, and yet he can never seem to measure up."

Miss Carstairs laughed, and Rose smiled, though she failed to see why it was necessary to be unkind to Lord Goldstone.

He is close in age to Lord Verimoor, who is but thirty. I am quite sure Lord Goldstone is not above three and thirty.

Rose would never voice her thoughts, for she did not want to offend any of her companions.

“Oh, that reminds me, did you hear about Lord Deermont?” Miss Carstairs’s eyes were full of delight.

Rose shook her head, trying to appear interested.

Must we talk about every scandal in the ton? I should hate to be gossiped about so.

“Well, apparently he was discovered in a rather compromising position with his housekeeper some months ago, and now the woman has returned, claiming to be carrying his child!” Miss Carstairs smiled as though she were savoring a particularly delicious sweet.

“Well, perhaps he will finally have an heir. Six daughters and no sons.” Lord Verimoor shook his head. “A man needs a son to continue his line.”

“Indeed, perhaps Lord Deermont will share in your own parents’ good fortune, and this shall be the babe that finally brings him that security.” Miss Carstairs traced a finger around the rim of her glass.

“It is true, my parents were most grateful for my birth. And I do what I can to repay their gratitude.” Lord Verimoor smiled at Rose. “And, of course, growing up surrounded by women has given me a wonderful understanding of the fairer sex.”

He does think much of himself, doesn’t he?

Rose raised her fan to hide her face, hoping it would seem an act of demure intrigue. “How fortunate for us all.”

Miss Carstairs and Lord Verimoor laughed.

Rose felt the slight knot of tension in her back ease. She glanced sideways at her mother, who was nodding in approval.

She was trying to think of how to capitalize on the moment when a sudden hush followed by a rush of whispers swept across the ballroom. Even the orchestra seemed caught up in it, leaving a number of dancers caught in a discordant pause. Curious, she turned her head towards the cause of such a reaction.

Whatever can have caused such disturbance?

“Announcing Lady Olivia Rokesby, accompanied by Her Grace the Dowager Duchess of Emberly, and His Grace the Duke of Emberly,” a voice rang out into the ballroom.

Three figures entered the ballroom. A pretty girl who Rose guessed was around eighteen. She was tall, with striking black hair and brown eyes. She was the youthful version of the woman behind her. Both women had kind, warm smiles and wore elegant but simple dresses, yet Rose knew that few would spare a thought for them.

Everyone’s attention was on the even taller man who towered over everyone in the ballroom. He had midnight black hair that was swept away from his face and high cheekbones. His jaw was striking, so sharp that Rose thought one could cut glass with it.

He would be handsome if he were not so frightening.

His face seemed cold and distant, and the scar that split his right eyebrow in two ran across his face down to his upper lip, only adding to the severity of his countenance.

Only Lady Cotswalts's coaching prevented Rose from gasping aloud. Beside her, Miss Carstairs sucked in a breath and whispered, "Oh this is interesting."

"Indeed, it is," Rose answered without thinking.

Has anyone seen the Duke since he inherited his title?

Miss Carstairs murmured, "I have always wanted to see the man who killed his father for his title."

Rose swallowed. Of course, she had heard the rumors. Everyone had.

Eight years ago, the previous Duke of Emberly had died, and his son had inherited his title. It was common knowledge that the former Duke had not died of natural causes.

Could it be that I'm staring at a murderer?

And if she was, why couldn't she look away?

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:29 am

The Beast Of Emberly

Alexander Rokesby, the Duke of Emberly, was not the kind of man who was known to fall victim to persuasion, especially if the request went against his own wishes and better judgment. For most of his life, he sought to be as unbending and as unyielding as steel. Yet, even he had his weaknesses.

Such as an inability to refuse even the most foolish of requests from those I hold dear to me.

Balls and other such social engagements had never held any sort of appeal for him, even before his life had changed nearly eight years ago. Flashes of memory came to the forefront of his mind. The flash of steel. Someone screaming. Blood. So much blood. The cold, unseeing eyes of a dead man.

No, I will not think of that night. Not now.

He shook his head, forcing himself to return to the present moment.

Yet, there was little comfort to be found. As soon as he had entered the ballroom with his sister and mother, the whispering and staring had started.

I will not lose my temper. I will not. These people are of little importance. Their pettiness will not cow me. I have no need for their good opinion.

He glanced at his younger sister, Olivia, who was holding his arm. Of his four siblings, she was the closest to him both in age and in bond. She stared around the

room, her head held high, smiling at the gossipmongers with such genuine warmth and affection that Alexander swore he could see some of their hearts thaw.

Olivia caught his eye and squeezed his hand. “Thank you for coming with me, Brother dearest. I do not think I could have done this alone.”

“You would have had Mother. I’m sure that would have been sufficient.” Alexander inclined his head towards their mother.

Olivia had inherited her disarming smile from their mother, and Alexander could not help but think that if the two women had come alone, then there would be less whispering and pointing.

“A mother is not the same as a brother.” Olivia shook her head at him. “And in any case, I am sure that an evening away from your dreary London townhouse will do you a world of good.”

Her words were the same she had used all those weeks ago to convince him to attend the ball in the first place.

“You never do anything fun, Alexander, and I want you there,” she had said weeks before. “You are my older brother and dearest friend. I do not want to go without you.”

“I am sure my company will only be a burden, dearest sister.” Alexander touched the scar that ran along the side of his face.

The scar had faded to a pale, thin line in the years since he had first received the wound. It split his right eyebrow in half and ran across his face, culminating in an indent in his upper lip.

At least it doesn't hurt anymore.

He shook his head, trying not to think about the blade that had given him his monstrous appearance.

The smell of blood and sounds of screams seemed to well up within him. He heard the dying gasp of a man, felt the slick, warm blood on his fingers.

I did what I had to.

"Brother, how can you say that? You, who have always kept me safe!" Olivia reached towards him, her eyes imploring. "Please, please say you will come with me. I am sure it will be a delightful evening. Besides, Emberly House is altogether too dreary to be shut in it forever."

"I am hardly shut in the house forever." Alexander folded his arms across his chest, feeling his temper rise. "I am oft away for business. And I visit Emberly Castle almost biweekly."

"That is hardly the same thing as a social engagement. Life should be lived, my dearest Alexander, not viewed." Olivia gave him a flat, unimpressed look that made his chest tighten.

Alexander turned away from her, guilt and anger overcoming him. "What would you know of it? What have you seen of life? There is nothing for me, and I will speak no more of this. Go to the damned ball, but pray, do not beg me to attend with you. I have better things to do."

He heard her sharp intake of breath and expected her to do as he asked. Shame and fury coursed through his body as he waited for the telltale sound of the door closing.

Instead, he felt her warm hand on his arm.

Olivia spoke quietly, her voice full of kindness. “Brother, how are people supposed to see the truth if you will give them nothing to see? If you would but give them the opportunity to know you as I do, then that would put all the silly rumors to bed once and for all. I am sure of it.”

Alexander moved away from her touch, guilt cutting through his tempest of emotions, quieting his rage. “You only see the good in me, and I love you for that, but the world is not like you. You are too good and pure.” Sighing, he turned towards her. “I must apologize. I should not have lost my temper. You did not deserve such treatment. Will you forgive me?”

I am a monster, and you simply cannot see it.

“I will always forgive you, Brother dearest.” Olivia hesitated, then grinned impishly. “But if you would like to make amends, you will escort me to the ball.”

Alexander gaped at her, then laughed.

“Fine, I shall do as you ask. I will accompany you to the ball. Though do not expect me to dance.”

Olivia threw her arms around him, and hesitantly, Alexander allowed her to embrace him.

“Oh, Alexander! Thank you! I am sure you will enjoy it, too! I will tell Mother.” She hugged him once more and left the room.

The first music notes brought Alexander back to the present. His mother and sister had positioned themselves near the dance floor, each holding a drink and smiling

warmly at those around them. For his part, he made no attempt to smile.

The whispering appeared to die down, and for a moment, Alexander let himself relax. But then the next two dances came and went, and still no one had approached his sister. Oh, some had nodded in her direction, but no one had made any attempt to introduce themselves. He saw the hurt on Olivia's face and felt his heart break.

Alexander was about to tell his sister and mother that he would leave and see them later when a familiar voice caught his attention. He turned and saw a man of average height with sandy brown hair and green eyes making his way towards them. Alexander recognized the loping gait of his dearest friend and held up a hand in greeting.

"Rokesby!" Nigel Maxton, the Duke of Glassley, clapped Alexander on the back. "What on earth are you doing here?"

"Isn't it obvious, Maxton? I am clearly dancing." Alexander grinned at his friend. "Though I confess, I hadn't expected to see you here."

Nigel laughed. "You know full well that I never miss a ball. Actually, I was with a few of the old Eton crowd, and I'm sure they would love to?—"

Alexander shook his head. "I have no desire to see anyone from our Eton days."

Of the many friends he had had at Eton, Nigel had been the only one who had remained by his side.

The man is a more loyal and honorable friend than I deserve.

"Of course, I understand." Nigel gave an easy smile. "I fear I have been frightfully rude and not extended my greetings to your companions."

“Ah, yes, of course.” Alexander stood to the side, allowing Olivia and his mother to see the addition to their group. “I am sure you remember my mother?”

“Duke! It is so lovely to see you.” The Dowager Duchess held out a hand to Nigel. “It has been far too long. Tell me, how is your mother? You must tell her to visit us soon. I have missed our conversations as of late.”

“You are too kind, Duchess. My mother is well, and I shall convey your wishes to her when I return home.” Nigel took her proffered hand and bowed over it. “Perhaps you could visit Glassley? I am sure Mother would be only too happy to accommodate you and your family.”

“That would be most agreeable. I shall write to your mother on the morrow, it has been far too long.” The Dowager Duchess smiled at him.

“And I am not sure if you remember my sister, Lady Olivia Rokesby. It has been some years since you last saw her.” Alexander gestured to Olivia.

“Of course, I remember your sister!” Nigel smiled warmly at Olivia. “Though I confess, you have changed since I last saw you. No longer a girl, but a woman in full bloom.”

Olivia flushed but returned his smile. “I hear that time oft has that effect on one.”

“Indeed, it does. I must only apologize, for I fear time has not been as kind to me as it has been to you.” Nigel’s eyes softened. “I trust it is your influence that has convinced our recluse to leave his cave?”

Olivia nodded. “Of course. I insisted he join us. To be quite candid, I feared that if he remained away from Society much longer, he would become quite a feral creature.”

“I am not some rabid dog. I simply do not enjoy languishing in the company of others.” Alexander frowned at his sister. “Save the few people I care for.”

Olivia shook her head at him, exasperation clear on her face as she exchanged a look with Nigel.

“You know, when I first saw him, I assumed I must be dreaming,” Nigel mock whispered to Olivia and the Dowager Duchess. “For it seemed as if some giant was descending the stairs, rather than my good friend.”

“I am sure it seemed more likely a giant would grace us with his presence than my dearest brother.” Olivia giggled. “You see, Alexander, you have been gone from Society for so long that people think you are a mythical creature!”

“Indeed.” Nigel laughed and clapped his hands together. “Tell me, My Lady, would you do me the honor of a dance? Perhaps you can tell me what witchcraft you have used to lure our good Duke out of hiding, so I might try it myself.”

Alexander felt a rush of affection towards his friend that only deepened as he saw the joy on Olivia’s face.

I will never be able to repay this kindness.

As Olivia met his eyes, Alexander nodded his approval and felt his heart swell as his oldest friend began to dance with his sister.

Perhaps this evening will not be a complete disaster.

Despite that thought, his hopes came crashing down. No sooner had Olivia left his side than he caught a few strains of whispered conversation.

“I hear he killed his own father,” one voice whispered. “Ate his heart.”

“Apparently he stabbed him while he was sleeping,” another said.

“A beast, truly. A vile creature. Just look at the scar on his face.”

“Why did he come? Can’t he see how he is holding his sister back?”

“He will be their downfall. What a beast.”

Beast. The word swam in his head, seeming to eclipse everything around him.

Killed his own father. He will be their downfall.

His jaw tightened. That anyone could believe such ridiculous things should amuse him, yet he could feel his anger growing.

He swallowed hard, digging his fingernails into his palms as he curled his hands into fists.

I must not lose my temper. I will not ruin Olivia’s debut.

“Mother, I shall return in a moment. I am in need of fresh air.” Alexander did not wait for a reply, instead turning sharply on his heel and walking into the gardens.

His anger ripped through him. He wanted to roar his fury, to grab the rumor mongers and shake them. In his mind’s eye, he saw his father shaking his head in disappointment.

But how was he supposed to save his family from himself?

After all, I am a monster.

Metaphor Becomes Reality

R ose was utterly transfixed by the newcomers.

The Duke of Emberly was the tallest man she had ever seen, towering over everyone else in the room. His stride was purposeful and self-assured. While his clothes were somber shades of the deepest blue and grey, their elegance spoke of their cost. Each item was perfectly tailored, highlighting his powerful stature. He reminded Rose of one of the ancient Greek heroes.

There was something about him that spoke of danger and power. Rose frowned, trying to work out how the man seemed simultaneously a warrior and a gentleman. His face was severe, but his brown eyes seemed remarkably warm.

Like honey on a summer day.

Unlike his sister and mother, the Duke clearly felt no compunction to smile.

It seemed ludicrous to imagine anything as gentle as a smile on that sharp face, and yet Rose found herself trying to picture it all the same. She was dimly aware of Felicity whispering something to her mother, but she found she could not tear her attention away from the Duke and his family.

They had moved to the far corner, and her heart ached as she saw the young woman's smile falter and begin to fade as the dances progressed and no one approached her.

The injustice rankled Rose, and she felt sympathy well within her. She thought of her

own sisters, Jane and Emily. Both younger and full of excitement for the future. She knew too well how her own actions and future could affect theirs.

If I fail, they will suffer. How can the Duke not see that his presence could harm his sister? Is he truly so selfish?

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her mother's eyes following the newcomers. Lady Cotswalts made it her business to separate truth from fiction.

Her mother broke away from Miss Carstairs, confessing a desire to move around the room and asking Miss Carstairs to keep Rose company in her absence.

Rose was still watching the group as her mother departed, and she found herself relaxing as a young man approached the Duke's sister. He seemed to know the family, and Rose wondered who he was.

"That is Nigel Maxton, the Duke of Glassley, an old friend of the Duke of Emberly's. A very respectable family. A most ample fortune as well." Miss Carstairs was nodding approvingly. "Such a kind young man, to dance with the young lady."

Rose nodded, still watching the Duke and his mother. She was dimly aware of Lord Verimoor muttering something. She assumed he was responding to something Miss Carstairs said. She felt a hand grasp her arm firmly and tug her towards the dance floor.

"I believe, Miss Pembleton, it is time for our dance." Lord Verimoor pulled her towards the dancers, not bothering to wait for a reply. "Let us go."

Shock at his actions coursed through her, followed swiftly by anger.

How dare he grab me so? Pull me as though I am some horse to be led to a trough.

Without thinking, Rose whirled around, pulling her arm out of his grasp. “No. I do not want to dance,” she spoke without thinking, her anger getting the better of her.

Lord Verimoor’s eyes widened in shock and then narrowed in displeasure. From behind him, Rose noticed the stares of those around her, including the disapproving look of her mother.

Oh God, what have I done?

In an instant, her anger left her, turning instead into intense shame. “My Lord, I am sorry. I did not mean... I... I-I must go. I am not feeling quite myself. Pray, forgive me. I-I must take the air. Yes, some fresh air will do me good.”

Without waiting for a reply, Rose fled. She knew that by all rights, she should wait for a chaperone, but she found that the very air around her was stifling. She longed to be free, to be outside and away from the scene of her outburst.

Foolish, selfish girl. You cannot afford such mistakes. Think of your sisters, your family.

Rose felt a lump form in her throat.

I must not cry. It would be ridiculous to cry.

She was barely aware of leaving the ballroom until she felt the sting of the cool night air on her cheeks.

She did not slow down, instead making her way towards the ornate maze. The large hedgerows would be an excellent place for her to gather her thoughts, and she thought it unlikely to encounter anyone else.

There is a chill in the air, and no one would be foolish enough to leave the warmth.

Not alone.

The gardens were mercifully empty, and Rose was glad, for company would only complicate matters. She did not want anyone to find her, so she went deeper into the maze.

She should not have let her temper get the better of her. Her mother had taught her better than that.

Mother .

She thought of her mother's disappointment, and her shame only deepened. Her mother would be furious.

Rose exhaled, and said aloud to a nearby statue, "We cannot all be perfect, Mother."

She was not sure why she was talking to the statue—it did not even look very much like her mother.

Some statue of Venus, I believe. Or Aphrodite, perhaps?

Yet, even as she acknowledged the lack of resemblance, she found herself unable to stop speaking.

"I am trying. I really am." She glared at the statue. "You were the daughter of a merchant, you have given up everything to make sure we can have everything we desire in life. You have worked for everything you have, and all you ask is for us to follow your example."

"Yet, how can I? You married Father for love, not just practicality. Yes, Father needed money, and your family was wealthy. And I know neither of you planned this life. After all, no one could have imagined Uncle John would succumb to illness."

Rose could not remember her uncle, for he had died when she was still very young, and her father did not often talk about him.

“But now this is our life, and I know that you value the opinion of the ton greatly and hold the position of our family dear. You want the world to see that you and Father are worthy of your title. Yet, why must I be punished for your own imprudence?” She whispered the words, hating herself as she said them. “Why is it always women who must pay for the folly of men?”

She sighed and rested her hand against the cool stone of the statue. “I do not want to let you down. But I do not know what to do.” She felt the last remnants of her anger ebb away.

The statue remained unmoving, its expression unchanged.

Rose sighed. “And now, here I am, talking to a statue as though it were a person.”

It feels good though, to have said it. And at least Mother will never know how truly selfish and wanting I am.

She laughed bitterly, glancing up at the stars in the sky. A cloud was passing over the moon, casting long shadows on the hedges. For a moment, she contemplated remaining in the garden. Yet, even as the thought crossed her mind, she dismissed it.

I am the Diamond of the Season, and I will not let my family down. I must fix my mistakes.

She took a steadying breath and rolled her shoulders back. She stood straight and looked once more at the statue, before turning around and walking straight into a figure who had just emerged into the maze.

She gasped, and she heard an answering grunt from the man she had just collided

with.

“My most sincere apologies!” Rose said once she caught her breath.

I am pressed up against a stranger, so close that I can barely see his face. I am sure he must feel my heart racing.

Rose did not know where to look, settling for turning her head to the side and peering down at the floor. Her mind seemed to be moving sluggishly. She needed to step away, to put some distance between them.

Why won't my legs move? What is wrong with me?

“There is no need for you to apologize, it is my own fault. I was so consumed by my thoughts that I paid no heed to my surroundings.” The answering voice was a gentle baritone that seemed to vibrate through the man's chest. “In truth, I heard a woman's voice and did not want to intrude.”

Rose felt a flush rise to her cheeks, the rumble of his voice a reminder of how close they were.

The scandal. If anyone finds us... But nothing untoward has happened. Oh! Oh, no! He heard my voice? I hope he did not hear what I said.

She tried to decide whether being discovered with this stranger or him thinking she was some kind of lunatic was worse. “Well, I would say this is an interesting way of not intruding.”

The man laughed, and the vibration of the sound through her chest seemed to jerk her legs into motion. Hastily, she tried to take a step away from him, only to find that she could not. The prongs of her necklace that had been catching in her gown all evening were now entangled in his cravat.

Nerves made her fingers clumsy as she tried to free herself. Without thinking, Rose found herself saying, “You know, when my mother said I should use this necklace to capture the attention of a man, I do not think she meant it quite so literally.”

“Ah, and here I was thinking that this was perhaps some new fashion I had missed in the years since I was last at a ball.” She could hear a smile in his voice. “I thought it a natural escalation of the need to ensnare a man.”

“I think we are perhaps more entangled than ensnared. I believe ensnaring would be far too forward for such an occasion.” Rose laughed softly, her nerves at odds with the sound.

Her rising nerves threatened to overcome her. She inhaled deeply to try and calm her emotions, breathing in the scent of the night air.

It reminded her of the clean, crisp smell of the first frost of winter. Like frozen earth and gently swaying trees. There was something calming about it that made her relax, until she realized that what she was smelling could only be the scent of the stranger before her.

Heat rose through her, and her hands began to shake. She was alone, in the dark, entangled with a man she didn’t know. And some strange part of her mind was enjoying his scent?

The man reached towards her hands. “Perhaps I might be of assistance. I would not have you trapped in the cold with me for the remainder of the night.”

“Are you quite adept at disentanglement?” Rose asked, smiling in spite of herself.

“I have some practice.” He paused, and then, as if sensing the impropriety of his words, quickly added, “My sister has often got herself in tangles when playing. And I have had to help others in my family when they have had jewelry or a toy or some

such thing catch in one thing or another.”

He gently took her necklace and began to delicately unpick each prong.

As Rose tilted her head back to allow him a better view of the necklace, she tried to make out his features. Yet, the position of the moon meant that the man was shrouded in shadows. She could only see his silhouette, which told her nothing about him.

In an attempt to defuse some of the tension, she said, “Well, it is good to know that you do not make a habit of running into women alone in gardens.”

“Not generally, no,” the man murmured distractedly.

Rose held herself as still as possible, letting him carefully disentangle her necklace from his cravat. He was on the last prong, and she shifted slightly so that his hands could have a better grip on the necklace.

“Miss Pembleton! Oh, good, I have found you at last. I was so worried when you disappeared and—Oh. Oh. Oh.”

Miss Carstairs’s voice tore through the night, and Rose felt as though her entire world had just burst into flames.

She sprang away from the stranger, desperately trying to explain the situation. “Miss Carstairs, it—I-I mean... My necklace. We were not... Please, Miss Carstairs. You must listen.”

But the damage was done. Miss Carstairs looked from Rose to the stranger, her eyes widening. “I must say, I did not think this evening would be quite so interesting. Nor did I think I would find you, my dearest Miss Pembleton, entangled with him. What will everyone think?”

“Please, Miss Carstairs, you must let me explain. It was my necklace, you see. It caught in his cravat. It has been catching in things all evening!” Rose gestured to her necklace, hoping that Miss Carstairs would note the prongs and the threads still caught in them.

Rose glanced up at the man, hoping that he would help.

He will make Miss Carstairs understand the truth of the matter. Yes, being caught unchaperoned would be scandalous, but not so much as whatever she thinks has transpired.

Her heart stopped as she realized who the stranger was.

The man beside her was none other than Alexander Rokesby, the Duke of Emberly. His face was full of such cold fury that she took a step back. She had never seen rage like it. It was like staring into the face of a wild, caged animal.

He killed his father, and he would kill me, too, I have no doubt. No wonder people call him the Beast of Emberly.

His gentle facade had slipped, revealing the truth below.

She moved away, not daring to look away from him for a second. Her heart thundered in her chest.

Run.

The Duke took a step towards her, the movement angry and menacing. Rose knew all was lost. She heard a yelp from behind her, the sound causing the Duke to pause in his advance.

She fled. At that moment, she did not think about her future or her family.

I do not want to die.

She tripped, falling and whirling around, expecting to see the Duke bearing down upon her. But she was alone.

Tears streamed down her face. Everything was ruined. There was no hope, she had failed.

Perhaps I should have let him kill me.