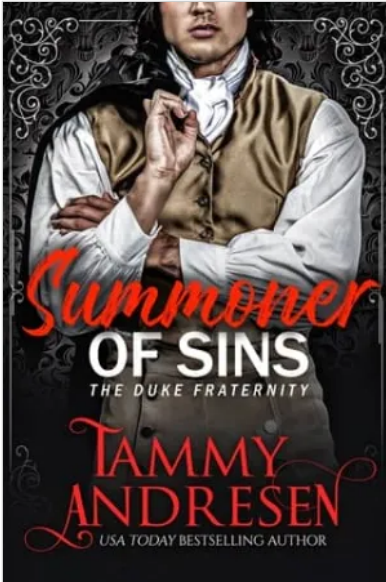




Summoner of Sins (The Duke Fraternity #3)

Author: *Tammy Andresen*

Category: Historical

Description: He's unhinged...

That's the only word Lady Sophie Wren can think when a silent and frightening stranger traps her in a dark hall at the Whittemore's ball.

And while she learns the identity of her captor, Lord Maxwell Whittemore, her mysterious host, he's a societal enigma. No one knows anything about him.

It doesn't help that he never speaks.

Which is why, she has no idea why the man is suddenly at every party she attends, every stroll in the park, even her ladies' luncheon.

Is he stalking her?

It's a game of cat and mouse and each time he grows closer to catching her. It makes her shiver in fear. Or is that something else?

And even if she did want to be caught, she can't allow it. Because her family, the secrets she keeps, could ruin them both...

Total Pages (Source): 20

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:41 am

PROLOGUE

Max adjusted the mask on his face, looking at the five other men at the table meant for ten.

The usual candles were lit, casting the meeting in the perfect mix of shadow and light.

“Welcome to our monthly meeting,” The Duke of Ironheart said. He sat to Max’s right and was known as the Master of Games. It was his job to create and run the monthly challenges in which the men participated. Each challenge tested their prowess either physically, mentally, or sexually, the latter being the Master’s favorite. The man was a first-rate rake.

“Is it business as usual, then?” Lord Jameson asked. His club name was the Devil of Debauchery, and he ran many of the gambling nights they liked to partake in between regular meetings.

Most of the men were unknown to each other outside these walls.

Max was the only one who knew them all because he was the Summoner. The man responsible for calling these men when it was necessary.

He rarely spoke which meant most people thought him mute. It made him ideal for the role. Men trusted another man with their secrets when they knew he wouldn’t share them.

“Obviously not,” Ironheart rumbled. “We’ve only got six men when we should have ten.”

Silence met those words. Two men had left their ranks. The Emperor, their leader, and the Keeper of Secrets, was one of the most competent men among them. They’d both married, and their by-laws clearly stated that once a member wed, he was no longer welcome.

Still, the other reason that they’d left, and the reason men like Lord Hubert Cranston were skittish tonight, was that two of their members had been murdered.

Max was in charge of finding the killer. Being involved in a secret society meant contacting the authorities was tricky. This was why Max had been tasked with finding the killers.

They’d tracked down the assassin. It was a man who went by Adam, but he was nothing more than a hired hand. Those who paid for Adam’s services had yet to be brought to justice.

“What are we here for then?” Cranston asked, shifting restlessly in his seat. “We should all be at home, distancing ourselves as much as possible from the club.”

“We’re not running scared,” a massive man, who the club members called Defender, said, and cracked his neck as he spoke, “We are going to fight for what is ours.”

Everyone spoke at once.

Some called for new members to be added, citing safety in numbers. Others argued it would be unfair to bring new people in now, with all that had happened, and another, Eggersby, called for temporary disbandment of the club.

Max let them speak for approximately one minute before he banged the table with his fist, silencing the room.

“Thank you, Summoner,” Ironheart said, chuckling. “Given that I have been thrust into the role of leader, and that Summoner and I are still rooting out the criminals, we will not be sending out invitations for new members this month.” He cleared his throat. “Nor will we have an official challenge. We’ve decided it’s too dangerous. But?—”

“How do you and Summoner make these plans, given that the man doesn’t speak?”

Max had half-expected this question. He’d been certain that the members were going to demand that each reveal their identities to one another. At least then, they’d know who their allies were.

They were being hunted.

Max looked at Ironheart, who nodded back. He’d made a decision. He was going to reveal his identity to not only the club members, but also their enemies. He was about to become bait... With that, he reached behind his head and tilted his mask. The rest of the members watched in stunned silence as the mask fell away.

“May I present to you, Lord Maxwell, son of the Duke of Everly. He is having a ball tomorrow night, and our enemy, the Earl of Whitehouse, has been invited to attend.”

Max heard several gasps, but Lord Hubert turned positively pale.

“We’d like to ask that all of you attend as well. Keep an eye on our enemy, watch and listen. See if you can learn anything meaningful. Lord Maxwell will do his best to keep Lord Whitehouse distracted while you investigate.”

The soft murmurs of the men were in contrast to their loud calls earlier. This was different from anything that had ever happened before. But desperate times...

A chair pushed back, and Lord Cranston stood. "I can't attend tomorrow night. I'm sorry." He sprinted for the door.

Max watched him go, with a frown. Odd.

He focused on the men in front of him. "This is what we've trained for, men. All of our challenges," the Master of Games leaned forward meaningfully as he spoke.

Max had to confess the man was doing a decent job tonight. Usually, the Master of Games acted as if life was one big game. But tonight, he sounded more like Keeper or Emperor. "Have been training for this moment, Lord Maxwell is going to draw our enemy out so that we may strike."

The Master of Games stood, flipping his coin into the center of the table. It was a symbol of participation and the other men about the table did the same, adding their coins to the pile.

"Lord Maxwell is putting his life on the line to protect us. We shall do our best to protect him."

A murmur of agreement rumbled through the group. Max stood too, tossing his coin on the top of the pile.

This was the only fraternity he'd ever truly known. He was all in...

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:41 am

CHAPTER ONE

Lady Sophie Wren tapped her toe as she watched the dancers twirl by. She had not yet been asked, but she held out hope that she'd fill at least one spot on her dance card.

But hope was far different than reality.

First, she had little experience in such things, having only recently been brought into her uncle's house after the death of her mother. Her small village had not prepared her for London's social scene. Second, her uncle had done little to introduce her to the finer world, and his acquaintances were of the roughest sort. It was so odd for the son of an earl. Third, her gown for the evening was borrowed. And though she'd thought it pretty, she could see it was a different sort from what the other women wore.

They were all pale, while hers was dark, and then there were the numbers of ribbons, bows, and fripperies that adorned their clothing. She was certain her uncle hadn't considered current fashion when he'd chosen the gown. She hadn't asked where it had come from, but it had taken some work to get the scent of cheap perfume from the fabric.

Sophie has been in the care of her uncle for less than a year. It was not so long that she felt truly comfortable, but long enough she'd learned its rhythm.

A fair number of unsavory men came through the house, but as per her uncle's wishes, she retired to her room at seven every evening and bolted the door. It was odd

at first, but now she'd grown accustomed to the practice.

The noise was a different matter. She still found the yelling, cursing, and loud banging upsetting. But in those moments, she'd hold Abigail and soothe her little sister, and herself, until they both fell asleep. Sophie never complained about the noise, however. She felt fortunate her uncle had taken her in at all. She and Abigail had food, warmth, a roof, and clothing.

At the age of twenty, however, she's been wondering if she'd ever get to make a match of her own. She'd hinted to her uncle but said nothing more. She was fortunate to have him, and she did not wish to upset the balance they'd found. Still, it had been such a treat when he'd informed her that he was taking her out tonight to Lord Maxwell's latest ball.

A nanny had been hired for Abigail, and Sophie had set off on this adventure. And by adventure, she'd spent most of the evening leaning against the wall. But even watching the dancers, and listening to the music, felt like a rare treat.

A couple of women walked by, hardly noticing her by the wall. "Have you caught sight of Lord Maxwell?"

"No, but I'm so curious. I hear he's handsome."

"Did you hear that he doesn't speak? Ever. So odd..."

They kept going, and Sophie was no longer able to hear what they said. She'd like to have participated. It would be so nice to find someone to talk to and maybe have that single dance. If she could make either of those happen, she'd consider tonight a success.

Uncle Allister was engaged in conversation several feet away. He wasn't much for

making conversation with her normally. They rarely spoke, but tonight, he paid even less attention to her than normal. He stood with a group of men, their heads bent together. She could not hear what was said, but she did note that several of the men wore clothes not unlike her own.

By that, she did not mean they wore dresses. They did wear clothes that did not quite fit in this setting. It was the way their cravats were tied. Or the style of their shoes or...

She snapped her attention back to the dancers, trying not to focus on all the reasons she shouldn't be successful tonight. If she were going to make something of this evening, she'd have to leave this one spot next to a potted fern and...mingle.

With that in mind, she set out, intent upon seeing the room from a different angle and perhaps, visiting the ladies' repose. She might hear something of interest or even participate in a conversation in a smaller, quieter environment. She moved slowly, savoring the experience, until she saw a small group of women make their way down a quiet hall. Surely, that was the way to the repose.

Following, she entered a spacious room where lounges had been set about with ladies resting on them as others adjusted the pins of their hair in a large mirror. Smiling, she draped herself across an empty lounge, her attention turning to the group she'd followed.

"And would you believe that dress Miss Poppy is wearing? Dreadful." A beautiful blonde in pale pink satin patted her perfectly coiffed curls.

"I know," a delicate brunette responded. "She thinks that her father's money will buy her social standing. But no merchant's daughter is going to be in the inner circle..."

Sophie ducked her head. These women were not likely to be her friends, and she

instinctively understood that being caught staring might incite their ire.

“Smart,” a girl next to her whispered. “They are vipers in disguise. You should not make eye contact.”

Sophie looked to her left to see a pretty woman in a perfect pale green silk gown lounging next to her. She had all the markers of one of the vipers. So why was she talking to Sophie? “What makes them vipers?” she whispered back, leaning closer before glancing over quickly to make certain she hadn’t been heard.

“Oh, they look sweet and innocent, but they collectively cut the rest of us to ribbons with their words.” She gave Sophie a friendly smile. “I’m Lady Tabetha, but my friends call me Tabbie.”

“Tabbie,” Sophie said, nodding. “Miss Sophie Wren. A pleasure.”

Tabbie turned to extend a hand and that’s when Sophie noticed the scars that marked her left side. Her skin looked as though she’d been burned.

Sophie was no stranger to the cruelty of life, so she only smiled brighter, taking Tabbie’s hand. “I’m so pleased to meet you.”

“Oh look,” the blonde in pink trilled a laugh. “Tabbie made a friend. Isn’t that sweet? It’s Cinderella and the Beast.”

All of the blonde’s friends turned to stare at Tabbie and Sophie. Sophie’s face flamed as she wished the floor would open up and swallow her whole.

But Tabbie only straightened up. “Spread your venom elsewhere, Elsa, or else I shall have to explain to your mother why your invitations to all the best events have been withdrawn.”

Elsa let out an indignant gasp, but she said no more as, chin high, she left the repose with the other women trailing behind her.

“Oh my...” Sophie said and then gulped. “How did you manage that?”

“My father is a marquess. As I manage our social calendar, I have a certain sway most ladies my age do not.”

Sophie nodded, staring at the door the women had just exited.

Tabbie sniffed as she settled back in the chaise. “At one time, I tried to be friends with Elsa. She and her friends were kind on the surface, but it became clear that their hearts are black after...” Tabbie pointed down to her scarred arm.

Sophie didn’t ask. They were too newly acquainted. “I’m sorry for their cruelty.”

Tabbie shook her head. “It matters not. I’ve learned a great deal about life and what sort of people are worth the time.” She gave Sophie a twinkling smile. “Tell me about yourself.”

“There isn’t much to tell. I’m enjoying the evening immensely, but I am certainly one of the women who does not belong. My uncle does not normally socialize, but he’s here by the invitation of Lord Whitehouse.”

Tabbie’s smile slipped and Sophie cocked her head. Had Tabbie’s demeanor changed because she realized that Sophie was not an actual debutante?

“Lord Whitehouse’s invitation?” Tabbie’s voice was neutral, but Sophie could sense the tension underneath.

“That’s right.”

“Have you met him?”

“I did briefly this evening.”

Tabbie relaxed again. “First time?”

“Yes. This is the first. So odd, because seeing them tonight, my uncle and Lord Whitehouse, they seem quite close. But he’s not been to my uncle’s house in the year I’ve lived there. I came after my mother...” Sophie stopped. Her chin dipped. She was doing that thing she often did where she let her tongue run away with her.

But Tabbie only sighed. “I lost my mother too. Dreadful, isn’t it?”

Sophie nodded. She didn’t ask for the details, she didn’t wish to pry. “It is indeed. But we’re very lucky that my uncle took us in. It could have been much worse.”

Tabbie nodded. “That is almost always true. It can always be worse.”

Sophie grimaced. She had this tendency toward attempted optimism that sometimes irritated those around her. “My apologies. I don’t know the circumstances of your loss. I...”

Tabbie gave her a soft look of appreciation. “Not at all. I have my father. I’m titled. You are an orphan apologizing to me about being too grateful. I was chastising myself.”

Sophie let out a long breath of relief. “I’m so glad to have met you, Tabbie. I’ve been missing friends since coming to London.”

“Do you not socialize with any other women our age?”

Sophie shook her head. In a move that was against her nature, she didn't tell Tabbie how she cared for her sister or her uncle's strange requests. Tabbie had been very kind; Sophie needn't frighten the other woman away. "We've been settling in."

"We?"

"I have a small sister. Abigail. She's just four."

Tabbie's eyes grew wide. "Oh, Sophie."

"We're good. I'm fortunate..." She stopped, knowing she was doing it again. "I've enjoyed your company this evening. Thank you."

"We must see each other again." Tabbie pulled out a small, elegant card from a clutch. "You must call on me. Soon. Just present this card and you'll be shown to the morning room where I take callers."

Sophie took the card, hoping she might have the chance to do just that. She left the repose, thinking that she'd managed one of her goals, and met a wonderful person.

Excitement bubbled inside to have made a friend. But perhaps her thoughts were a distraction she could ill afford because as she made her way down the hall, she ran smack into a large chest. Bounding off the man, she nearly tripped and stumbled when his hand shot out to her waist, holding her in place. Her chin snapped up, her gaze colliding with the hard and uncompromising eyes of the largest man she'd ever encountered.

She gasped. The size of his shoulders blocked the view of the ballroom beyond. "I beg your pardon, sir."

He continued to stare, not saying a word. She made to step back, but his hand only

tightened around her.

Panic rose in her chest as she tried harder to move away. He held tight. Then, with his free hand, he reached toward her.

She let out a cry, her heart hammering in her chest as she pulled harder. His fingers touched the dance card dangling from her wrist. Letting go of her waist, he pulled a small bit of lead from his cuff and scratched a name on one of the lines.

“I...”

He took her hand, tucked it in his elbow, and turned. Sophie had little choice but to walk with him as they started for the ballroom.

Sophie had wanted a dance. More, even, than she’d wished for a friend. In her heart of hearts though, this was not how she’d imagined it happening. She’d pictured a handsome gentleman approaching, perhaps paying her a compliment or two before he kindly asked for the honor of her company on the dance floor.

This felt a bit more like she’d been taken hostage.

The man who now stood with her hand in his, his other at her waist, had yet to say a word. She craned her neck to look at him, the thick muscles of his neck straining his collar and cravat. Swallowing down a lump, she tried to think of something she might say. But for once in her life, she was at a complete loss for words.

In the candlelight, she could see that he was handsome in his way. He had a chiseled jaw, a strong slashing brow, and his jacket pulled across his chest. His hand dwarfed hers as the first strains of the violin filled the ballroom. With a sure step, he began the dance.

She gasped, not sure she knew the steps. She wasn't educated in these sorts of things, but with strong arms, he led her effortlessly about the floor. She could hardly keep her breath; the steps were so quick. But for a man who frightened her as he did, she found the strength of his arms comforting as the other dancers appeared to make way for them.

Why would they? She couldn't mull over the question long because her mystery partner spun her close to her uncle and his group. They stood in a straight line staring. Staring. Her uncle's arms were crossed as he glared back at her. She barely had a moment to question why before her partner swung her about again, closing off her view and swirling her in another direction.

She gasped in a breath, sensing that she'd entered into something she ought not to. Events were unfolding well past her control, but she had no idea what or how.

The song came to an end, and the mysterious man who'd dragged her to the floor let her go. Just like that. Then, with a bow, he was gone. She watched him disappear into the crowd, her brow furrowed as she watched him go.

"Sophie, you fool," her Uncle Allister hissed from next to her. "Do you have any idea who that was?"

"None."

"None?"

"No," she shook her head, turning to her uncle, her gaze going wide. He looked excessively angry, more so than she'd ever seen. "I was coming back from the repose, and he just grabbed my arm and dragged me to dance. Never said a word."

"Interesting," another man said from next to her uncle.

She leaned forward to see who'd spoken to find Lord Whitehouse at her uncle's elbow. Unlike most of the men with her uncle, this man fit the setting perfectly. His clothing was of the finest quality, the knot in his cravat perfect, his silver hair styled back in a neat and distinguished manner. He oozed influence and money.

"Is it, my lord?" her uncle asked, much of his anger disappearing.

"Indeed," Lord Whitehouse answered. Then, his gaze found Sophie's, his gaze running down her in a way that made her excessively uncomfortable. Her hands flattened into the folds of her skirts as she resisted the urge to curl into herself.

"I'm glad to hear that he accosted you rather than charmed." He turned to her uncle. "Get her better clothes."

"How do I do that?" her uncle asked with a frown.

Sophie was still puzzling over his first comment. Would it have been a problem if she'd agreed to dance with whoever that man was? Why?

"Bring her to a modiste. The woman will do the rest."

She delicately cleared her throat. She had no idea why she might need them, whatever the reason, this might be the excuse she needed to see Tabbie again. "I know who to ask for help. I hope."

Lord Whitehouse gave her a wide smile. "Beautiful and resourceful. You will prove to be as useful as I hoped."

Her brows drew together. What did that mean? Now she was truly confused. This man had hopes for her? Why? How? When?

Her uncle clamped a hand on her arm even as Elsa appeared in her peripheral vision.

“Excuse me,” Elsa called, lifting a finger.

“Yes?” she asked, not quite certain that the woman was speaking to her.

“I should like to call upon you,” Elsa said with the sweetest most innocent smile.

“Perhaps invite you to my garden party next week.”

Sophie shook her head. Had she stepped into a different world? It looked like the same one, but everyone was acting so oddly.

“Send invitations to me, Miss Dayton,” Lord Whitehouse nodded at Elsa, the two of them clearly acquainted. Then, he leaned over and whispered to her uncle, her uncle nodding as the other man spoke.

What were they saying? It was surely about her.

Tabbie came into view as well, standing ten feet away from Elsa, her look one of concern. She gave the other woman a wide-eyed stare.

“What’s happening?” Tabbie mouthed.

“I don’t know,” Sophie said back, so glad someone else understood that the whole world had gone mad.

CHAPTER TWO

“How much did he give you to buy dresses?” Tabbie asked as they stood inside her massive dressing room.

Sophie had come to Tabbie’s calling hours in the hopes of retaining aid in the purchase of fashionable dresses. Instead, Tabbie had pulled her up to her private rooms. They stood staring at the racks and racks of clothing. A maid stood just behind them.

She pulled out the bag of coin she’d been given by her uncle. Opening it, she shifted through the coins. “There must be 500 pounds here.”

“Believe it or not, that doesn’t buy you much in a London dress shop.” Tabbie frowned as she looked down into the bag.

Sophie shook her head. The events of the last several days had her head spinning. They had left her uncle’s home and were staying at Lord Whitehouse’s estate. One nanny had turned into two, and now she hardly saw her sister at all. They were allowed a small window of time together in the late afternoon and that was it.

Instead, she’d been thrust into the care of a tutor of her own. A woman who was supposed to teach her the finer points of society. They mostly practiced serving and pouring tea. Two skills for which Sophie was already perfectly confident. Her mother had been the daughter of an earl, even if she’d married a man not of society.

Tabbie pulled a gown from the collection. “I’ve never liked the neck on this dress.”

The maid took the dress, folding it over her arm as Sophie attempted to understand. “You’re getting rid of it?”

“And this one is from last season but if we tweaked the style of bow...” On and on it went with Tabbie pulling out an entire wardrobe from her collection.

There were dresses for garden parties and balls, teas, and masquerades. “I think we’re the same size, so let’s try a few on you to see how they fit.”

“What?” Sophie knew she was being thick. But she didn’t expect this. “You can’t mean...”

Tabbie stopped in front of her. “I know we don’t know each other that well.”

“No, I suppose not.” Somehow, Sophie already felt as though they’d known each other for a very long time. “And yet, I think you might understand more of what’s happening in my life than I do.”

Tabbie winced as she took one of Sophie’s hands. “I might understand a few things.”

“Can you explain them to me?”

Tabbie hesitated, looking away. “As the temporary mistress of this house, I have more insight than I might normally into the workings of society. I don’t know what Lord Whitehouse does, but I know many families won’t entertain him. He’s not welcome.”

Sophie shook her head. She wanted to believe that her uncle didn’t consort with unsavory men, but she knew it wasn’t true. Despite that, he’d taken care of her and Abigail and still did. “My uncle has been nothing but supportive this past year. I...”

Tabbie waved her hand. “Just keep your eyes and ears open.” Then Tabbie stepped closer. “I think Lord Whitehouse has taken an interest in you because of that dance with Lord Maxwell.”

“Lord Maxwell,” Sophie whispered. He had been their host for the evening. The one everyone was talking about. The man who didn’t speak, which all of a sudden, made sense.

“He’s a recluse. Notorious for snubbing his nose at society,” Tabbie stepped closer. “He wasn’t seen at all during the ball, even though he was the host until he danced with you.”

Cold dread slid down her back. What did it all mean?

“You told me in the repose that the ball had been your first social event since coming to London.”

“That’s right.”

“And now, you’ve been invited to several, and your uncle is paying for your clothes?”

“That’s right,” she said again, her voice growing higher and tighter.

“I’ve been thinking it over and the only thing I can figure is that Lord Maxwell, your uncle, and Lord Whitehouse must all know each other. They wanted you to be seen in society.”

“But why?” she asked, swallowing down a lump. She could hear the truth in the words. But why wouldn’t her uncle simply ask her to dance with Lord Maxwell?

“That doesn’t make sense. Why did my uncle look so angry and call me a fool when I

danced with him?”

“He called you a fool?” Tabbie leaned back on her heels. “Interesting.”

Sophie did not find it interesting. The word had cut. Her uncle didn’t speak to her all that much, but she thought that might just be his way. What she’d seen in his eyes that night had alarmed her. She’d not seen that side of him, and it made her feel as though she didn’t know him at all. Which was frightening, considering he was her one support in this world.

She shook her head. “Lord Whitehouse is choosing which events I attend and for some reason, I’m attending Elsa’s luncheon. They seemed to know each other.” Her head hung a bit lower at the idea. Those women were not for her. “I have no idea if they’ll even pretend to be kind, but I feel as though I’m in the center of some vortex.”

Tabbie sighed. “You are.” Then she squeezed Sophie’s hands. “I’ll go to the luncheon with you. It’s one place I can meaningfully help you.”

Sophie’s eyes widened as she looked over at the dresses. “You’re helping plenty.”

Tabbie shook her head. “In a place like this, people are never upfront or honest. I saw you were both those things the moment I met you and I adore that about you. But London will eat you up and spit you out if you’re not careful.”

Sophie nipped her lip. It wasn’t the first time she’d thought that very thing. But she’d found the only way to solve a problem was to keep walking through...and so that was what she’d do. “I’d very much like for you to attend with me.”

Tabbie nodded. “Now listen. Take that money for the dresses and hide it. Tell them it’s all gone and then keep it. If the worst happens, it will allow you to get away from here.”

“To where?” she asked, letting go of one of Tabbie’s hands. “I’ve nowhere to go and maybe enough funds to live for six months or a year. Then what?” She shook her head. “The only solution for me is to marry. But until my uncle allows me to court...”

Tabbie frowned. “You might have to search on your own. You’ve got access to society now. Use it. Stay away from men like Lord Maxwell. Focus on merchants, barristers, doctors. You’re beautiful and you’ve got a very sunny disposition. Some man will surely wed you for those traits alone.”

Sophie’s eyes widened. She never really considered her dark brown hair and matching eyes the traits of a beautiful woman. “You’re too kind.”

“I’m not being kind, Sophie. You are exceptionally lovely. I can feel that you are kind and forthright in the way most people I meet are not. It’s why I know we’ll be the best of friends. But please, use your beauty to place yourself in a secure marriage.”

“I will.”

“The luncheon will be all women but tell me which balls you’re attending, and I’ll see you introduced to good candidates.”

Surging forward, Sophie wrapped her arms around Tabbie. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now, let’s get some of these dresses on you. We’re about the same height and both slender, but I’m worried you have more bosom than I do.”

It turned out that she did have more bosom, which meant, for the first time in her life, she had cleavage coming out of the top of the gowns.

She left with a collection of items that were loaded into the waiting hack. She made a

trip to the haberdashery to buy several hats and gloves that might accompany the gowns, along with other matching bits of ribbon. Then, she returned to Lord Whitehouse's estate, a sprawling mansion with vast lawns right in the heart of the city.

Several footmen met her at the carriage door, unloaded her items, and carried them into the house. She'd been excused from her lessons for the day to acquire her clothing, but tomorrow she'd commence with her tutor on comportment and grace.

She sighed. Though her mother had married a soldier, she'd taught Sophie well. They'd even had enough money for a cook and a maid. Her father had been in the military and once he'd retired, he'd started a counting house, and they'd lived a good life. However, not a year after his retirement, he'd passed.

Her mother had been shrewd, and she'd hidden what she could from the counting house. Unfortunately, she'd also grown ill and then died, leaving Sophie and Abigail with nothing but the name of a single relative—Lord Allister Stanley. Her mother's brother, Sophie's uncle.

Sophie had sewn the money into her skirts that her mother had removed from the counting house and left the north of England for London. She'd been directed to her uncle's house but had been dismayed to see the state of disrepair it was in. But she'd forged on, having no other choice.

When she'd rang the bell, an older gentleman had answered. "I'm looking for Lord Stanley.'

"I'm Lord Stanley. Who are you?" he'd barked at her.

"Uncle Allister, I'm your niece. The daughter of Lady Amelia."

He grunted as another man appeared behind him. “Who’s that?”

“My niece, or so she says.”

“Let her in, Uncle Allister,” the other man had laughed as he’d walked away.

She’d been filled with dread as she’d made her way into the house, Abigail at her side. She’d been shown into a room with nothing but water, as she’d waited for nearly two hours.

Uncle Allister finally joined her, listened to her plight, and brought her and Abigail up to a room. That’s when he’d told her the rules. No coming out of her room after seven, always barring the door behind her.

She’d nodded as a tray of food was placed on the table and then the door closed without another word from her uncle. No, Uncle Allister didn’t treat her with the love her parents had, but she’d been safe this past year.

Stepping into the vast entry of Lord Whitehouse’s home, she stopped to stare up at the gilded ceilings. It was almost like a church with its stained glass and elaborate arches.

Sophie had been so grateful that she had decided to ask as little as possible from her uncle, but perhaps it was time for a few answers. Returning to her room, she pulled out a needle and thread, creating small pockets in a second skirt to hide the dress money as Tabbie had instructed her. All told, she had about five thousand pounds sewn into skirts. It was a great deal for a woman of her station, but Sophie knew that it would only last for so long should she leave with Abigail. As if on cue, she heard the distant cries of a child.

Folding the skirt up on her bed, she exited the room again, following the sound of the

cries. She found her sister, her large brown eyes filled with tears as a nanny stood over her with her arms crossed, glaring at Abigail.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, bending down to scoop Abigail into her arms.

“The child refuses to nap,” the nanny huffed.

Abigail curled into her sister, her cries growing softer as she rubbed her wet face on Sophie’s shoulder.

Abigail had surely been missing Sophie and the routine they’d established. “I fancy some air, anyway. I shall take her out to the park while you take a break, yes?”

The nanny’s eyes only narrowed. “As long as I am here, she’ll follow my schedule.”

Sophie didn’t have much experience with staff, but she’d seen Tabbie with her maids today. Tabbie gave the orders and not the other way around.

And while Sophie was a guest, this was her sister. No one knew better what Abigail needed than Sophie. “Let me try again. You’re dismissed.”

The nanny huffed, before turning away and tossing over her shoulder. “Lord Whitehouse shall hear of this.”

Sophie let out a long breath of air. She had no idea how Lord Whitehouse might react to the knowledge that Sophie had begun ordering the staff about, but that was a problem for later. Right now, she wished to comfort her sister. They needed a few minutes together. With that in mind, she wrapped herself in a shawl, placing another about Abigail.

“I don’t like it here,” Abigail pouted into her shoulder. “I want to go home.”

Sophie frowned. How would she explain to a child that she had absolutely no say in where the two of them lived? Stepping back out onto the porch, she made her way down the drive and out the side gate, crossing to the park on the other side of the street.

A few people strolled about, but she found a quiet bench in the warm afternoon spring sun and sat with Abigail who let out a large yawn, snuggling closer.

Sophie sang to her sister, brushing a kiss across her forehead. She closed her eyes in the dappled sun. "I want to go home too." But she didn't mean she wished to go back to Uncle Allister's. She meant the before.

As grateful as she was to her uncle, Sophie only existed in the now. Once upon a time, she really lived. And she wished to live again.

CHAPTER THREE

Max stood under the shade of the tree, watching the fragile beauty who held a child in her arms. Was she a mother?

His fist clenched at his side. She was a means to an end. He'd danced with her to make a point to Lord Whitehouse and his henchman, the weaselly Plimpton.

He knew who they were. He was watching them too, and he was ready for them to come try and get him.

Lord Whitehouse had been attacking the members of Max's club, the Duke Fraternity. Lord Whitehouse had a cousin who went only by the name of Adam, who'd killed two of their members and attacked two of his compatriots' wives.

Adam was dead now, but they'd only removed the hand of the killer. The head remained. Whitehouse.

And this woman was attached to him. Which meant that Max ought not to care that she was a mother. Nor should he acknowledge the unwanted attraction that had flared within him the moment she'd run smack into his chest.

Oh, how soft she'd been.

She was a small thing. If he'd expected her angles to be hard, he'd been mistaken. And then there were her large brown eyes, her pert little nose, the fullness of her mouth. She made a man ache. He was not a man prone to aching. He hardly ever

indulged in his needs at all. He'd learned from a young age that women had fangs, just like men. Letting one close meant that he risked being bitten.

He scrubbed at his jaw as he watched her. Her hands were so gentle with the child, her soft singing caught the breeze and reached his ear. Her voice was beautiful. He knew that she was supposed to be Plimpton's niece. He didn't see the resemblance. Nothing in her physical appearance or her comportment bore any familiarity to the man he found odious.

He'd been watching Plimpton closely. With the death of Adam, Plimpton was moving up in Whitehouse's ranks and becoming his number two man.

Now it appeared as though Plimpton were living with Whitehouse, bringing his niece with him. Was it a coincidence that she'd been moved into Whitehouse's estate right after he'd danced with her? That thought made something unpleasant settle in his gut. He didn't know why. She was Plimpton's niece. Of course, nothing bad would happen to her.

He edged closer, staying under the trees and moving behind the shrubs. He ought to have brought his investigative partner with him. The Duke of Ironheart was excessively annoying, but the man could always charm the ladies. However, the very idea of him charming this particular lady made Max's skin crawl. He knew he'd left Ironheart out of today's investigation for a reason.

He didn't wish for Ironheart to know Miss Sophie Wren. Max already knew that Ironheart would like her. First, because he liked all women. Blonde. Brunette. Curvy. Willowy. But Ironheart especially liked beautiful women, and Miss Wren was that.

When he'd gotten within a few yards of where Miss Wren sat, he stopped, staying in the shadows.

“Do you remember the country?” she asked the child. “With its tall grasses and the sound of the birds?”

“I do,” the child picked up her head. She had the same brown hair, pert nose, and big brown eyes. She was so beautiful; she looked almost angelic. “I do remember.”

“What else do you remember?”

“Mama singing,” the child sighed and laid her head back down. “I miss her.”

“I miss her too, lamb.”

A jolt of surprise made him pull upright. Not a mother, but perhaps a sister? Orphans?

“Do you miss Papa?” the little one asked.

“Very much.”

“Tell me about him again,” the little one said. “I don’t remember.”

The child couldn’t be more than four. If she remembered her mother, that loss had to be recent.

“He was tall and handsome,” Miss Wren began. “He could hold your body in one arm, and he’d sit with you in his lap and tell you stories.”

“What stories?”

“His favorite and yours was Little Red Riding Hood. He’d make the funniest noises when he pretended to be the wolf.”

The child lay her head back on Sophie's shoulder. "Do we get to have a real family again?"

Sophie held the girl closer. "We are a real family, my little lamb."

"Not Uncle. He doesn't tell me stories."

Miss Wren rocked the girl. "He feeds us, Abigail. And he keeps a roof above us and clothes on our backs. We should be grateful for that." She began to hum again.

"He has angry eyes," the girl said and then yawned. "I don't like them."

"Grateful," she whispered back as she softly rocked the little girl.

His gut clenched. The child had the right idea, but then again, he supposed, Miss Wren did as well. If they were truly orphans, life could be harsh.

The very idea of a woman like herself having to survive, being sent to a workhouse, or needing to sell her body... He revolted at the idea of it, his muscles tightening. It was then he knew. He'd have to do the thing he dreaded more than any other. He'd have to speak with her.

It was odd. He'd stopped talking with anything but his fists years ago. He only spoke to a select few people, and then only when necessary. But the quieter he'd become, the more others seemed to seek him out. He knew the reverse would be true.

Once she learned his secret, she'd shy away from him, no matter what he offered her. He hesitated. He ought to wait and speak with her another time, or only if necessary. Why set himself up for rejection if it could be avoided?

Her singing quieted and became nothing more than a whisper. He looked down to see

that the child was asleep. They had privacy, no one was there to witness her rejection, and she was likely to remain on the bench with the child asleep. If he had things to say to her, to ask her, there would be no better time.

The alternative was to have Ironheart do the talking for him. That was the final thought that pushed him forward, out of the shadows and onto the sunlit path.

It was a mild day, and the sun warmed him. His boots, which had been muffled in the grass, crunched on the gravel path.

Her head lifted and her eyes widened as they caught his. "It's you."

"Me," he answered, speaking slowly. Carefully.

"What are you..." Her voice died off as a bit of fear colored her eyes.

He stopped. Had he frightened her at the ball? Of course, he had. He'd not said a word, but instead, had dragged her onto the dance floor. How did he assure her now that he meant no harm? He dropped into a crouch.

Her eyes went from wide to narrow in an instant as she assessed him. "What are you doing here?"

A fair question and the obvious one. Why hadn't he crafted an answer before stepping out of the shadows? He opened his mouth and closed it again.

"Are you following me? Do you mean me harm?" Her voice trembled at the last words.

He swallowed down a lump. "I-I came to apologize."

Her brows drew together. “Apologize?”

“I’m Lord M-Maxwell Armstrong.”

“I know,” a ghost of a smile touched her lips. “Dancing with you has caused quite the stir.”

He grimaced. He’d been afraid of that. “B-bad?”

Miss Wren looked up at the sky for a moment and then back at him. “You’re a curious man, my lord.”

His fist clenched as he covered it with his other hand. “Mmh.”

“You drag me on the dance floor without a word, and now I happen to find you outside my home. Why?”

Why? The answer was far too long, he’d never get it out, and he ought not to tell her anyway. “H-h-how l-long—” Damn him and his infernal stutter! He hated the sound of it, grating his ears. His head dropped, not wanting to see the shock, disgust, or judgment that would surely color her features.

“How long what?” she asked, her voice perfectly neutral. He looked up to see an expression of mild curiosity, nothing more, on her face.

“H-have you li-lived with Plimp-Plimpton?”

“Who is Plimpton?”

Now he was the shocked one. “Y-y-y-your u-u-uncle.”

“My uncle is Lord Allister Stanley.”

His mouth hung open, all his worries forgotten. Something was very wrong.

“Goddamnit, Sophie, where are you?” Another voice called from around a corner.

Miss Wren sat up a bit, drawing in a quick breath. “I’m here.”

Standing, he looked back down at Sophie. “See you soon.” He stepped back into the shadows, disappearing behind a hedge. Taking his hat off, he crouched down, determined to get more information.

Sophie might very well tell her uncle exactly where he was hiding, but he’d take the risk. Pulling out a pistol, he slowly loaded a lead ball.

“Who told you that you could leave the grounds?”

“Oh. My apologies. I just assumed. At home I was allowed?—”

“At my townhouse, I don’t have gardens. You’re not to wander off again.”

Sophie cleared her throat. He heard the rustle of her skirts as she stood. “Apologies, Uncle. It won’t happen again.”

“Good. Now come on. Lord Whitehouse is spitting mad that you cried the nanny off.”

Max shook his head. Was Plimpton impersonating her uncle? An earl’s son, even a second son as Allister was supposed to be, did not say things like spitting mad. He’d say furious or frightfully angry.

Did Sophie know? He’d guess not. Which meant she wasn’t tucked in with family at

all. They'd moved her here because they had some plans for her. But what would they want with a beautiful young woman? Shaking his head, he had a few ideas, none of them good. She could be bait. She'd been brought to his ball.

And then he'd danced with her. He hadn't been enacting a plan; he'd been participating in theirs. At least that was one theory, but any other was even worse. Which meant Miss Sophie Wren and the little girl were in deep trouble. It wasn't his place to do anything about it. He hadn't caused any of this.

As he watched her walk away, he couldn't quite shake the urge to rush to her side, punch Plimpton in the face, and carry her off. He couldn't. She'd only be marginally safer at his side. He'd set himself in Lord Whitehouse's path, which meant he could end up like the other men in his club. Dead.

He could not afford to care about a woman now. The very idea was ridiculous. That could only mean one thing. He'd gone mad, maybe from the silence? Either that or for the first time in a long time, he was attracted to a woman. Which was way worse than having lost his mind.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sophie stood on the outskirts of the garden party, trying hard not to be seen. Next to her, Tabbie wore a beautiful silk gown with a sheer wrap that mostly hid her scars. She looked lovely, her auburn hair shimmering in the sun right along with her clear, green eyes.

“Do you think they’d notice if we just disappeared?”

Tabbie rolled her eyes. “Yes. They’d notice. We’ve been asked to play croquet, blind man’s buff, and with those ridiculous hoops. Elsa is clearly trying to befriend you, and by extension me, even though she knows I’m a lost cause.”

“You were friends once?”

“Yes. Back when we were both at finishing school and men had not been introduced into our lives. But then I received these burns...” She pointed at her arm. “And she had her first season. When I came out a year later, she...” Tabbie’s mouth pinched. “She laughed at me and made fun of my marks in front of a large group of lords. Most of them laughed too.”

Sophie cringed. “That must have been dreadful.”

“I don’t think she had any idea that she’d only stiffen my spine, not weaken it.” Tabbie’s chin notched. “I fired back that night, about her ugliness being on the inside. A remark that also got a laugh, and we’ve been enemies ever since.”

Sophie reached for Tabbie's hand. "I'm sorry."

Tabbie gave her a soft smile. "Don't be. I learned a great deal from all those experiences. One lesson was how to spot a genuine person. I could tell from the moment we met that you've got a heart of gold. Which is why I'm here."

"Same to you." The thought made Sophie pause. She'd given her uncle the benefit of the doubt. He'd taken care of their needs this past year. She hadn't required much beyond that. However, Abigail's comment about a real family made her think. She was grateful to her uncle, but between the strangeness of the situation with Lord Whitehouse, and Abigail growing older and needing more, it was time to be in a place where people loved them again. They needed a place where they would be cared for emotionally.

She sighed out loud, it was a lot to ask.

"Any more theories on why your uncle has suddenly thrust you into society?"

"None."

"Are you still intent on finding a husband?"

"Yes."

"Then play a game with Elsa. If you attend the next ball, having her lead you about the ballroom will only improve your chances."

"But couldn't you do that?"

Tabbie sniffed. "I'm not known for being well-liked."

Sophie frowned. Tabbie was the only other person who'd done anything of consequence for Sophie. This was the sort of person she much preferred to spend her time with. "You're well-liked by me."

She didn't give a fig about finding a husband who was socially accomplished or even rich. She needed enough money to eat and live, and to educate Abigail. Beyond that...she wasn't completely sure. She simply wanted a man who was kind and caring. "I thought you said I should focus on barristers and doctors. My guess is Elsa doesn't spend time with many of those."

Tabbie smiled. "Too true. Do a circle with her first to be seen, and then I'll help you meet men I think you might like. How important is handsome?"

She nipped at her lip. She wanted to say not important at all and mean it. She did, but she couldn't help but think of Lord Maxwell. In the light of day, he'd been even more handsome than he'd been at night. He had sandy brown hair and tawny eyes. The muscles she'd been a bit afraid of that first night made him look dashing in the light of day.

She let out a sigh. "I need a man who is caring and will accept my sister and help educate her. Looks are the least important attribute on my list."

Tabbie gave her a wink. "I'm going to wager you get all three and more."

"Come," Elsa called. "We're going to play blind man's buff!"

Sophie softly laughed before she picked up the edge of her skirt. "All right. I'm going to do this."

"Go," Tabbie said. "I'll be waiting here when you return."

With a swish of her skirts, Sophie joined the other women. It was fun enough until Elsa pulled her aside.

“I’m so glad you could come.”

She didn’t mention she’d been told by her uncle to do so. It was all so odd. “I’m glad to be here.”

“Good. I think we’re going to be the best of friends.”

Sophie smiled and dipped her chin, but did not respond.

Elsa tried again. “You know Lord Whitehouse is very good friends with my father.”

She nodded. Why Lord Whitehouse was suddenly part of her life was another concern.

“I shall tell you a secret. There is an informal agreement that I should marry Lord Whitehouse’s son, Lord Cranston.”

She nodded again, keenly curious as to where this conversation was going. “That’s wonderful.”

“Thank you. Being an honorary baroness would be wonderful, but knowing I’d someday be a countess,” she gave Sophie a smirk of satisfaction.

Sophie jerked her chin in acknowledgment, though titles didn’t concern her in the least. “I’m sure that would be very nice.”

“You don’t care about being titled?”

She shook her head. “Honestly. No. I don’t judge, I just want...security, I think.”

“I understand,” Elsa patted her hand. “I’m sure he’ll be happy to hear that.”

“He?”

“Lord Whitehouse. He asked me to learn a bit more about you.”

Her stomach filled with a kind of sick dread. “Why would he wish that?”

Elsa gave her an exaggerated wink. “He has been a widower for a long time. He is a man of influence and power, so he requires a bride with at least decent bloodlines, but his deep beliefs require him to find a woman who is pious and obedient.”

Sophie was at a loss for words. Lord Whitehouse had hardly interacted with her. “Surely you're mistaken.”

“I’m not.” Elsa shook her head. “But if you don’t believe me, ask your uncle.”

Sophie intended to do just that.

“I shall see you tomorrow night at the Edgemere ball, correct?” Elsa squeezed her arm.

“Of course,” Sophie answered, but she couldn’t quite make the smile reach her eyes. Leaving Elsa, she rushed back to Tabbie to tell her new friend what she’d learned. While she ought to be thrilled, the idea of marrying Lord Whitehouse...

He was several years her senior, older than her father, possibly, and while he’d certainly be able to provide for Abigail, there was a sternness to his house that left her ill at ease. He kept his intentions shrouded, and she had even stricter rules now than

she'd had at her uncle's when she'd been forced to lock the door every evening.

She walked slowly, considering all she knew as she made her way back to Tabbie.

Tabbie's brows lifted the moment Sophie reached her side. "Was blind man's buff that bad?"

Sophie attempted a smile, but she could not hide her concern. "It's not that. Elsa...she said..." Sophie drew in a deep breath. "She said that Lord Whitehouse is interested in courting me."

Tabbie gasped, both hands covering her mouth. Her eyes were wide as she dropped her hands a few inches. "No."

Sophie shook her head. "I know you said that I shouldn't consider titled lords."

"It's not that. If one is willing to take you without dowry, I recommend you accept."

"So why do you look so concerned?" Her fears were growing more intense as her hand settled over her heart.

"Because," Tabbie pulled her even further away from the tables, deeper into the bushes. "He's not a good man."

Sophie shivered, drawing back her chin to look at her friend. "But..." Part of her felt the words, her heart fluttering under her hand at the thought of her life under his thumb. Another part argued that her uncle had taken care of her. This was his associate. "My uncle."

Tabbie's mouth pinched. "That's another oddity. Your uncle wasn't seen in society for thirty years. All of a sudden, he just appears at a ball."

Sophie blinked several times, trying to reconcile all this new information. “Why would he...”

Tabbie’s hand on her arm tightened as Tabbie leaned closer. “I’m worried for you, Sophie.”

She shook her head. “My uncle isn’t an affectionate man, but he’s been a consistent one. Honest. And Lord Whitehouse’s interest has been very...distant.”

Tabbie winced. “I’m not sure how much to tell you. I don’t want to frighten you or lead you astray with rumor, but it’s said that he’s a religious zealot who kills upper-class men based on their perceived morality.”

Sophie gasped her hand clutching at the bodice of her dress. She didn’t want to believe it. Had she fallen into the clutches of a murderer?

“What are you discussing, Lady Tabetha?” Elsa called, eyeing them both.

Sophie snapped her head up, guilt surely coloring her features. “The salmon that you served was exceptional,” she called, a bit of a tremor in her voice. “And the games, Lady Tabetha was just telling me she wished she’d played blind man’s buff with us.”

Elsa’s eyes narrowed. “She should play with us, but Lady Tabetha is neither playful nor can she take a bit of light ribbing.”

Tabbie let out a small cry of indignation as Elsa, nose in the air, passed by them once again.

“Let’s finish this conversation tomorrow over tea,” Sophie squeezed her friend’s hand. She needed to know more but this was hardly the place.

“Good idea,” Tabbie frowned. “I think the shrubs here might have ears.”

* * *

The next day, dressed for tea, Sophie made her way down the foyer. She was eager to see her friend, and even more interested to hear more of what her Tabbie knew about Lord Whitehouse. However, she wasn’t certain what good the information might do. She hardly left the property and certainly not with Abigail. If she was ever left alone, she might chance it.

Still, she’d arm herself with whatever information Tabbie had to give. If there was any way out of this mess, she’d have to come up with a plan, and that required understanding. She reached the foyer, the clap of her boots on the marble floor echoing through the two-story space.

She doubted she’d grow accustomed to this place. While the stained glass and soaring ceilings were beautiful, it all seemed so ostentatious.

“Sophie,” her uncle called from the hall that led to the back stairs.

“Yes, Uncle?”

“Where are you going?” he asked, crossing toward her.

“To see my friend for tea,” she answered, a bit of dread trickling down her spine. “I’ll only be gone a few hours.”

“What makes you think you can do that?”

The trickle was growing stronger. “I thought I was to socialize?”

“You’re not going anywhere. You have lessons.” He frowned at her, his face set in hard lines.

“Oh, but all of our lessons have been about things such as tea and drinks and...”

“I said no. Report to your lessons.”

Tabbie was expecting her. “She’s the daughter of a marquess. It’s a good social connection if I’m to move in?—”

Like lightning, his hand came down across her cheek. She stumbled back, shocked, as pain exploded in her cheek.

“You let me decide what is good for you or not. I told you to go to your lessons, now go.”

Tears misted her eyes as she drew in a ragged breath, her hand coming up to cover the burning-hot skin where he’d slapped her. She didn’t dare argue, but she couldn’t quite get her feet to move either.

“And you’re not to see that troublesome woman anymore, do you hear me?” Uncle Allister’s finger wagged in her face. “Lady Tabetha is neither righteous nor helpful to our cause.”

“Cause?” she whispered. Dark, cold dread curled her shoulders as she struggled to breathe.

“Never mind. Go.” He pointed toward the stairs.

She paused for another moment before she did as she was told and started up the stairs. Once she reached the top and took two steps down the hall. Rather than

reporting to the music room, she leaned against the wall, taking several deep breaths to compose herself.

Her uncle had never been that cruel or that candid. She hardly had a chance to think about it because another voice floated up the stairs.

“How did she respond to the correction?”

Was that Lord Whitehouse?

“Very well,” her uncle answered. “Did as she was told. She did argue once, though.”

“It’s that other woman’s influence, I’m sure of it.”

“Agreed,” her uncle said with a slight huff of breath. “Sophie has been nothing but obedient until this past week.”

“Good. I need a wife who responds to correction, who will heed my way of life without argument.”

Sophie slid down the wall until she sat on the floor, her hands covering her mouth. Had her uncle hit her at Lord Whitehouse’s direction? Why would he do such a thing?

“She’ll be that for you, I’m certain. I’ve never met a more docile female. Chatty at times but...”

“I’ll correct that. Not to worry. It was only your job to observe. Well done, Uncle Allister.”

Both men laughed at the name.

Sophie dropped her face into her skirts to muffle her cries. What was she going to do?

CHAPTER FIVE

Max searched the ballroom, but there was no sign of Sophie. It was the third event he'd been to this week, and he'd not caught a glimpse of her at any of them. Tonight, Ironheart joined him. Max stood silently, observing, scanning the room in the hopes of catching a glimpse of Sophie. Ironheart, however, was anything but silent, and Max's lack of words seemed to only invite the man to speak.

"Do you think she'll attend this one? How many do we have to go to before we give up?" Ironheart barely paused for a breath. "And speaking of giving up, how long do I have to wait tonight until I begin pursuing interests of my own?"

Max looked to the side, glaring at Ironheart. By interests he either meant liquor or women. Those were the only two interests the man possessed. "Stop. Talking."

Ironheart rolled his eyes. "Standing in silence doesn't suit me."

"I sh-shouldn't have b-brought you."

Ironheart shrugged. "Maybe not. But then, how will you ask after your lady?"

"Sh-she's not my lady." Even he could hear that his voice lacked its usual edge. The longer he went without seeing her, the more he wished to. Aside from his worry—and he was worried—he missed her face. It was a good face.

"Then why are we hunting for her? She seems tangential to the investigation at best."

He'd written down his thoughts on the matter, but Ironheart struggled with the written word. Max had a feeling the other man hadn't read the missive. Which was damned difficult. He'd never get an explanation like that out. It took him a long time to speak freely in front of someone, and he didn't trust Ironheart to be kind or patient.

"Excuse me," a feminine voice called from his other side.

He turned to see a lovely red-haired woman standing at his elbow. He was mildly relieved to realize, pretty as she was, he felt no interest in her. Somehow it was comforting to know that all of the walls he'd carefully constructed around his feelings were not falling. That was specific only to Sophie. Not that he could afford to let his guard down with her either. He'd just gone and made himself Lord Whitehouse's target.

He met her gaze, his brows lifting.

She cleared her throat. "Right. You're not one to talk. I'm Lady Tabetha."

"Hello," Ironheart said, grinning while leaning around Max to look at Lady Tabetha. "Pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Save it," the woman huffed. "I know who you are."

Max smiled then, liking her a great deal more already.

Her gaze returned to him. "I'm a friend of Sophie's."

He jerked his chin in acknowledgment, though he'd already known who Lady Tabetha was in relation to Sophie. He'd followed Sophie to Lady Tabetha's home last week.

“We attended a lunch together a few days ago, and she was supposed to visit me the next day, but she never came.”

His brow furrowed. What?

“There’s more,” Lady Tabetha said as she stepped closer. In hushed tones, she explained all she knew about first Lord Whitehouse and then her suspicions about the uncle.

He’d have many of the same concerns, though he hadn’t known that Allister had been a recluse. Who even knew what Allister looked like? Which meant... “Damn it.” His words came out perfectly, without a stutter.

“I’m worried about her,” Lady Tabetha looked up at him with troubled, green eyes. “I don’t know why you danced with her that night, but I have to assume that you know more about Lord Whitehouse than I do. And Sophie said that her uncle was very angry so I can only assume you’re not his friend.”

Lady Tabetha had the right of it on several facts.

“He’s most certainly not,” Ironheart confirmed. “But what is it to us if he marries her? It doesn’t help or hurt our cause either way.”

“I don’t know what your cause is, but it must not be very noble if it involves allowing a lovely young woman’s life to be destroyed.” Lady Tabetha’s chin notched up as she glared at Ironheart.

Max looked over at Ironheart as well, a brow notching. He liked this woman even more for being immune to Ironheart’s charms. Most women stopped paying attention to his character when they saw his face. And secondly, she had both intelligence and spunk. He drew in a breath, saying the next words slowly. “I will keep...” he paused,

“a-an eye o-out.”

His arms crossed, his fists clenching as he straightened up. It was a reflex, to grow more physically intimidating when he revealed his vulnerability.

She didn't seem to notice. “Thank you. I know she'll be in attendance tonight and I'd hope to learn more, but I'm worried they won't allow her a moment alone with me.”

“Tonight?” he asked, hope rising in his chest.

“That's right. She told me at Lady Elsa's luncheon that this was on the list of events she'd attend.” Lady Tabetha scanned the room, craning her neck.

“You're far too short to see anything,” Ironheart grumbled, as though it was a pox upon her to be the height of an average woman.

“And you're likely not smart enough to know when you're seeing something important,” she fired back.

Ironheart cringed, his lips thinning.

Tabetha paused, cocking her head to the side. Then, she let out a small sigh. “I've changed my mind, my lord. Let's dance. Perhaps if we turn about the room, we can find them.”

Silently, Ironheart offered his elbow and the two set off onto the dance floor.

Max used the opportunity to circle the room, watching for Sophie as he stayed on the fringe of the activity. In the candlelight, it was easier to go unnoticed, even with his height, and after nearly a quarter of an hour, he stopped when he recognized Sophie's uncle.

Was Plimpton impersonating a lord? Now that was something that Max could take to the authorities. He crouched down, staying against the wall as he moved closer. He saw Sophie next, standing between two men, neither looking as though they belonged in a ballroom.

She held her hands demurely folded together, her chin level as she stood silently.

Lord Whitehouse stood next to the man to her left. He neither looked at Sophie nor spoke as he stood one person away from her. What he did do was greet a series of men, shaking hands and talking with them as though they were friends. None of them spoke to Sophie. It was strange.

As if she sensed him, Sophie looked over her shoulder, her gaze connecting with his. Her eyes widened and then she snapped her face forward again. She must have alerted the man to her right because he grabbed her elbow and spoke in her ear.

She cringed, her chin dipping, but she nodded as though agreeing. Whitehouse flicked a finger in her direction and the man who had his hand on her arm pulled her away.

Max followed. Naturally.

Ought he have stayed and continued to watch Whitehouse? Probably. Ironheart, annoying as he was, had been right. The original intent of dancing with Sophie had been to send a message to Whitehouse that Max was watching, paying attention, and stepping out into the open. He'd gone to spy on Whitehouse's home to learn more about the man. He'd followed Sophie to Lady Tabettha's because he'd been curious. He hadn't expected her to be there, and he'd wondered how she fit into the puzzle of this investigation.

But he also personally craved information about her.

The man turned down a quiet hall and stopped. “The repose is just that way. Five minutes. No more.”

She nodded again, starting down the hall and disappearing into a door on the right.

For a split second, he debated and then he moved forward, going straight for the man.

“Who are you then?” the guy grumbled, his chest puffing out.

Max, not favoring conversation, answered with a stiff fist to the jaw. He had hands like anvils and the man dropped like a stone.

Max opened the door just to his left and then stuffed the man inside, closing it again.

Pulling at his collar, he walked down the hall, waiting on the other just outside the door of the repose.

Several women came out, eyeing him with skepticism. They then disappeared with quick steps.

Finally, Sophie came out.

She gasped. “What are you doing here, Lord Maxwell?”

Both his brows rose. He had every right to be here.

“How did you find me here and where is the guard?”

“Lady Tabetha told me everything.”

Her face collapsed, her hand coming to her mouth. “I’m so frightened.”

He did something that he'd surely question later. Reaching for her, he pulled her into a hug, pressing her against his length. She folded into him, her body molding to his as her face settled into the juncture of his neck and shoulder.

"What am I going to do?" Her voice broke on the words, and inside he broke a bit too.

Tabetha's words came back to him. What kind of man was he if he didn't protect her? His eyes closed too as he rested his cheek on the top of her head. He hadn't been this close to another person in a long time.

Her heat and softness wrapped about him. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask her to marry him. Take her away from all of it. He hesitated. He didn't open himself like that. What if she became like every other person in his life? Max's father could hardly stand the sight of him, the impairment making him a disgrace to the dukedom.

Besides, he'd put a target on his back. Now was no time to commit himself to anyone.

What if he married Sophie and...

She sniffed and that's when he felt the wetness on his collar. She was crying.

His hands spread out on her back. "T-there must be som-someone who can take you in."

She shook her head. "Uncle Allister was the only person my mother told me about."

She looked at him, then, those large eyes even more beautiful shimmering with tears. "There has to be more."

“Do you think? But how would I find them?”

“Th-there’s a book.” He pushed the words out with only the smallest stutter.

“Do you have it? This book? Could you look? Or we could ask Tabbie? My mother was the daughter of an earl. My Uncle Allister his fourth son. Surely, other people in society will know of her other relatives.”

Of course, they did. An earl’s lineage was well documented. “G-good idea. Tabbie can help.”

She nipped her lip. “I don’t know how much time I have or how I’ll escape, but first things first, I need a place to go.”

The urge to claim her as his own rose again, but his fears stopped him. “C-can you meet me in the park tomorrow?”

She shook her head. “I’m confined to the garden.”

He could work with that. “Time?”

“Afternoon repose. Four or five in the afternoon.”

Good enough. “I’ll see you then.”

“But how?”

“That is for me to worry about.” Reluctantly, he let her go. “Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” she whispered, her arms wrapping around herself. She looked so small and fragile. He stiffened his spine, forcing himself to turn around.

An inner battle raged, and he was afraid either way, he was losing.

CHAPTER SIX

Max rang the Marquess of Shefford's bell, knowing he was inviting trouble.

He only wanted Lady Tabetha's help in researching Sophie's family. However, as the son of a duke, even the second son, calling on the daughter of a marquess was complicated.

The butler opened the door, inviting him in for Lady Tabetha's calling hours. He left his card with the man and then made his way to the sitting room where Lady Tabetha sat alone.

His brows lifted. She was the daughter of a marquess, so she ought to have a room full of friends and admirers. She waved him in, adjusting her shawl.

"Lord Maxwell, nice to see you again."

He gave a quick nod. He nearly asked if he'd come at a bad time, but that would require speaking, and he'd save his words for only the most necessary bits of conversation.

"Are you here to discuss Sophie?"

Another nod.

Tabetha sighed, and then he watched as she undid her shawl. She wore a puffed sleeve day dress with a high neckline. As the silk of the shawl fell away, Max could

clearly see the angry red burns that colored her left arm.

“They’re on my side and chest too,” she murmured. “It’s why no suitors are here.”

His brow furrowed. “S-surely m-many men....”

“Let me save you the words. I’m sure a great deal of men would overlook my scars to gain access to my dowry or my family’s connections, but who wants to be tolerated? Certainly not me.”

He sat down across from her, his jaw loose as he stared into her bright green eyes. She’d said plainly the thought he’d been circling but never quite able to articulate for years. “I don’t seek the company of women.” He was surprised to hear his own voice come out perfectly clear. “Sooner or later, I realize they have only just been t-tolerating my stutter.”

She nodded. “I understand. Just like I understand why you like Sophie. She doesn’t give a fig about my scars. There was no moment of hesitation when I met her, no doubt, no revulsion. She just accepted me. Maybe it’s her past, or perhaps her naturally sunny disposition, but she’s the first person I’ve met since this...” she said, waving her hand down her arm, “happened that I felt liked me without reservation.”

He closed his eyes. Was it true? Could Sophie care for him without reservation? Would he at some point learn that she hated the thing he disliked so much about himself? He had a difficult time believing it was true.

“When did you receive those scars?” he asked, opening his eyes again.

“Two years ago,” she answered, turning her face toward the far wall.

“I’ve stuttered since the age of four. My father found it repulsive, he...” Max

stopped. It didn't discount Tabetha, but how did he explain that his entire childhood he'd known the people who were supposed to love him could hardly stand him? That he was a blight on the family name? It was ingrained deep within him to believe he could not be loved.

She looked back at him. "I understand. I mean, I think I do. But consider this. Help Sophie now, the woman who I know doesn't give a fig about your stutter, and she will be devoted to you. I promise you that."

He nodded again. "She needs to find another relative."

Tabetha's eyes widened. "Right! Why didn't I think of that?" With that she was up, crossing the room. On one side sat an ornate table with a single volume on its surface. He knew it was a history of the great families of England. His childhood home had the same book. He followed, standing just behind her.

"Let's see, her mother is the daughter of the Earl of Wingate."

She slid her down the page, stopping at the earl's name. But a different name caught his notice. "Wait," he rumbled, moving closer. "Does this say that Lord Whitehouse has a son?" His blood ran cold.

"Of course. Lord Cranston."

Max blinked several times. Lord Cranston was a member of the Duke Fraternity. The one man who'd refused to go to the ball. The ball where he knew Lord Whitehouse would be in attendance. "But?—"

"They are estranged. Lord Whitehouse is known for his religious beliefs, and Lord Jameson for his hedonistic tendencies. They haven't spoken in at least a decade, to my knowledge. It must offend Whitehouse greatly that the son, who drinks, gambles,

and whores, will be the next earl.”

Max scrubbed his face with both hands. Two of the seven members were already dead and a third had been attacked.

Max and Ironheart had long suspected that Whitehouse intended to kill them all.

Was it possible that Lord Whitehouse’s motivations were far more personal than he’d imagined? Could this be an elaborate disguise to kill his own son, marry Sophie, and create a new heir? Or just get rid of the club so that he could point his son on the right path again? Why marry Sophie now after years of being without a wife?

“I have to go.”

“Where?” Tabetha asked.

He didn’t know. Should he go to Sophie first or Ironheart? Lord Cranston? He stopped, pulling out his watch. “I promised to meet Sophie in the garden, give her a name.”

“We don’t have one yet.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he shook his head, making his decision. “I’m going to remove her from that house. You find a relative who can care for her.”

Tabetha clapped her hands. “On it.”

Decision made, he strode out the door and back to his waiting carriage. He parked several streets away, slipping through the alleys that led to the earl’s back gate. Then, scaling the wall, he dropped down into the garden.

It was quiet, the only sound was a babbling fountain and the call of birds. He stayed by the wall, and then positioned himself by the back door, hidden behind some bushes. From there he could watch people come and go from the kitchen path.

The day was mild and several of the windows in the house were open. He wasn't certain how long he'd have to wait, so he leaned against the wall, removed his hat, and wiped his brow. He found himself, once again, excessively eager to see Sophie, and to his surprise, Abigail too.

She was a delightful miniature version of Sophie. For the first time in his entire life, he wondered what it might be like to have children. To his utter shock, he smiled at the notion. His breath held in his lungs. His hand shook as he swiped it over his face. What had happened to him? Had he gone from a stone that felt nothing for anyone to daydreaming about babies?

He'd gone mad after all.

The door to the kitchen opened and he craned his neck to see who it might be.

* * *

Sophie wrapped a shawl about her shoulders, preparing to make her way out to the garden. Next to her, Abigail stood, bouncing on her toes. With a shake, Sophie let go of all the worries she'd been carrying all day and tried to focus on this moment. This little trip out to the garden was one of the few opportunities for them to spend time together, and Sophie cherished these moments, as did Abigail. It was some of the only times the child was allowed to simply play.

This was no life for Abigail, despite the amount of wealth that surrounded them, but Sophie had made little progress on how she would remove herself from the situation. She'd not even been allowed out to tea yesterday, and she certainly wasn't allowed to

leave the property with Abigail, that much had already been made clear. She could only hope that Lord Maxwell came and that he had answers.

Giving Abigail's hand a squeeze, she smiled down at her sister. "Ready?"

"Ready," Abigail answered back, her eyes dancing. "Can we sit under the tree with the pink flowers?"

"Of course," Sophie said, lifting her sister and swinging her around. "And we shall tell stories, and?—"

"Sophie," Lord Whitehouse appeared in the kitchen, his stern countenance more severe than usual. "I'd like a word."

Her stomach fluttered with nerves as Abigail tugged on her hand. "Of course, my lord."

"But..." Abigail said, her lip jutting out. "I want?—"

"Quiet, child," Lord Whitehouse said, snapping at the child. Then he gestured toward Abigail. A nanny appeared from behind him, and Sophie's stomach sank. Abigail needed this time.

The nanny took Abigail's hand, tugging her away as Abigail cried loudly.

"I said quiet," Lord Whitehouse said again, taking a step toward Abigail.

Disappointment turned to fear as Sophie took a step forward, holding out her hands. It was one thing for Abigail to be confined by nannies, and quite another to have her yelled at by grown men. "My lord," she said, wanting to explain that the child needed a bit of freedom.

With her quick steps forward, she reached Lord Whitehouse in time for him to bring his hand down hard across her cheek. If she'd thought her uncle's slap had been severe, this one sent stars sparking behind her eyes as she crashed down to her knees on the stone floor.

"You will not argue with me." He grit the words out between his teeth. Then, he had her by the arm, dragging her back up on her feet. "And you will tell me what happened to my guard last night."

Lord Whitehouse had asked at the ball last night when she'd returned to his side alone. When she'd said she didn't know, he'd sent her home with a footman and the remaining guard. "I told you last night, I don't know."

"Liar," he yelled in her face, spraying her skin with spit. "God does not approve of lying, Sophie."

"I'm not lying," she cried, several small broken sobs punctuating the words. "He was right outside the repose when I went in, but when I came out, he was gone."

He shook her. Hard. "And you saw nothing? No one?"

"No." She gasped, knowing this time, she did lie. It wasn't something she did often. She hated it now, but Lord Maxwell felt like her only chance. He was the one person who seemed able to breach the walls Lord Whitehouse had put around her.

"If you're lying and I find out, I shall take your sins out on your sister's skin. Do you hear me?"

Cold, hard dread weighted her limbs. Sophie could endure a great deal, but Abigail was just a child. "No."

“Oh yes,” he said, sneering. “I know that Elsa told you of my plans for you. Obedience will be rewarded, sin punished.” He let her go, her knees giving way so that she slumped back to the floor.

Hot tears tracked down her cheeks, her hands supporting her on the cool stone as she tried to calm her breathing. She had to think. She looked about to find the usually bustling kitchen empty. Had everyone left when Lord Whitehouse entered, or had they gone when he knocked her to the ground? Either way, she knew she’d find no support from the staff.

Her uncle was no ally. Despite all her gratitude, it was becoming obvious that he’d cared for her and Abigail for reasons other than familial duty. She sank until bent in half, she could press her forehead to the cool stone. What was she going to do?

“Sophie.”

She recognized the deep baritone of Lord Maxwell’s voice. She’d protected him just now with Lord Whitehouse. If he couldn’t help her, she courted danger every time they spoke.

“You should go, Lord Maxwell, before you’re seen.”

He crouched down next to her, his hand sliding gently down her back. “Call me, Max.”

That made her lift her chin enough to turn and look at him. “Max. You should go.”

“This w-was because of the guard?”

She nodded even as he brushed his fingers over the swelling skin of her cheek.

“Come right now. Leave. I’ll hide you away.” The fierceness of his gaze might have frightened her, but she understood that his anger was in her defense.

“No.” She shook her head, sitting up, and straightening her spine so that his fingers fell away. “Not without Abigail.”

“Tonight? C-come to the garden.”

Sophie shook her head. “There is a guard outside my room. And if I’m caught—” She shivered. She didn’t need to ask to know what Lord Whitehouse would do to her or Sophie if she were caught trying to escape.

“What floor do you sleep on?”

“Second.”

He frowned. “Too high.”

What was he thinking?

He only leaned closer and, to her complete shock, brushed a kiss over her temple. “Can you have Abigail with you in the evenings?”

“Yes.” Their rooms are connected.

“Be ready. I’ll be back and I will see you both out of this house.”

Then, he was gone.

Sophie stared after him. Did he really think he could? What if he couldn’t? Lord Whitehouse’s wrath frightened her half to death.

What if he could?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Max stood outside Lord Whitehouse's estate, Ironheart and several constables flanking him.

Tension filled his gut, sitting like a weight. He wasn't worried for himself. It was Sophie and Abigail's safety that gave him concern. "You know the plan?" he asked Ironheart.

"Crystal clear." The other man nodded. "You're certain about your part?"

"She can't stay here," he replied. "If I don't return tonight..."

"I'm to find another way to remove her. Understood." For once, Ironheart neither smiled nor joked. He looked deadly serious.

With a few quick huffs of breath, Max melted into the dark, finding his way to the back door of the garden, which was now locked. No matter. Scaling the wall, he dropped to the soft earth, cocking his head to listen. It was a large garden, with many sections. Guards could be anywhere, but as he circled the perimeter, he was fairly certain there were only two by the kitchen door.

One had a cheroot in his mouth, the bit of light from it making him easy to spot. The other stood next to him, a short sword held loosely in his grip. "Seems like a lot of trouble for a couple of orphans."

"It's not them he's worried about," the other answered. "Some lord is fighting him

hard.”

“How do ye know that?”

“Heard it,” the second answered.

Max grinned into the dark. He was the lord, and provided nothing happened to Sophie, he was going to enjoy this evening. Creeping through the shadow, he reached the men before they had any idea he was there. He didn’t even bother with his weapon. Plucking the sword from the second guard’s hand, he hit him hard with the handle, sending him crashing to the ground.

The other’s cheroot fell from his mouth as he made a lunge for Max, but a stiff fist to the nose sent the man crashing to the ground. Working quickly, he pulled out some rope from his satchel and tied them both. He couldn’t have them giving him a hard time on the way back out.

He slid the kitchen door open, waiting until the maid had gone, and the cook’s back was turned away before he slid through the door. Stepping into the kitchen, he ducked into the butler’s pantry, immediately meeting a footman.

“Shh,” he whispered as he pressed the blade to the man’s throat.

The man’s eyes went wide as he held up his hands. “Please, sir.”

“Sophie,” he muttered, pressing the blade a bit deeper into the man’s skin. Then, he pointed.

The other man gave the tiniest nod as Max pushed him forward.

Max heard the front bell echo through the foyer. Ironheart had arrived with the

constables. Good.

The footman led him up to the first floor and started down the hall. With his eyes narrowed, he grabbed the man's collar, yanking him back, and pressing the sword to his throat again. "Wrong."

"Please," the men begged. "I just got confused. I?—"

Max knew Sophie was on the second floor, just as he knew this man lied. This time he pressed hard enough to draw blood. "Lie again and you will die."

"All right," the other man whimpered. "Please. It's one more floor."

"Tell me where," he said even as he pushed the man forward.

"Third door on the left, but there are guards," the other man hissed. "They'll kill us both."

They started up the stairs, but just as they reached the top, Max used the handle of the short sword on the back of the man's head. Catching him in his arms, he laid him softly on the floor. Then, still hidden in the stairwell, he glanced down the hall. The two men leaned on either side of the door, one looking as though he might fall asleep at any moment.

For a second, Max considered his options. Then, looking down at the still footman, he gave him a push with his foot, sending the footman back down the spiral stairs. Pressing himself to the wall, both guards came charging into the stairwell. In short order, he knocked them both out.

Racing to Sophie's door, he unclicked the heavy lock that had been placed upon it.

Sophie stood just on the other side, Abigail in her arms. Both wore a look of shock and fear, but he didn't have time to comfort them.

Grabbing Sophie's hand, he pulled her into the hall. "Come on."

He started down the hall, half dragging Sophie behind. He was stronger in every metric, and she carried a child. With a small rumble, he reached back and plucked Abigail from her arms. "We need to move quickly."

Abigail squawked but Sophie softly murmured, "Hush," as they went down the stairs.

He could hear the loud voices of men arguing, and he knew that Ironheart was doing his job. He was the distraction, and by the time he was done, Plimpton would be in custody. The man had been impersonating a lord, and that was not an offense taken lightly.

By drawing out the arrest for as long as possible, Ironheart was giving him a chance to escape with Sophie. Max might have tried to have the constables remove her. If Plimpton wasn't her uncle, she would have been there under false pretense. But Max hadn't wanted to risk it. Lord Whitehouse might have insisted she wasn't in the house and the constables would have to be made of stern stuff to demand a search.

Max hadn't wanted to chance it.

As they reentered the kitchen, a maid caught sight of them and let out a blood-curdling scream.

"Damn it," he muttered even as he pulled Sophie toward the door.

Dashing out into the darkness, he followed the garden wall, even as the shouts of several footmen filled the night.

His breath shot out of his chest as he laid eyes on the garden door. He knew it was locked, and the wood slats were thick, the hinges large. He could try to kick it down. Shaking his head, he stopped, lifting the child to set her atop the six-foot wall.

“Come now,” he said, grabbing Sophie’s waist and lifting her.

She weighed far more than he’d imagined, and he grunted with the effort to lift her up past his shoulders.

“Sorry about that,” she whispered back, even as the voices of the men searching for them grew louder.

He set her on the wall and heaved himself up and over. Then he reached up his arms. “Abigail first.”

Sophie reached for the girl, handing her down to him. He set her just to his right and then she jumped into arms.

That’s when he felt it. Her dress was like a knight’s armor. Heavy and filled with metal. “What the...”

“I’ll explain later.”

With a nod, he picked up Abigail and took Sophie’s hand. They dashed to his carriage at the end of the alley. He heard the shouts, and looking back, he saw several men pouring from the gate and coming over the wall. Moving faster, he pulled a stumbling Sophie behind him. The men pressed closer, and it was a race to make it to the carriage in time.

“Get ready,” he shouted at his driver.

That's when from behind them, a shot rang out in the night.

He felt Sophie jolt. Stumble.

His eyes grew wide as she nearly fell. Wrapping an arm around her, he dragged her against him, carrying them both the final steps to the carriage as he set Abigail down and then hopped inside with Sophie. "Go, damn it, go!"

The driver snapped the reins, and the carriage jerked to a start even as another shot rang out in the night. He barely heard the sound as he sat on the floor between the seats, Sophie tight in his arms. Had she been hit?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sophie slumped against Max, her lungs feeling as though they were on fire, her ribs aching.

“Sophie,” Max growled. “Tell me where it hurts.”

“My...my back.”

She heard the distant sound of her dress tearing, but she was focused on breathing in and out. With each breath, the pain receded a bit more. That’s when the cool air fanned her shoulders. She burrowed down deeper into Max’s lap, her face once again, nestled into the crook of his neck.

“Sophie,” he said, his voice achingly gentle. “I’m just going to move you so that I can look at your back.”

“It doesn’t hurt so much,” she said into the collar of his shirt. “I think I’m all right.”

With his arm curled around her body, his other hand searched her skin. He stopped when she winced in pain, her skin clearly cut. “But...”

Next, he was pulling at the fabric of her bodice. “What the hell is in this thing?”

“Coin,” she answered. “Everything I’ve been able to save.”

“Christ,” he muttered, twisting the bodice in his hand. “I think the bullet caught a

coin.”

“What?” she sat up then. “I was shot?”

That made him chuckle. “Technically, no.” He wrapped both arms around her, squeezing her tightly to his chest.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, the inside of her biceps brushing the stubble of his chin. The rough skin felt delicious, and she pressed her cheek to the other side of his jaw, rubbing her face against him.

“Sophie?” Abigail asked, her voice wobbling with her fear.

“Come here, love,” Sophie crooned, and then, somehow, Abigail wormed her way between them, pressing into the middle of their embrace.

For a moment, Sophie wondered how Max might respond to a child joining their embrace. He’d already saved Abigail, she didn’t expect him to give the child affection. However, he kept his arms around them both, holding them tightly. Sophie’s heart swelled in her chest. What would she give to call a man like this her own? Had she really thought him frightening? He was the best man she’d ever met.

She curled around Abigail, resting her forehead on his collarbone. “Max?”

“Yes.”

“Where are we going?”

“The Duke of Ironheart’s home.”

“Who is he?”

“A friend,” he said, grimacing. “With an army of footmen and the social sway to stay an earl.”

“I don’t think Lord Whitehouse follows normal rules,” she whispered. None of these men did. Max had removed her from an earl’s home without much bother. Much as she’d like to think she was safe now, what was stopping the earl from stealing her right back?

Max seemed to understand. “I’ll get you out of London as soon as I know where to take you. Lady Tabetha is searching for relatives now.”

“Tabbie helped you?” Her heart swelled to think of having friends who’d come to her aid.

“Yes.”

She heard the creaking swing of large metal gates as the carriage slowed. They moved through the gates, the metal clanking behind them as the gate closed again.

She swallowed down a lump. She wasn’t certain she wanted to go anywhere that Max wasn’t. “You’re certain that Ironheart can be trusted?”

“Yes.” He gave her another squeeze. “But I’ll stay too.”

“Thank goodness.” She sighed. She didn’t say more because she felt him stiffen underneath her.

Had she given away too much? Put some sort of pressure on him? She was a woman with no social connection, little money, and no family other than a child who needed to be cared for. In the best of circumstances, Max would never be hers. She hadn’t meant it like that. She just felt safe with him nearby.

The carriage came to a stop as they attempted to untangle themselves from the floor of the carriage. Once they'd all managed to climb out, Sophie realized the bodice of her gown was hanging off one shoulder, completely in tatters.

Her face flamed as they walked past several assembled servants, but Max looked completely at ease. "Doctor," he said to the most matronly of the women, likely the housekeeper.

"Yes, my lord." She curtsied. "Right away."

"My lord," a man stepped forward. "What happened?"

"Bullet," Max said, pointing toward her back. In the carriage, he'd spoken full, unbroken sentences.

Now, while he wasn't stuttering, he only spoke a word at a time.

The butler stepped around her, assessing her skin. "A scratch."

"Feel...her...dress," Max said the three words slowly.

The butler pulled the fabric away from her skin and she heard him gasp as he tugged, dislodging a bullet and a coin. He dropped them both into her hand.

She shook her head. She'd sewn the coins into the gown for protection. She'd just never considered that it would be that kind of protection. "Unbelievable."

Max pulled her close again, his arms wrapping around her in front of the entire staff. Then he whispered in her ear. "I still want you to be seen by a doctor."

She swallowed. "All right."

“Let me show you to your rooms,” a maid said as she bobbed a curtsy. “The child must be tired. Or is she hungry?”

“Just tired,” Sophie answered, but then she touched Max’s arm. “Will you be close?”

“I’ll be close.”

An hour later, Sophie had been seen by a doctor, and she’d settled Abigail into a large canopied bed. A second had been brought in, smaller, likely meant for Abigail, but Sophie knew she’d sleep with her sister in her arms tonight. She was relieved to know that Max had been placed in the connecting room. It was surely meant for married guests, but tonight she couldn’t give a fig about propriety. She just wanted to be safe.

Max opened the door between the rooms. “Everything all right?”

“I’m fine,” she said, getting up from the spot on the bed to cross to him. She wore one of Ironheart’s dressing gowns, her body swimming in the folds. “You?”

“Good,” he answered, his eyes sliding down her body as he frowned. “Worried about you.”

“I’m good,” she said, stopping in front of him. “I’m no longer at the mercy of my uncle or Lord Whitehouse.”

“He isn’t your uncle.”

Sophie blinked several times. “I beg your pardon?”

Max reached out and pulled her into his arms. “He isn’t your uncle. His name is Plimpton, and he’s been part of Whitehouse’s organization for many years.”

“That can’t be true. He was at my uncle’s address, he...”

“I have no idea what happened to your real uncle. I’ve only been investigating Whitehouse for a few months, but at some point, Plimpton moved into the house and assumed your uncle’s identity.”

Details began to click into place in her mind, but she still wasn’t certain she wanted to believe it. The very fact that she’d placed her and Abigail’s care into the hands of an imposter jolted her. “If you’ve only been investigating for a few months, how do you know he’s not my uncle?” Her breath was coming out in rapid little huffs as her blood rushed in her ears.

Max gently pulled her closer. “I knew Plimpton before. He and I traveled in the same circle.”

“What circle?”

Max’s face spasmed as he looked away. “I don’t think it’s important...”

“I want to know.” She tapped his shoulder. “Tell me everything.

* * *

Telling long stories was not exactly his specialty. He said more to Sophie than he’d spoken to anyone else in actual years. But this was different. First, it would all frighten her. Even worse, if his stutter didn’t frighten her off, his past certainly would, or perhaps, that was his present.

“I don’t even know where to begin.”

“At the beginning.”

They might as well sit. Lifting her into his arms, he started for the armchair that sat in the corner near the fire. Settling in, he held her in his lap. “My father and I don’t like each other. He hated my stutter, and I hated him.”

Sophie frowned, her large eyes holding his. “How awful.”

“When I was of age, he sent me to the military. I hated it. He thought the discipline would cure me, but it only made me angrier, and more reserved. That’s where I met Plimpton.”

“That explains his anger that first night at the ball. He knew you’d recognize him.”

“I’m sure.” Max sighed. “Rather than staying in the military, I came home and started a life outside my father’s influence.”

She nodded. “That makes sense.”

He frowned. “The position I took was for a group of titled lords who run a secret club. Only I know their identities, and only I know every detail of the group. Which is how I know that Lord Whitehouse is responsible for the death of two of our members and that his son is among our roster.”

“Death?” Her hands tightened on his biceps. “Why?”

“I’m still working on that. I know that Lord Whitehouse’s men move a great deal of goods that have not been taxed. He uses the funds to support his cause of making England a more m-moral...” He tripped on that one word. He’d heard it often as a child. His father had been convinced that if Max were pure of soul, he’d not be so damaged.

“He wants to make England more moral by killing people?” Sophie snorted. “How

ridiculous.”

He relaxed. “He thinks our club is what’s wrong with England. Powerful men behaving badly.”

Sophie shook her head. “Few know better than me who is really the villain of this story.”

He spread his hands over her back, wishing he could strip Ironheart’s dressing coat off her. She should be wearing his clothing, not some other man’s. He shook off the thought as he focused on the story.

“Regardless, because our ranks are secret, I couldn’t just go to the police. So, I exposed myself to Whitehouse to try and bait him into action. I’ve put myself in his direct line of fire.”

Sophie’s eyes widened. “Oh. I see.”

She didn’t see it all. Not yet. “I’ll have to send you somewhere, Sophie. You’re not safe with me.”

“What?”

“I’ve made myself the bait.”

“No,” she shook her head, her hands sliding up his neck. “I am safest with you, Max.”

His lips pressed together, Tabbie’s words coming back to him. Sophie was the kind of woman who’d give all of herself to him without reservation. No qualifications. Why did he have to meet her now?

He dropped his forehead down to hers. “I want you to stay too. I care about you, Sophie, which is why...” She needed to go.

Her hands fluttered from his neck to his jaw, her small fingers holding onto him like he was a lifeline.

Tipping her chin up to his, he pressed his mouth to hers, her mouth just as soft as the rest of her. He pulled back for a moment, drinking in the sight of her eyes closed, a blush upon her cheeks, her lips softly parted before he kissed her again. And again, deeper, longer. He couldn't remember kissing a woman like this. It wasn't just lust, and he had no reservations. What he'd not realized was that the connection between them grew stronger in an instant.

He tightened his arms about her, needing her closer still as he kissed her over and over. Sophie belonged in his arms, in the circle of his protection, and that's where she was going to stay.

He needed a plan. He'd gone too far in baiting Whitehouse to back out now. So whatever plan he chose, he knew one thing for certain.

He had to win.

CHAPTER NINE

Sophie woke to the morning sun pouring in through the windows. She pushed herself up, rubbing her eyes. Abigail was still asleep next to her, and as she dropped her hand, she saw Max asleep in the same armchair they'd slept in together the night before.

His powerful legs were spread wide, the muscles visible under his breeches. His cravat was undone, revealing the thick cords of his neck. Even relaxed, the strong lines of his jaw stole her breath, the only soft thing about him was the fullness of his lips.

She'd felt those lips last night. Kissing him had been more profound than anything she'd ever known. He'd told her that he had to send her away for her protection, but in his arms was where she wished to be.

She looked over at Abigail and sighed. It wasn't just about her. If it was, she'd risk nearly anything, but she had to think of her little sister. She wiped a hand across her forehead, and then slipped out of the covers, crossing to the small dressing table near the window. On it sat a bowl and a pitcher of water. She poured water into the bowl, splashing her face.

"Get some sleep?" Max asked from behind her.

"More than you, I'd wager."

She heard him rise, crossing the room. He stopped a few feet behind her. "I slept just

fine. Better knowing that I was in the same room so that...”

He didn’t finish and she turned to face him. That was when she realized she was in nothing but her thin chemise. His eyes traveled down her body, his shoulders growing broader, his spine straightening.

Color filled her cheeks. “Thank you for that.”

“How’s your back?”

“Fine,” she shook her head. “I can’t believe?—”

“Sophie,” he said. “You were nearly shot last night. I need you and Abigail?—”

“I know,” she whispered. “I know.”

He closed the distance between them. “As soon as this is all over, I’ll come for you.”

“Come where? I’ve nowhere to go.”

“We’re going to decide where we can send you today. Ironheart will help us.”

She gave a tentative nod.

An hour later, she made her way downstairs, in a gown borrowed from one of the staff, to the breakfast room. Max and the Duke of Ironheart already sat at the table deep in conversation. She stopped at the door, her hands folding in front of her stomach. She’d been like a leaf in the wind of late. As she faced another dining room, another place, she had the keenest desire to settle down somewhere on solid earth.

“Sophie.” Max rose from his seat, stepping around the table and coming to take her

hand. “May I introduce the Duke of Ironheart?”

He tucked her hand into the crook of his arm as she dipped into a curtsy. “Your Grace.”

The duke waved his hand. “Just Ironheart will do. Come eat. You must be famished.” He hardly looked at Sophie. His gaze was on Max, and the question in his eyes was clear.

Max helped her into a chair and then crossed to the buffet, heaping a plate full of food that he then set in front of her. “Thank you.”

Despite everything, she smiled. The plate held three times the amount of food she could consume.

“You’re welcome.”

“I’ve got a question,” Ironheart asked as she took her first bite. “What happened to your stutter?”

“W-what?” Max took his seat again, glaring.

“How come you don’t stutter when you talk to her?” Ironheart didn’t seem the least perturbed by asking such a personal question.

Sophie’s brows lifted as she set her fork down. Max had gone from not talking at all, to telling her whole stories without a bother.

“M-mind your business.”

“Not this time, big man,” Ironheart sat back on his chair. “We’re all in this together.”

“He’s excessively annoying,” Max said, looking at her.

She nipped at her lip. “I must confess that I’m also curious.”

Max let out a long breath. Then he shrugged. “I don’t feel judged by you.”

“Judged?”

“You like me, even though…” he pointed at his mouth.

“Max,” her heart hammered in her chest, but she knew she had to say the next words. “I don’t just like you.”

Ironheart cleared his throat even as Max’s eyes grew wide. “Max said we need a place to send you where you’ll be safe.”

She nodded tentatively. “I know Max sees it clearly, but I feel less sure.”

“What are you unsure of?” Ironheart leaned forward. His blond hair caught the morning light. He was a handsome man, Sophie could see that. She much preferred the kind of muscles that looked as though they could hold up the whole world.

“Whether I’m safest somewhere else or at Max’s side.” She glanced at Max, knowing that she was going way out on a limb.

He’d not made her any promises other than that he’d come for her when the business with Lord Whitehouse was all done. He’d promised to find a relative. For the first time since the death of her mother, Sophie thought she might know where she belonged.

“I agree,” Ironheart said.

“But Whitehouse,” Max cut them both off. “He knows who I am.”

Ironheart nodded. “True. But first question first. Do you more than like Sophie?”

“Ironheart.” His voice came out like a growl as his hands fisted on the table.

Sophie touched the back of one of them, her bare fingers trailing on his skin. “I’d like to know too. Do you care for me the way I do you?”

* * *

The question had a very simple answer.

Yes.

He cared for her more than he ever had any other person. He knew he was in love. However, the circumstances were anything but simple. “Sophie.”

He watched her face fall. Tucking her chin down into her chest, her shoulders curled in. He leaned closer, his hand coming to her back. “Sophie. I can’t just?—”

She shook her head. “I never asked my uncle, Plimpton, a single thing. I was afraid to put any pressure on him, my situation was so precarious.”

A lump formed deep in his chest. He understood. She’d spoken up and asked the question because she trusted him. If he didn’t give her answers, he’d lose that trust. “I care very much.”

Her chin snapped up, her eyes filled with hope. “Really?”

“Which is why I’m trying to protect you.”

She nipped at her lip. "I've been alone for so long. And I try to be strong for Abigail, but I don't want to go anywhere. Not now."

The words pierced deep into his heart. Every part of him wanted to wrap her in the protection he knew she craved. "I told you last night. I've made myself the target. As long as you're with me, you're not safe."

"I'm already a target too."

"Which makes it easy for him to come at both of us."

"But what if he finds me and you're not there?" Her voice trembled. She shook her head. "No. You're right."

"I am?"

"Yes. You've given me enough. More than I've any right to receive, and it's unfair of me to ask more."

Unfair of her to ask more? He shook his head. "Woman. Ask."

She cocked her head to the side. "No. You're right. You have your duties, your plans. You've already rescued me, which was not your obligation at all. I...I can't repay you for what you've done."

"You can repay me by loving me for who I am and not the man the world wishes I was."

"But I do love you. Just the way you are." Her large brown eyes implored him to believe her.

He reached for her hand then, lacing their fingers together. Still holding her hand, he looked back at Ironheart. "I'm leaving London."

"I know." Ironheart nodded.

"That leaves you with all the worst work."

Ironheart sat back in his chair. "I suppose. Though, you're the man who holds all the information. Which is why you shouldn't tell me where you're going or who the members are. I'll cease all activities of the club. Which will be simple without the Summoner to summon them."

"You should go to the new police. Tell them everything we've learned."

"Good idea." Ironheart scratched his chin. "And then perhaps I should leave London as well."

"You're worried about Lord Whitehouse?"

Ironheart shrugged. "I'm not scared of the man or his beliefs. But the excessive number of thugs he keeps about him does propose a concern. I'd like to know for certain how many of them there are. Without understanding the scope of the threat, I dare not move around London freely."

Ironheart was right, and, when not drunk, quite smart. Max gave him a quick nod of appreciation.

"I'd like to find a way to safely get word to Tabbie. I know I can't just go calling, but I want her to know I'm safe," Sophie said.

"And we need to know if she's found any relatives," Max said, but sending her off to

some distant relative was becoming the plan behind the plan. If he could help it, he wouldn't send Sophie or Abigail anywhere.

They'd remain at his side unless something happened to him. He filled his lungs with air. "Today we need to get word to Tabbie, see what we can observe of Lord Whitehouse, though I've been trying with limited success. I think it might be time to see what we can learn from Lord Cranston about his father."

Ironheart tipped his chin in acknowledgment. "Good thinking."

He rose then, knowing he had another assignment. He had to collect any funds he had available. Should the worst happen, he'd leave Sophie with enough money to see herself settled wherever she chose, be that with some distant aunt or on her own. Besides, a dress lined with coins had been a lifesaver.

He only hoped they wouldn't need such measures again, but on that account, he wasn't holding much hope.

CHAPTER TEN

Max sent his carriage out with a footman posing as him. A half-hour later, he came back. “Followed?” he asked.

“Yes.”

Max drew in a deep breath. Lord Whitehouse knew they were here. It was noon, and part of him thought he ought to wait until dark, but he had a great deal of business to attend. Moving through Ironheart’s garden, Max slipped out through the back gate, traversing several alleys before he came to a main thoroughfare and hailed a hack.

His first stop was Lady Tabetha’s. He didn’t call upon her. Instead, he skirted around back, entering the kitchen. At this time of day, deliveries were being brought in, and the kitchen was the busiest room in the house. He recognized the butler from his first visit. The man sat in his small office just off the kitchen recording the deliveries and paying vendors.

Max waved to him, and the other man’s eyes lit up with recognition. “My lord. What brings you here?”

Max grimaced as he handed the note to the butler, Sophie’s feminine scroll decorating the front. “From Miss Wren.”

The man nodded, his eyes holding questions that he was well-trained enough not to ask. “I’ll see Lady Tabetha receives this post haste.”

Max nodded and turned to leave.

His next stop was home, where he collected every spare coin he could muster. He'd paid for the townhouse outright with his earnings from his time in the military. He could surely sell for a profit now. That was a problem for another time. He grabbed the deed from his safe. If Whitehouse killed him, Sophie would need it.

Drawing in a breath, he looked around his simple home. He felt little affection for the place. It had served him, but if he didn't come back, he wouldn't miss it. With a salute, he turned and left, staying in the shadows.

Then he made his way to his final errand—Lord Cranston.

Max knew the property well enough, as he'd been here many times before delivering messages for the club. He donned his mask and rang the bell at the front door. While he'd already revealed his identity to everyone in the club, he wanted to appear as though he was there on club business, which he supposed he was. Investigating Lord Whitehouse had been for the benefit of the Duke Fraternity, even if his investigation was decidedly more personal now.

He stood on the steps waiting for a minute and then two. He rang the bell again, and that's when he noticed the curtain next to the window flutter.

"Open up, Cranston," he said. The curtain dropped and a moment later, the door opened.

"You spoke," Cranston murmured as he appeared at the door, waving Max in. "I didn't know."

Max shook his head. He had spoken and he was honestly as surprised as Cranston. He hadn't even thought about it, but he'd had multiple, albeit short, conversations with

multiple strangers.

When had he become this man? He knew it was because of Sophie. Her acceptance helped him relax and be more comfortable speaking, and doing so clearly and without his stutter.

“I need to speak with you about your father.”

Cranston shivered. “Must we?”

“Yes.”

“What do you wish to know?” Cranston turned and led him through the house. The curtains were drawn in every window, and no fires were lit in any of the grates. Some of the furniture was covered, and other pieces were layered with dust. It looked like the man hardly lived there. Cranston turned into a back study. A fire burned there, and the furniture was uncovered and free of dust. It was the only room in the house that looked inhabited.

Cranston sat in one of the armchairs, gesturing for him to take the other. “It’s good that you came.”

Max’s brows lifted at the marked change in attitude.

Cranston rose again, moving to his desk and pulling out a folder. “My childhood had little joy, as you can imagine. My father insisted that his children live righteously, and he was generous with the whip when we failed.”

Max grimaced. He knew about stern fathers.

“My mother died when I was eight. Banged her head falling down the stairs, they

said. I never believed it, not even at eight. I'd heard the arguing right before it happened. I knew the truth."

Max sat up, his fingers gripping the arm of the chair. It was possible the woman had fallen while trying to escape her husband.

"My little sister was next. Tipped off a balcony."

Max's jaw grew granite hard as he thought of little Abigail being in that man's house.

"And then when I was sixteen, my younger brother fell from his horse. I was already at school, of course, and rarely went home. It ate at me. He was just twelve and I should have been there." Cranston handed Max the file. "I've been a coward, I know it. I'm only alive because I was his heir, but I think..." Cranston tapered off, looking into the fire. "I know the killings were meant to send me a message."

Or to disguise his son's murder, or a bid to eliminate the club? Perhaps it was all of the above. "I'm trying to s-stop him. Any advice?"

Cranston nodded. Standing again, he crossed to the desk, pulled a pen from its inkwell, and scratched it across a piece of vellum.

Then, dusting it, he handed it to Max. "The address of his warehouse."

Max took the paper, not folding it so the ink could dry.

This was the clue he'd been waiting for.

* * *

Sophie paced the library, trying to calm her fears. Max had been gone for a long time.

He ought to have returned by now. Ironheart had attempted to comfort her multiple times but had given up and now sat by the fire, sipping at a drink.

After making her hundredth pass, he loudly cleared his throat. “Come. Sit.”

“My apologies, my lord. I?—”

“Sophie. It’s Ironheart. Or Caden, if you’d like to get very comfortable.”

“Caden? Unusual name...”

“Yes. It’s a good story, and I’ll tell it to you if you come sit.”

She sighed as she walked over to him, perching on the edge of the chair, her hands clasped.

Ironheart assessed her for a moment and then stood, pouring a second glass of the amber liquid. He returned, handing one to her.

“Oh, thank you, but I don’t...”

“Today you do. Drink.” He sat back down in his chair.

She took a sip of the liquid. It managed to be both sweet and burn her throat at the same time. Choking it down, she made to set her glass aside, but Ironheart held up a hand to stop her.

“More.”

“But, my...Ironheart...it tastes awful.”

He laughed then and she found herself returning a small smile before she covered it by taking another tiny sip. “It will help you relax and endure the waiting.”

“I think I’d rather pace,” she muttered, but she took a tiny bit more, the warmth of it sliding down her throat.

“I’d rather you join me in drinking.” He set his glass aside, rubbing the spot between his eyes.

She set hers on the table between them as well. “I don’t mean to add to your fear. I just...”

“You’re worried. I am too. I actually like that big lug.” He picked up his glass again and took a healthy swallow. “But as neither of us is with him, there is nothing to do but pass the time while we wait.”

He was right, which is why she relaxed back into her chair, picking up her glass again. “You said you had a story for me, Caden?”

He gave her a wink then, the half-smile curling his lips sin incarnate. This man must have his choice of women. Not that it had much effect on her. Her heart firmly belonged to Max. If something happened to him, she didn’t know how she’d go on. She’d have to, for the sake of Abigail, but the idea of marrying another man left her hollow and empty. Then again, they had no formal promise, just an admittance of feelings. It all unsettled her.

“So, the story of my name. Let’s see. First, it’s an important detail to know that I had an older brother. I was never supposed to be the duke.”

She gasped, her hand coming to her chest. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

He waved his hand. "I hardly knew him. I was a toddler when he died. But my mother, hating my father, and having delivered an heir, set about having a very public affair with a known rake and philanderer by the name of Thomas Caden."

The glass paused halfway to her lips, her eyes going wide. "Oh, Ironheart."

"Might as well call me Caden, we're in it now." He smiled, but the expression held no joy.

"She gave me the name to rub my father's nose in it, I'm certain. But it all fell apart when the real heir died, and they were left with me. A bastard who was inferior in every way except for the part where I managed to keep living."

Her heart ached for him. She took another sip, noticing that her limbs were relaxing. "Life does like to present its challenges, doesn't it?"

"It surely does." He sighed. "I know you care for Max."

"I do."

He gave a small jerk of his chin. "But if the worst happens, I'll see you settled, Sophie."

"Thank you, Caden."

"Caden?" Max rumbled from the doorway.

She nearly spilled the glass in her haste to set it on the table, and then, lifting her skirts, she ran toward him, vaulting herself into his arms. "You're unharmed."

He caught her, settling her close to his body, his nose settling into her hair. "I'm

here.”

“Thank goodness.” Her feet dangled off the ground, her arms about him as he squeezed her tight to his chest.

Finally, he lowered her to the floor, easing back far enough to look down into her eyes. “I have to go out again.”

She sucked in a breath, her heart aching. She didn’t wish him gone from her side any more today, or tomorrow, or the next day for that matter. But she had no claim to make such demands. Her face, however, surely betrayed her, because he leaned down, pressing his forehead to hers. “I’ll be safe.”

“Please don’t go.” She couldn’t quite hold back the words.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” he whispered before he eased back.

Then he crossed to Ironheart, and taking her glass, downed most of the liquid in a single swallow. She stood by the door, one hand holding her other elbow as she tried to control her feelings.

“Where are you going?” Ironheart asked, with a tip of his glass.

“Cranston gave me the address of a warehouse. I’m going to investigate.”

Ironheart pushed out of his chair. “I’ll go with you.”

Her breath caught. She knew Max had only found her because he was investigating Lord Whitehouse, but watching him put himself in danger was too much. Tears welled in her eyes. Max and Ironheart came toward her. Her breath stuttered as she drew it in, trying to think of the words that might sway him.

He stopped in front of her, and reaching into his overcoat, he pulled out a hefty bag of coins.

“What is that?”

He reached for her hand, pulling it toward him, and placed the bag in her palm.

Then, he let go, and reached into another pocket, pulling out a sheet of paper.

“It’s the deed to my townhouse,” he said, holding her gaze. “Sell it or live in it.”

Her mouth hung open. This was...it was...she just... “Max?”

“I will be back. We’ll talk then.” With a kiss on her forehead, he was out the door.

She stood there, overwhelmed with emotion. Fear, gratitude, and love vied in her chest as she stared down at the gifts he’d bestowed upon her.

“Please come back,” she whispered into the empty room. She sank to her knees to pray.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The sun had nearly left the sky when Max and Ironheart arrived at the address Cranston had given him. Though the place looked deserted, Max had the carriage take them to the end of the lane before he and Ironheart exited and doubled back.

“What are we doing here exactly?” Ironheart asked as Max tested one of the side doors. It was locked tight.

“Looking for clues,” he said, climbing up onto a crate to look into a window.

“What sort of clues?” Ironheart climbed up too, despite his incredulous tone.

Max didn’t dignify the question with an answer. As he peered at the multitude of goods that filled the enormous space, a weight settled in the pit of his stomach. Whitehouse had resources beyond his wildest imagination. Hundreds if not thousands of wooden crates filled the space, but just as much sat loose, stacked in neat piles and rows. What would he find in those boxes?

Just as he thought he might try to sneak in once again, he heard a noise at the front of the warehouse. The large doors at the front opened, flooding the space with the light of the setting sun. Four men went about the room lighting candles, as man upon man filed in, carrying more goods and boxes.

“Christ,” Ironheart muttered. “He’s got more assets than the queen.”

Max made note of that comment. These men were loading in the twilight when the

docks had quieted because they were operating outside the law. He was certain of that, which was a point that might work in their favor. Then again, with this amount of money, almost anything was possible, and laws were frequently overlooked.

The sheer volume of men who came in and out of the massive space overwhelmed Max. Were there fifty of them? Seventy? More than he could ever fight. He'd been able to take Sophie because he'd used the element of surprise, but he'd be unlikely to use that element again.

He zeroed in on one, his muscles turning to granite. It was Plimpton. "How is he out of prison already?"

"Fuck," Ironheart said under his breath. "Think he broke out?"

"Of the Tower? In a day?"

"Do you see Whitehouse?"

"No," Max shook his head. "You?"

"No." Ironheart cursed again. "I can go to the queen, and take his goods, but it would be better if I could say I'd seen him here."

"Even that isn't a guarantee if he offers her enough money."

Max was still impressed that Ironheart had that kind of moral compass in which he didn't want to lie. Over the last several days, Ironheart had hardly had anything to drink, and he'd been a good leader and friend. Max liked this side of Ironheart much better. However, this was one moment he might be willing to lie. Whitehouse deserved prison.

They stayed for another hour until all the goods had been loaded in and most of the men had filtered out. Sliding off the crate, Max crept along the side of the building to try and listen to their conversation as they parted. Peeking around the edge, he was just in time to hear Plimpton say to the three men who stood with him. “Night after tomorrow. That’s when deliveries will go out. Don’t be late.”

Max ducked behind the building. If they were going to catch Whitehouse, two nights from now might be their chance. Then again, he might be in this far too deeply. His next visit would help him decide. Slipping through the alleys, he made his way back to his carriage, Ironheart was right behind him. They didn’t speak until they were in the carriage.

“What are you thinking?”

“That we need to speak to Plimpton’s arresting constable. How is he out of prison already?”

“Good question.” Ironheart nodded. “Did Cranston give you any other good bits?”

“Nothing we can use,” Max thought of the man’s words about his family. He was never more thankful that he’d removed Sophie and Abigail. If that was his one chance to make a move on Whitehouse, he was glad that was the one he’d chosen. Whatever happened next, he’d made the right choice, and he was eager to return to them both.

They arrived at 4 Whitehall Place, the lanterns casting eerie shadows as he opened the double doors wide, allowing his coat to fan out behind him. This was not a moment to look weak.

Ironheart stood on his right and he tugged the lapels of his coat as he approached the clerk. “I’d like to speak with Constable Jacobs.”

“And who may I say?—”

Jacobs appeared before the clerk had finished his sentence. “Your Grace.”

The clerk paled as he stood, giving a short bow to Ironheart. “So sorry I didn’t recognize you, Your Grace.”

Ironheart waved the man off. “It’s quite all right. But I am curious about?—”

Jacobs gave a quick jerk of his head, his mouth turning down. “Follow me.”

He took them to a small office, filled with an old mahogany desk and a single chair. Max and Ironheart filled most of the empty space as Jacobs came to stand close, leaning in his head as he whispered, “Plimpton has been released.”

“By whom?” Ironheart whispered back.

“I don’t know, but I know it came from the top. I told them the accuser was a duke, but...” Jacobs raised his hands. “Whitehouse has friends in the highest places.”

“Damn it,” Max growled out his words. If they couldn’t even put one man in prison...

“It gets worse.” Jacobs moved even closer.

“What is it?” Max asked, his muscles growing taut with tension.

“Lord Cranston was found dead in his home this evening. The investigator said that two men were seen coming and going from his address today. One in a long coat,” his eyes flitted to Max. “And the other, later, baring six marks, three and three across his cheeks.” He drew three fingers across each of his cheeks.

Max stumbled back. Would Lord Whitehouse accuse him of killing Lord Cranston?

Why was a new man wearing Adam's marks? Had they found a new assassin?

They left a quarter hour later, Max feeling more frustrated and frightened than he had in a long time. Lord Whitehouse's operation was massive, and his connections were of the highest influence. How could he and Ironheart hope to best him?

"I should leave the city. With Sophie. Tonight." He spoke into the darkness of the carriage.

"Maybe." Ironheart lounged across from him. "Or maybe, tomorrow, I should pay a visit to my cousin, and yours if I'm not mistaken, the Queen."

Max hadn't had anything to do with family for a long time, and the Queen was only a distant relative of his, anyhow. "She'd have to care enough to get involved and not be bought by Whitehouse."

"I think I might know the angle." Ironheart laced his hands behind his head. "If you run now, and he only gains more power, you can't come back, and neither can I. We always knew Lord Whitehouse was well-connected. He wouldn't be attacking bloody dukes if he wasn't."

"How can he call us immoral? It's ridiculous. He's a murderer, abuser, thief. Turns my stomach."

"Maybe we're just as bad." Ironheart dropped his hands. "You don't...you don't participate in the challenges?"

"I don't," he said, but he knew what Ironheart meant. A great deal of what the club did was downright dirty. "Thinking of making a change?"

Ironheart shrugged. “What’s it like? Meeting a woman you care for so much you decide to give her the deed to your home?”

That was one way to put it. He smiled as he thought of Sophie. “Like seeing the sun rise after the darkest night.”

“Christ. Poetry? You?” Ironheart snorted.

Max didn’t answer. The words said all he needed to say.

Ironheart leaned forward. “Look. Give me two days. I’ll see if I can convince the queen to take up the fight with us. If I can’t...we’ll retreat to the country and come up with a new plan.”

Max made a terse nod.

Two days. But his gut churned. Was he doing Sophie a disservice? “Ironheart. I might need a favor...”

* * *

Sophie snuggled Abigail into the hollow of her body as the child slept. Part of her wished she could get up and pace once again, but this was better. If she couldn’t sleep, she ought to at least rest, and Abigail had needed the comfort. They were in the second new place in a week.

However, Abigail had largely enjoyed her day. The staff had kept her occupied first in the kitchen, helping the cook bake pasties, and then she’d had a picnic in the garden with one of the maids.

She’d been given paints, and she’d danced with the opening flowers. If Sophie had

doubted any of her choices, the proof was in the sleeping child. Abigail would be much better cared for away from the man who'd claimed to be their uncle. Their future was still so uncertain.

She slipped from the bed, crossing to the window to look out into the darkness. It wasn't terribly late, but it felt as if the whole city was quiet and that she was all alone. Perhaps it was just this neighborhood. Mayfair went to sleep far earlier than the rest of London. She wished Max was there. The quiet would be a comfort, but it would feel safe if he were there. Instead, the silence rang ominously in her ears, worries filling the space in her head. What if something happened to Max? She had money, and that was a relief. Could she run without his strength? Could she protect her sister?

She sighed, laying her head on her hands as she stared out into the darkness. That was when a bobbing carriage lantern appeared in the distance. She lifted her head, staring as it moved closer, and grew bigger. Was it friend or enemy? Should she hide? Ironheart had an army of footmen. Would they protect her and her sister?

The carriage and six came into view, and she saw that it was Ironheart's, and she let out a cry of relief. Abigail stirred in the bed, and Sophie covered her mouth with her hand, even as she stood, creeping toward the door.

In nothing but her chemise, she reached for her borrowed housecoat and wrapped it about herself before slipping from the room. Padding down the hall, she stopped at the top of the stairs, looking down two floors to the massive entry as Max and Ironheart entered the mansion.

She watched Max move with decisive steps across the marble floor, her heart hammering in her chest to the thumping of his boots. The sound rushed in her ears and echoed up to the cathedral ceilings. He stopped up the bottom, glancing up, his eyes locking with hers. "Sophie."

She didn't hesitate. Lifting the hem of the long garment, she made her way down the stairs as fast as her feet could carry her. Max started up them, taking two or three at a time, he met her on the landing of the first floor.

Without a word, he swept her into his arms, lifting her feet from the ground as he pressed her to his chest, his lips capturing hers. She lost herself in that kiss. Her hands sliding into his hair, she held on and let the passion burn away her fear.

"Max," she whispered against her mouth. "I missed you."

"I missed you too, love." He kissed her again, his mouth opening hers, his tongue sliding between her lips, and swiping against hers. Had she been burning before? A blaze lit deep in the pit of her stomach. She'd never felt anything like it. She kissed him back, tentatively at first, but soon, she returned the strokes of his tongue, her desire erasing her shyness.

"Ahem," Ironheart called from the bottom of the stairs. "I'm off to bed. I shall visit the Archbishop of Canterbury first thing in the morning."

The duke's voice and his words finally pulled Sophie from her daze of passion. "The Archbishop? Tomorrow?"

Max cleared his throat but didn't set her down. If anything, he gave her another tiny squeeze. "Yes. That's right."

"Why?"

"I don't know what will happen in the next few days. But I know I can give you one more layer of protection."

"How's that?"

“I can make you my wife, Sophie.”

“Your wife?” her heart hammered in her chest, her blood racing through her veins.

“You...you want?—”

“I’m asking you to be my wife, Sophie. Will you marry me?”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Sophie stared down at Max. Since he held her, her face was just above his, but with her feet dangling down, she felt rather small. Then there was the fact that every thought had left her head, leaving her to stutter like a child. She watched Max's face change. The hope that had been there just a moment before soured and turned black. She squeezed around his neck, opening her mouth to share her heart with him.

But that's when Ironheart reached the landing. "Tell her that thing about the sun and then night."

"Sh-sh-shut up," Max said, stuttering.

He had not hesitated in his speech at all recently and she knew she'd somehow hurt him. Did he think she was rejecting him? Of course, he did. She never imagined he'd propose now. Yes, he'd told her he had feelings, and he'd given her money. But somehow there was confusion.

"Max," she said and then rubbed her nose against the tip of his. "Do you truly mean it? You'd marry me?"

He remained like marble, not softening a bit. "I asked, didn't I?"

She'd hurt him. She'd have to be more careful because he had deep wounds that would take time to heal. Closing her eyes, she kissed him again. He didn't kiss back, but he didn't pull away either. "It's just...I am rather troublesome and needy."

By small increments, he relaxed. Running a hand through his hair, she said “Part of me thinks I ought to say no because...” She felt him tense again. “Because I think you might grow to resent me.”

“Sophie,” he said. “I am the sort of man who can hold the weight of your world. I don’t know a great deal, but of that I am certain.”

“There you go again, spouting poetry,” Ironheart called over his shoulder as he started up to the second floor. “Who knew the man who excelled at silence had a poet’s heart?”

“I said shut up, Ironheart.”

“Is that any way to talk to a man in his home?” Ironheart chuckled despite his words, continuing up the stairs. “I trust you’ll have a magical evening.”

Max didn’t respond, his gaze holding hers. “I’ll still protect you, even if you say no. I’d never let him hurt you, I?—”

“Max,” she said and then she kissed him again, a light touch of her lips that held all her intentions. “I know you’ll protect me. You are the finest man I’ve ever met.”

“Fine?” he said, grimacing.

Did he want to be something else? “Handsome. Brave.” She kissed him a third time, her eyes fluttering closed.

His fingers spread out on her back, his mouth moving with hers.

“I don’t think I’m worthy,” she whispered into his mouth.

“I disagree.”

“All right then, I accept, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.” She smiled, intending the words, at least in part, as a joke.

Max scowled at her. “Do not speak of my wife that way. She is the finest woman I’ve ever met.”

“Fine?” She wrinkled her nose. “You’re right. It’s a terrible word to use to describe the person you love.”

He smiled back. “Sophie. I’ve never had a family. Not a real one. I’m counting on you to teach me how this all works.”

Her eyes widened in surprise because this notion had never occurred to her.

“I’ve watched you twist yourself into knots trying to provide for your sister. You fight for her the way no one has ever fought for me.”

He kissed her again, his tongue dipping between her lips. She kissed him back, the desire between them flaring red hot as he carried her up the stairs.

She only pulled back long enough to tell him, “Abigail is asleep in my bed.”

He stopped in front of her door, setting her lightly on her feet. “That’s all right, I should leave you to return to her.”

She stared up at him. It was her turn to be offended. They’d agreed to marry. Her body was aching with need. “Max. No. I want?—”

“I don’t know what will happen tomorrow or the next day. I won’t compromise you,

Sophie. Not until we're legally wed."

She frowned then. "You're right. We don't know what will happen tomorrow or the next day. And if we were to only have tonight, I would spend that time in your arms."

For one second, indecision flashed in his eyes, and then he picked her up again. He carried her one door further down the hall to his room. Opening the door, he set her down and then crossed the room, softly opening the connecting door between his room and hers. "In case Abigail wakes up," he whispered, crossing back to her side.

She opened her arms and wrapped them around his neck. They kissed again, their mouths sliding together as one kiss blended into another. His hands came to the opening of her housecoat. He parted its heavy folds, the thick fabric sliding to the floor. He stepped back, his jacket and cravat landing in the pile of discarded garments. Bending down, she unbuckled his boots.

Silently, he sat on the bed, and she helped to pull them both off. Kissing him was fire, but the intimacy of helping him undress was...magic. Her hands slid back up the muscles of his legs, his breeches highlighting the thickness and strength he possessed.

He looked down at her, his jaw locked in hard lines. "Sophie."

"You're so strong," she murmured with a sigh. "I love the way you feel."

"Sophie." He growled, his voice rough with...something she couldn't name. Her body seemed to understand as he pulled her up, his mouth crashing into hers a moment before they rolled to the side.

Her chemise rode up her legs, their bodies pressed together. He felt even better beneath her fingers with several layers of his clothing removed. Their arms and legs twined together as he kissed along her jaw, down her neck, and back up under her

ear.

She could feel the evidence of his passion, pressing to the intimate spot between her thighs. It only made her ache more. Hooking one of her legs over his hips, she pulled him even closer, hoping to ease the hectic need building inside her.

He groaned into her ear. “You’re going to break me.”

What did that mean? She didn’t exactly know, but it sounded wonderful. “Oh. Yes, please,” she gasped out, clutching him tighter. “I think I’d like to break too.”

In answer, his hand came to her bare calf and slid up her leg, over her knee, and inside her thigh. Finally, he cupped the silky flesh at her apex.

Her whole body shuddered in response, and she just knew...Max was her forever. Crying out, she bucked into his hand. This felt better than she ever could have imagined, and she wanted more.

* * *

The silky folds of Sophie’s sex were slick with her desire as he ran his middle finger over her. It had been a hellishly long time since Max had touched any woman. His experience was limited at best, having found his few experiences with women to be full of temporary pleasure, but they were ultimately hurtful.

This was different in every way. Sophie knew exactly who he was, knew his weaknesses and his hurts, and she wanted him anyway. She found him worthwhile. His emotional attachment heightened his pleasure in ways he didn’t expect, and his body thrummed with the need to claim her. Instead, he settled the pad of his finger over her nub of pleasure, feeling the shiver that passed through her. He circled the spot, her body tightening and her thighs trembling as she gasped in his ear.

“Oh, Max.”

He smiled into her skin, applying slightly more pressure as he worked her flesh. She softly moaned in his ear, her hips chasing the pleasure. Deep satisfaction rumbled through him. He wanted his satisfaction but hers...it made him feel like a man to know that she wanted him, that he brought her pleasure.

She gripped his shoulders, her fingers pushing into his flesh, her body growing tight, her leg locked around his hips, pushing him deeper into the cradle of her body. He only worked her faster, knowing her finish was close.

And then she broke, her cry filling the room.

He smiled, not stopping, but lightly shushing her. “Hush, sweetheart. We mustn’t wake Abigail.”

“I know,” she half sobbed in his ear, her body slowing. “It was just so...”

“I’m glad.” He kissed her then, slow, and unhurried as she clung to him. His pleasure was of less concern than hers, as he enjoyed her softness. She relaxed onto her back, and he followed, half laying on top of her as he ran his hand up her side, tracing her waist and rib cage. She ran a hand up his back, urging him closer.

“Why is Ironheart going to the Archbishop?”

He lifted up. “I told you. I want to give you the protection of my name. My family.”

She looked at him then, studying him in the dark. “Did something happen?”

How did she know him so well? “Whitehouse is very powerful. I think it best not to underestimate him.”

She nipped at her lip. “So, you’re going to the archbishop so that?—”

“We can marry tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” she gasped, half sitting up. “That soon?”

His gut churned again. He half expected Sophie to change her mind. “We can wait if you need more time to d-decide.”

“No, Max, stop. This isn’t about my feelings for you, I’m asking about the seriousness of the situation.”

He relaxed again. Did she understand how tentative he was in this regard? He’d rather fight all fifty of Whitehouse’s men than have Sophie tell him that she didn’t wish to be his wife. “It’s just a precaution.”

He kissed her again, because, every time she soothed his fear, he had this need to touch her, be close to her. Did she know that she was putting his heart back together? He slid on top of her, her legs naturally parting for him. Her feet and calves locked about his as she kissed him, her hands sliding up and down his back. He propped up on his elbows, holding her head in his hands as he returned the kiss, his thoughts quieting as his need pulsed through him.

Max thrust against her, his cock aching in his breeches. As her tongue tangled with his, her body soft and warm underneath him, he could feel his orgasm building. He wanted to be inside her, but that could wait until they were married. So much of Sophie’s life had been a struggle. He’d not do a thing that might create any complications.

One of her hands slid down to the small of his back and then traced his waist, slipping between their bodies until she cupped his manhood in her small palm, giving him a

light squeeze.

It was so perfect, the feel of her, the lightness of the touch. With a grunt he thrust into her palm, an orgasm ripping through him as he spasmed and shook. She held him until it was done, and his forehead tipped down to press to hers.

“Sophie.” He sounded as though he was begging, and he just might be. Because as much as he could be the strength, he needed her so much. Her body pressed to his was like being home for the first time in his life.

“I’m here,” she murmured back. “Right here and I’m not going anywhere.”

Neither was he. He lifted her long enough to settle her under the covers before he wrapped his body around hers.

In this moment he knew for certain, that he’d use every ounce of his strength to defeat Whitehouse and make Sophie’s world safe and happy. His fear was replaced with resolve. He was going to dismantle Whitehouse brick by brick. He’d begin tomorrow.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Sophie woke as the sun rose. She was in the protective circle of Max's arms, his body wrapped securely around hers. It had been so long since she'd felt anything other than sustained. Now, she felt loved, protected, and cherished. She let out a sigh of contentment, not certain she ever wished to leave. His arms tightened around her as his nose buried into her hair.

"Good morning." His deep baritone rumbled through her, and she mused to herself that he had the most wonderful voice.

She was glad he became increasingly free with how he spoke to her. "Good morning," she smiled into the pillow. "Did you get any sleep?"

"Plenty," he said, running a hand down her bare arm. "You?"

"Good," she answered, burrowing deeper into him. She'd like to sleep like this every night, surrounded by his heat and strength. Her chemise had ridden up so that most of her legs were exposed. His hand slid under the covers and then down the skin of her leg, tickling down to her knee. She let out a small giggle, his matching rumble of laughter reverberating through her.

He kissed the spot on her neck, behind her ear, tingles cascading from the spot. Her breath caught even as he slid his hand back up to her hip, pressing her deeper into the cradle of his hips. His manhood nestled into the softness of her behind and she swirled her hips to rub against his hardness. She heard his rumbling growl of satisfaction as he moved his hand between her thighs.

“Sophie?” Abigail’s small voice called from the other room, floating through the open door.

With a small sigh, Sophie pushed up. “I’ll be right there.”

Max pushed up on his elbow and kissed the spot on her back between her shoulder blades. “Duty calls.”

“I’m sorry.” She twisted around to kiss his forehead. “It’s been a lot of new places lately. She’s feeling insecure.”

“Don’t be sorry,” he said, squeezing her again. “I love the way you take care of her.”

Her heart swelled to hear him say that. “Do you want to come?”

“Will she find it odd?”

“We can tell her that we’re marrying. I think she’ll be very excited to know we’re going to be a real family.”

“A real family,” he repeated and then, without warning, she was back on the mattress, his weight on top of her as he gave her a searing kiss.

He let her up just as quickly, pulling her from the bed, and holding her hand in his as they crossed the room together. He stopped to let her through the open door first. Abigail sat up in the bed, her legs crossed.

“Where’d you go?”

She smiled. “Max and I were chatting.”

“This early in the morning?”

Sophie laughed. “Yes. And guess what we’ve decided.”

“What?” Abigail’s eyes lit up.

“That Max and I should get married.”

Abigail was off the bed in a second, spinning around in an excited little dance. Then she stopped, cocking her head. “Can I get a doll?”

“Of course,” Max answered. “Every girl should have one.”

Abigail clapped again and then raced toward them. Clearly, Max had passed the test her four-year-old mind had concocted. Sophie caught her sister, lifted her into her arms, and hugged her close. Max wrapped his arms around them both, helping to support Abigail’s weight as he kissed the top of Sophie’s head.

“We’ll marry tomorrow, provided Ironheart can get us the license. If I’ve not made progress with Whitehouse by the day after, we’ll leave London.”

“And go where?” Sophie asked quietly, not wanting to frighten Abigail.

But it was Abigail who answered. “We’ll go home.”

“Home?”

“Back to Mama and Papa’s.”

“Oh Abby...” Sophie wanted to explain that the house wasn’t theirs any longer.

But it was Max who answered. “Not a bad idea. I wonder if the cottage is yours by right.”

“It smells here,” Abigail wrinkled her nose. Sophie could only assume the child meant London. Ironheart’s home was very well kept.

“While Ironheart is acquiring the license, I’ll speak to a barrister about the sale of my townhome.”

Sophie looked back at him, her eyes wide. “You’re serious. We’re going to leave London?”

“If you would like to, then I’d be happy to go. London was only the place I had a position, it has never had my heart.”

“Had?” she asked, looking back at him.

“I think the club is dissolving, but even if it doesn’t, it’s not the position for me now that I’ll have a family.”

“You could do Papa’s job. He counted.” Abigail added, clearly full of ideas.

Max cleared his throat. “Counted?”

“He owned a counting house,” Sophie said.

“Did he own the building?” Max asked.

“I don’t know, and my mother didn’t say. She told me to come here and seek out my uncle.”

Max grimaced. “I wonder if she worried about you taking on the responsibility or if they didn’t own either property.” He gave them both a light squeeze. “Perhaps we can start by finding out.”

Sophie looked back at him, her lips softly parted. It felt as though, piece by piece, her life was falling into place. Max was the blessing she’d always hoped for. He left shortly after, saying he had a few details to arrange. Every time he left, worry ate at her gut, but she spent the morning with her sister, making the child as comfortable as possible. After a morning spent exploring Ironheart’s home, they settled in the library to read.

As the noon hour approached, a maid appeared at the door. “Miss Wren, you have a visitor.”

Sophie’s head snapped up, her brow furrowing, when Tabbie appeared in the doorway.

She cried out, jumping up from her seat, and ran to embrace her friend. “What are you doing here?”

Tabbie hugged her tightly. “I know I ought not have come. Ironheart sent word that I shouldn’t leave my father’s house, but I had to come.”

Sophie pulled back, assessing Tabbie’s clothes. “What are you wearing?”

Tabbie laughed. “I traded with my maid, walked here, while she plays croquet in the garden pretending to be me.”

Sophie shook her head. Her friend shouldn’t have put herself in danger, but she was so glad her friend had come. “I’ve missed you.”

“And I you,” Tabbie hugged her again. “When you didn’t come for tea, I became worried.”

Pulling the other woman aside, she whispered the events that occurred over the past few days, including Max’s proposal.

“Oh, that is wonderful!” Tabbie squeezed her hands. “But what of Lord Whitehouse?”

Sophie bit her lip. “Max doesn’t say much, but I think he’s worried.”

Tabbie frowned. “Are you worried?”

Sophie shrugged. “When Max is here, I think nothing can hurt us, but the moment he’s gone, I’m afraid he’ll be attacked, and he won’t come back.”

“If something happened to him, you come to me. I will take you and Abigail to one of my father’s other estates. He has so many, it’s easy to get lost.”

Sophie shook her head. “I could never?—”

Tabbie waved her hand. “We both know I’m not marrying. I have neither the appearance nor the inclination. We’ll be old maids together, giving Abigail the home she requires.”

Sophie hugged her friend again. Tabbie was truly a blessing she’d never imagined she’d have. “Thank you for being the most wonderful friend, I shall find a way to repay you.”

“You needn’t repay me.” Tabbie hugged her back. “Your friendship has been enough.”

“Good news,” Ironheart called from the doorway. “I’ve procured the license.”

Tabbie stiffened in Sophie’s arms. “It’s you.”

Sophie’s brows shot up at the way Tabbie prickled. “It’s you,” Ironheart rumbled back. “I told you not to come.”

“Good thing I do not take commands from arrogant dukes.” Tabbie sniffed.

Ironheart crossed the room, his long strides eating the ground between them. To Sophie, he was never commanding or particularly intimidating, preferring a jest to a growl most times. This was a completely different side to him. The way he looked at Tabbie it was...almost possessive.

How very interesting.

* * *

Max stood on the steps of his ancestral home, looking up at the tall facade with its cold gargoyles and he grimaced. He was only here for Sophie. He’d repeated that every few seconds as he rode in a hack from the barrister’s office to here. Rolling his shoulders back, he pulled the bell cord, standing straight and tall as he waited.

His father had gotten a military commission. Max was certain that his father had hoped the military would punish the stutter out of him. Max could have told him it wouldn’t work. The military’s discipline had been nothing compared to his father’s. What he’d learned in his time serving, was that his actions carried more merit than his words, and his silence held more sway than any words he’d ever spoken.

The butler opened the door, his bored expression quickly turning to shock. “Lord Maxwell.”

Max didn't speak. He simply held out the letter he'd written. In it, he'd detailed his marriage, the fact the Duke of Ironheart was a witness, and the match was also supported by Lady Tabetha.

He wanted his father to see to Sophie's care with whatever money he might have as an inheritance, and for his father to recognize her as his daughter-in-law. The butler took the note, opening the door wider. "You're free to deliver this yourself."

Max shook his head. He didn't wish to see his father or either of his older brothers again. He turned, only to find his eldest brother, heir to the dukedom, coming toward him.

"Look at you." His brother, the Earl of Westham, stopped. "All grown up and the most strapping of us all."

Max didn't answer as he drew himself up. His father had given his brothers free rein to treat Max without mercy. He had no good memories of them or his time there. Westham stopped at the bottom of the stairs, appraising Max with a certain wariness.

"Don't look at me like you're going to repay every deed I did as a child right this moment. I shan't survive it, I'd dare say."

"If I hit the way you did, then no. I don't think you would." To Max's surprise, his voice held.

His brother had the decency to grimace. "He wasn't kind to any of us, you know."

Max nodded. He did know. His older brothers had had each other though. He'd always been everyone's enemy.

"I'm marrying tomorrow." He trotted down the steps, stopping in front of his brother.

“And my club...”

“I know it. I was rejected.” His brother looked away. “Your doing?”

Max didn’t answer. “We’re being attacked by Lord Whitehouse.”

“That zealot?” His brother’s lips thinned.

“If I die, I want to know you’ll see my inheritance is s-sent to my wife.”

Max froze, expecting a reaction to his stutter. But his brother didn’t notice. “Wife? You’re married?”

“It’s in the letter.”

“Are you still in your townhouse in Cheapside?”

Max shook his head. “Staying with Ironheart.”

“Whitehouse is giving you trouble even with the backing of a duke?”

Max nodded. “He’s got friends everywhere.”

“I’ll see to your wife should you need it,” Eastham gave him a nod to confirm his words. “And I’ll second you with Whitehouse should you need.”

Max jerked his chin in response. This time, he did not choose silence, he was at a loss for words. He’d never imagined receiving his brother’s support.

His brother started up the steps but stopped halfway up. “Our father is dying. I don’t know if it’s weeks or months, but if you’ve any last words for him, they should be

said soon.”

Max nodded again and then turned to make his way back to the waiting hack. He didn't need apologies, he wasn't looking for explanations. All he wanted was a commitment that Sophie would be tended to. It was all he required before taking up the rest of the fight. As he climbed into the hack, he noted that down the street, another carriage started just after his.

He cocked his head to the side. “Take a right.”

The driver did as he commanded, the other carriage making the same turn. “Left.”

The driver turned, and again, the other vehicle followed suit. “Damn it,” he whispered through gritted teeth. He was being followed.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Tucking the coins for his fair in the seat cushion, Max cracked open the door. "I've left your money plus extra. Keep driving toward Cheapside," he instructed.

The driver leaned over giving him a quick nod. "Aye, Govenor."

"Pick up speed, and take that left just up there," Max said. He needed a good ten seconds where he could roll out of the carriage unseen.

The driver did as he was asked, pushing the horses faster before taking the wide turn. Max didn't hesitate as he jumped out and rolled away. He sprang up and ducked into the narrow alley between two buildings. The driver reached back and snapped the door shut just as the other carriage made the turn.

He let the vehicle pass and then he sprinted back out, hopping onto the back of the vehicle, taking the narrow seat meant for a footman.

He had to hunch down to avoid being seen, but from this spot, he could hear the men inside talking.

"Where's he going?"

"Don't know. How long ye think we have to follow?"

"Not sure. We'll ditch out in time to make it to the meeting."

Max cocked his head, knowing he'd ride for as long as it took to find out where that meeting was and who was in attendance.

The carriage followed the hack until the driver stopped in front of a haberdashery in Cheapside, where he sat.

Max nearly chuckled out loud when the men in the carriage spit and cursed when no one entered or exited the carriage. At some point, an older woman approached the driver about a fare, which he accepted. She climbed in and off they went.

"What the fuck was that?" one of the men rumbled. "Where is the mark?"

"Hell if I know," another answered.

They debated Max's whereabouts for five minutes before finally abandoning the search and starting for the next destination. He tightened his grip in anticipation. Whatever he learned tonight, he knew it would help him with the decisions in front of him. He'd do whatever need be done to keep Sophie and Abigail safe.

The carriage slowed, and he jumped lightly down, hiding himself in the deepening shadows. It stopped in front of a large church. Even in the dying light, Max could see the exterior was dilapidated, the stone moss-covered, and the windows filthy. But, as he snuck through the shadows and peered into a window near the back, he could see the interior was anything but.

Rich gold candelabras filled the space, the altar shined with a glistening polish. The exterior was nothing but a disguise. What happened here that they needed secrecy? He didn't have to wait long for the answer. A hundred men, at least, filled the space, all of them dropping to their knees as a single man stepped up to the altar. In the candlelight, Max caught the profile of Whitehouse. Long white robes adorned his body and on his head was a crown.

“Your majesty,” came a call from the crowd.

“Our king,” another called. Whitehouse raised his hands silencing them, and then his voice boomed over the assembly.

“Men. We gather here tonight with one single mission. To reshape England. To put in power men of purity, of integrity and with a moral compass.” A cheer rose from the crowd.

On and on it went. A speech that denigrated every level of British aristocracy and its moral impurities right to the Queen. The Queen most of all. His words stole Max’s breath. The accusations he made about her lack of morality, her personal relationships, and his plans to rise to the highest position in England were enough to have him instantly beheaded.

A slow smile spread across Max’s face. He was going to win after all...but perhaps his celebration was too premature. As he focused back on the meeting, he found the gaze of one of the men in the audience pointed directly at him. Ducking down, he tried to hide, but it was too late. He heard the cry of warning echoing through the vaulted ceilings of the church. He didn’t wait to find out what they might do next. As fast as his feet would carry him, he ran.

The church was on the east side of London, in a neighborhood where poverty reigned, and silence could surely be bought with a few coins. Max knew he’d find little help here, but there were also a great many places to hide.

He heard the roar of men pouring out of the church. He needed to put more distance between himself and Whitehouse’s men. As he burst out into the courtyard of several buildings, the yells of Whitehouse’s men nipping at his ears, an old man looked at him, silent for a moment before he yelled. “Here!”

“Fuck,” Max grit out the word before sprinting again. He cut this way and that, sticking to the shadows, avoiding anyone. As the calls and cries grew more distant, he stopped to catch his breath and assess where he was. Could he hide? Wait for the storm to pass?

“There,” a man yelled and Max, with a quick jerk of his head, noted ten men in pursuit.

He took off again, running for a narrow alley. As he approached the end, he found it blocked by two men. One held a pistol and Max froze. It wasn't fear but instinct. He'd been in battle.

The man fired and Max hit the ground, the bullet flying over his head. He heard the sharp cry of one of the men behind him even as he jumped up, drawing out his short sword. Charging, he cut down one man and then grabbed the other and shoved him with all his force at the other men trailing him. It gave him just enough time to take a quick right and then another left.

Three men appeared in front of him. He was like a rat trapped in a maze. Gripping the hilt of his sword tighter, he went straight for them. His strategy worked, as two of them dove out of the way. Only one man took his challenge, the clash of their swords ringing out in the night. Max gave a loud curse, knowing he'd alerted the others with the sound. With a quick thrust, he ran the man through and then set off again, his legs and lungs burning with the effort. He could not die tonight.

In his heart, he'd made all sorts of promises, ones he wanted to keep. He could hear the footsteps behind him, growing louder. How many men could he fight off? How long until they overwhelmed him, or someone fired a pistol and hit him with lead? As if he'd imagined it into being, five men appeared before him, all with guns leveled. This was it, he was going to die.

“Down,” one commanded, the voice ringing with familiarity. He didn’t hesitate, dropping as all five men fired.

It only took a moment to understand he’d found allies. Jumping up again, he made a break for them. That’s when he recognized the Devil, one of his club members. He’d never been so happy to see the man in his entire life.

“What are you doing here?” he ground out as he broke through their line, pulling a pistol of his own, even as the men reloaded.

“I was in the meeting,” Devil said with a wink. “Along with several of Her Majesty’s soldiers. In disguise of course.”

“But how?”

“You and the Master ought to have asked. I used my military connections to infiltrate their ranks.”

Why hadn’t he thought of that? Max leveled his pistol along with the others even as the eight or nine men chasing them stopped. Twenty paces away, they raised their hands.

Max didn’t feel particularly merciful. “Take them into custody. Deliver them to the Queen.”

Pistols raised, the soldiers did as he commanded. Ahead, he noted that he’d run his way to the border of Cheapside. He needed to return to Sophie.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

For the second day in a row, Sophie found herself pacing. She didn't even bother to retreat to the library, walking up and down the grand entry from the front of the house to the back. Ironheart, determined to keep her company, but tired of standing, pulled a chair to the archway of the formal sitting room. He'd poured himself a whisky and, every third pass, he'd offer it to her for a sip.

"It never occurred to me, until I watched you, that it might be nice to have a woman who worried after you."

She looked over at him, her brows lifting. Sophie knew he wasn't speaking specifically of her. First, he seemed to fully support her relationship with Max, but second, Ironheart treated her how she'd imagined a brother might. "What sort of woman do you think would suit you?"

"Docile, probably. Sweet."

Sophie snorted, glad for the distraction. She wasn't generally prone to snorting, which made her wonder how much of Ironheart's whisky she'd consumed.

"Your derision is not appreciated."

Her snort turned into a giggle. Perhaps it had been quite a bit of whisky. "Forgive me, Ironheart, but even I know enough about you to know that you'd be bored in a day with that sort of woman."

He turned his head assessing her. “I could be very tired of my rakish ways and looking for a simple affection.”

Her hands came to her hips. Ironheart had insisted on seeing Tabbie home today. If Sophie wasn’t mistaken, the air crackled between them. “You could be tired of that life, yes, and ready for a new adventure.”

“Marriage is not an adventure.”

“I beg to differ.” She sniffed. “But regardless, even if you don’t want a complicated relationship, I’m certain you want the sort of...attraction that will keep you engaged for a long time.”

Ironheart stood, staring at her for a long time. “I underestimated you, Miss Wren. You are as bright and vivacious as you are beautiful.”

“Touch her and I will kill you. I don’t care if it’s your house.”

Sophie spun around to find Max standing by the back entrance of the entry that led out to the garden.

Relieved as she was to see him, she gave a startled cry as her gaze flitted down him. He was covered in dirt and...blood. “Max!” She rushed toward him, her heart running wild in her chest.

He opened his arms, a small smile tugging at his lips. “I’m so glad to see you, sweetheart.”

She jumped into his embrace with a cry. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine. Nothing that some sleep won’t fix,” he murmured into her hair.

“You’re making him downright chatty,” Ironheart called over to them.

She felt Max grumble about his irritation, but she didn’t wish to discuss Ironheart or his comment. “What happened?”

“Good news. Her Majesty’s armed forces caught Lord Whitehouse in the worst sort of treason,” he answered, squeezing her close.

Ironheart jumped from his seat. “You’re serious?”

“Bad news.” Max shook his head. “About sixty of his men saw me and laid chase.”

Sophie let out a cry as she wiggled from his arms and felt his body for injuries.

“I’m unharmed,” he softly said, reaching for her hands and pulling them to his mouth to kiss the back of each.

“What does this mean?” Ironheart asked.

“It means that the Queen will surely take up his capture and imprisonment. Several of her soldiers heard him plainly say he had designs on her throne.”

“Fu—”

“Hey,” Max bit out. “Not in front of the lady.”

Ironheart’s jaw snapped shut, but he smiled. “I got the license. You’re to wed tomorrow.”

Max pulled her back into his arms, dropping his head into the crook of her neck as a shudder passed through him.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, her fingers threading into his hair as she pulled him closer, pressing her cheek to his head. Silently, she told him how she loved him, how she'd hold him until the pain of the night passed, of how she'd always be there to do so...

Her eyes drifted closed, the only words she managed to say out loud, "I love you."

"I love you too," he murmured into her shoulder.

"Ironheart." She didn't move. "Would it be too much trouble to have a bath sent to Lord Maxwell's room?"

"None at all." Ironheart turned, his footsteps sounding across the marble floor until he reached the top of the servant's stairs. It was only then she took a step back, gently tugging from his embrace as she took his hand and led him up the stairs. She didn't ask him to explain further, she just knew that he needed her tonight.

They arrived at the same time as the tub. Silently they waited for the water and when it was delivered and poured into the large copper bath by the fire, she turned to Max, untying his cravat and removing it from his neck. She took off his jacket, his vest, and his boots. Then, she worked on her garments, taking off her large skirts, undoing the buttons of her dress, and removing her corset. She meant to bathe him, wash the dirt away.

He tugged off the rest of his clothes, and she tried not to focus on making him feel good, sitting on the bed to roll her stockings down her legs, but when he pulled his shirt off, she stopped and stared at the rippling muscles as they came into view. Then, as he pulled down his breeches, the sheer power of his form left her in awe. She swallowed down a lump, unable to move as she drank him in.

"Join me," he said simply as he crossed to the bath and sunk into the water.

“I’ll just bathe you,” she said, finishing with her stockings and taking off her petticoats so that she was only in her chemise.

She crossed to him, picked up a sponge, and dipped it into the water as she sank to sit on the floor next to the tub. He looked over at her, leaned forward, and captured her lips with his own. Leaning back far enough to look at her, he said, “I want to feel your skin.”

Sophie only hesitated for a second before she stood and stripped the chemise over her head. She wasn’t nearly as embarrassed as she thought she might be. Perhaps it was their connection. Maybe it was the whisky, but she let the garment float to the floor, watching Max’s gaze darken as he dragged it up her body. Then, taking his hand, she sank into the tub. Her back settled against his front, her legs drawing up to her chest so that they’d both fit.

“How am I supposed to wash the dirt off you like this?” Her voice was soft with a sigh as she laid her head on his shoulder.

“I’ll manage,” he murmured into the crown of her hair.

“Are you worried?” she asked, lacing her fingers through his.

“No. I was tonight, but now, with the Queen’s aid, we can leave London without regret.”

“We could stay,” she said. “You have a home here. Work.”

He smiled into her hair. “I’m eager to go if you are. I’ve needed a fresh start for a long time.”

“All right.” She gave a slight nod. “London hasn’t held much promise for me. I’d

much rather return to the quiet country life I had.”

“Good. We’re in agreement.” He wrapped his arms tightly around her, rubbing his cheek over the top of her head. “You’ll teach me how to be a good father to Abigail, won’t you? I know I’ll be her brother-in-law, but...”

“You’re right, we’re her parents, and I don’t think I’ll need to teach you much. When you make decisions out of love, the rest is easy.”

He smiled against her head. Then, sliding his hands down her arms, he reached for the sponge and scrubbed his shoulders and face. “I got the worst of it,” he said, dropping the sponge into the water.

She picked it up and partially turned, splashing a great deal of water out of the tub as she washed his chest and torso. When she’d started on his lower stomach, her hand bumped into the hard shaft of his manhood. She stopped, gasping. Sophie had felt its contours the day before, but there in the water, she used her other hand to trace it and give it a light squeeze.

“Woman,” he said, his voice husky. “What are you trying to do to me?”

Nipping at her lip, she met his gaze. “Seduce you.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Sophie noted the hesitation in Max's eyes. The fact that he cared so much for her well-being made her heart swell, but it also deepened her commitment to give herself to this man. He was everything she'd ever dreamed might be hers. Kind, committed, strong, a protector, a fighter, and...

She kissed him long and slow, her body settling back into the hollow of his as her arms wrapped about his neck.

She felt his resistance for a moment or two, and then he pulled her tighter to his chest, his kiss opening to hers. Max's tongue swept into her mouth, the water making her skin slide against his. It was erotic and wonderful, and the ache between her legs pulsed with need as his manhood pressed into her hip. So lost in the kiss, she didn't notice when his hands left her body. She came back to reality when he scrubbed her skin. She pulled back looking into his eyes.

"The water is starting to cool, love," he answered, his soapy hand sliding over her back and down her legs. Then he circled to the front. She gasped as his hand slid across her chest. He soaped up each of her breasts, her nipples growing into stiff peaks.

Her head fell back as she arched into the touch. Then, she bumped her back against the side of the bathtub. "Oh." A sheepish giggle fell from her lips.

"We need a larger tub," Max said, even as he stood, lifting her with him.

The giggle turned to a laugh. “We do.” There was something about the way he said the words. She knew they were to wed, but he was making plans. They’d have a particular tub, but she only had a moment to revel in the satisfaction before he soaped the rest of her, his hands...everywhere. A moan fell from her lips as his fingers danced up her thighs, stopping just before her apex. The ache that had been building throbbed as she arched, inviting him deeper.

Instead, he stood, grabbing her under the armpits and lifting her from the tub.

“What are you doing?”

“I can’t have you getting cold.” He grabbed a large blanket, wrapping it around her shoulders.

Sophie looked up at him, wondering how she’d managed to find herself there with a man who was concerned for her every need, great or small. “Max,” she said with a soft sighing whisper, his name full of all of her intentions and all her feelings.

His hand came to the small of her back, pressing their bodies together as he captured her mouth again. She opened the folds of the blanket, wrapping her arms around him, sheltering both of them in the folds of the fabric.

Firelight filled the room as Max lifted her in his arms and carried her to the bed. He laid her down, his weight on top of hers. He was a large man, strong and muscular. She wasn’t sure what she’d expected, but his weight, pressing her into the mattress, was the most comforting and satisfying feeling she’d ever known.

She sighed into his mouth as he kissed her again. The sweet comfort of it quickly gave way to desire when his hand slid down her side. He then lifted his hips so that he could bring his fingers to her thigh again. He slid higher, lightly brushing the folds of her sex. She gasped in a breath, pulsing need coursing through her. Her hips flexed

to chase his touch as she opened wider for him. He kissed a trail over her jaw, swirling his tongue on the sensitive skin just below her ear, as he stroked her slick folds.

Sophie thought she might perish from the pleasure, even as she thought she might never want him to stop. He stroked up and down her skin a few more times, before he narrowed in on the center of her pleasure, circling with the pad of his thumb.

Sophie thought she might have died and gone to heaven. It felt so good, she cried out, her hands twisting into the blanket. Then, pushing up, he brought his other hand between her legs, inserting a finger into her channel. Her world exploded as she squeezed her eyes shut as a moan fell from her lips. He didn't stop. He kept going as she rode out every last ounce of pleasure.

Only when she lay limp, covered in a sheen of dampness, did he remove his hands, settling himself between her thighs. He kissed her again, her tongue languid as he stroked his against hers. Slowly, he pressed his shaft into her channel, the stretch burning as he sunk deeper.

Sophie didn't tense. The small bit of pain was nothing compared to the deep connection that came with being joined together. She wrapped her arms around his neck as he sank all the way inside her, his body shuddering as he brought his forehead to hers. "My love."

She held him tightly as he moved, slowly at first, and then picking up a bit of speed. She could sense that he wished for more, but he kept his movements light and easy. Did he worry about hurting her? She lifted her hips to meet his, encouraging him to take what he needed. His response was to half moan, half roar in her ear as his body shuddered with his finish.

He collapsed on top of her, kissing her forehead, cheeks, and chin. It had been the

most exciting night of her life and yet, it had also been the most comforting. Sophie had found her home. Whether they moved to the north or stayed in London, Max's arms were where she belonged.

* * *

The next morning, Sophie woke in bed alone, the rising sun shining through the windows. On the pillow next to her was a scrolled note.

I shall see you at ten at the altar.

All my love.

Max

A smile pulled at her lips as a flush crawled up her cheeks. She rose from the bed, stretching when a knock sounded at the door.

"Come in," she called as her chemise settled over her body.

Tabbie stuck her head through the door. "Sophie?"

"What are you doing here?" Sophie cried, rushing to the door.

"Ironheart came to fetch me this morning. Said they had their enemy on the run. Apparently, Whitehouse left London on a ship in the night, chased by the Queen's men. And since you're getting married today, he thought I should join you."

She hugged her friend, so glad Tabbie was there.

"Come on." Tabbie tugged her hand. "Let's get you ready for a wedding."

A maid stepped in behind Tabbie with a dress in hand.

“What is this?” Sophie gasped, and the lace-covered folds of off-white skirts came into view.

Tabbie waved her hand. “Just a little something I had hanging about.”

Sophie shook her head. “You can’t. You’ve given me enough.”

“This one you’re only borrowing.” Tabbie winked. “But you should look stunning on your wedding day.”

Sophie felt tears of joy fill her eyes. How had she managed to find these beautiful people to fill her life?

A breakfast tray was brought in. Two maids, under Tabbie’s direction, styled Sophie’s hair and helped her to dress. By the time they were done, she hardly recognized herself. Her hair was twisted back in an elaborate coif that was just loose enough to appear soft. Several tendrils fell about her face. Her cheeks had the slightest bit of rouge, her eyes darkened.

And the dress...

Hugging her narrow waist, it offered a generous hint of her cleavage. “Tabbie,” she gasped as she turned this way and that to study her reflection.

Tabbie gave her a soft smile. “I wish I could do more. Today, I shall live vicariously through you.”

Sophie turned to her friend, softly reaching for her hands. “I have every confidence that you are going to marry.”

“I told you, I don’t want to marry.”

Sophie could see the fib dancing in her friend’s eyes, but she didn’t push. Tabbie had her reasons for being hesitant and for protecting herself. “But if you did decide, I know that you would not only be successful, you’d find the best sort of man.”

“Is that what Lord Maxwell is? The best?”

“Not for everyone, but he’s perfect for me. That’s the part that takes a bit of teasing out, I think. He doesn’t have to be perfection, just right, correct, for you.”

Tabbie nipped at her lip. “That is interesting. You know if I thought that future was for me...”

“If.” Sophie leaned forward and kissed her friend’s cheek.

Arm and arm they left the room, Ironheart meeting them at the top of the stairs. He offered his arm to Sophie. “I hoped to escort you to the ceremony and perhaps walk you down the aisle.”

Sophie couldn’t explain how much she appreciated that. Abigail appeared in a darling dress that Sophie was certain Tabbie had provided. Sophie leaned down, kissing her sister on the cheek before Ironheart swung the girl up into his arms. Abigail went willingly, her small hand resting on his cheek.

“When did you two become friends?” Sophie asked, her brows raising.

“I needed a story last night,” Abigail said.

Ironheart winked. “I’ve long been told my orations are excellent.”

Tabbie snorted. “Orations? That’s a big word for—” She stopped when Ironheart’s face notably fell. Clearing his throat, Ironheart set down Abigail, taking her hand as he offered his other arm to Sophie.

With Tabbie a step behind, they made their way out to the garden. The wedding was about to begin.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Max stood next to the vicar, shifting from foot to foot as he waited for Sophie. He'd left in the night, but in his heart, he'd wanted to stay. The longer it took for her to appear, the more restless he grew. Last night had been...

He'd never experienced the like. His connection to Sophie was more than he'd ever dreamed and when he was away from her, he didn't feel right. She'd reordered his world, and he already couldn't imagine it without her.

Sophie finally appeared with Ironheart. His breath caught in his throat as he stared. She could not be his. She was too—he swallowed down a lump—perfect. He'd never seen a woman look more beautiful.

Abigail, too excited to wait, raced down the path toward him. He swept her up in his arms, settling her on one side as Sophie approached, her smile so joyful, he grinned back, surely looking like a fool. He didn't care. Now, he bounced on his toes, Abigail bouncing with him as Sophie came toward them.

Ironheart handed her off, stepping to Max's other side as Tabbie stood next to Sophie. Together, they promised to love, honor, and cherish each other until death do they part. Max felt every word as he set Abigail down to take both of Sophie's hands. This was his whole life. His heart. His soul.

"You may kiss the bride," the vicar announced.

Max leaned in, capturing Sophie's lips with his and sealing the bond that no man

could ever tear asunder.

Abigail hopped on one foot and then the other, dancing. “We found a home,” she sang. Then, she stopped. “Will Ironheart live with us?”

“No.”

They all laughed.

“But we can all visit.”

“Often,” Ironheart added with a chuckle.

Making their way back inside, Sophie clung to Max’s arm, her cheek brushing his biceps. They went through the garden and back to the dining room where a wedding breakfast had been laid out. They hadn’t been dining long when the butler appeared at the door.

Ironheart took the missive, opening the letter. Max noted that it bore the queen’s seal. Ironheart’s frown didn’t help matters.

“What does it say?”

Ironheart handed him the parchment. “We’re being summoned by the Queen. She wants more details, and she’d like them now.”

Max cursed under his breath but there was nothing to do but comply. It was in everyone's best interest that he heed the queen and that Whitehouse be brought to justice. He hated to leave Sophie now. They were finally free of danger and were ready to start their future.

He kissed her lips. "I won't be gone long."

She nodded, nipping at her lip.

"When I get back, we can begin our celebration."

"I've an idea," Tabbie raised a finger. "I have a few days before my father and I leave for Dover. Perhaps Abigail can come and spend a few days with me. Give the two of you a bit of time for yourselves."

"You needn't do that," Sophie held up her hands. "The staff and Ironheart?—"

Tabbie was reaching for Abigail. "We could have a tea party, and build forts to sleep in, and pick flowers from the garden, and?—"

"Yay!" Abigail danced again. "This is the best day!"

Sophie smiled at her sister. "All right, then."

"I won't be gone long," Max said.

Sophie's worried eyes met his. "All right."

After a final kiss, Max followed Ironheart out the door. They climbed into the waiting carriage, settling into opposite seats.

"I know the queen well. When we get there, allow me to do the talking."

Max's brows lifted. "Not a problem."

Ironheart grinned. "Right. I forgot. You've gotten so chatty."

Max laughed, knowing he was still far from chatty. “We’re leaving as soon as we’re able. We’re returning to her village.”

Ironheart nodded. “You’ll be happier away from London.”

“You’ll be all right here? Without me? Without the club?”

“I’ll muddle through. I’ve got the Devil and the Defender. They’ll do in a pinch, but our numbers are down.”

Max nodded. “My brother, about to be a duke, would like to join. You can invite him for vetting if you’d like. If nothing else, I know his accounting skills are excellent.”

Ironheart winced. “If you could keep my lack of skill to yourself...”

“We both know that discretion is my specialty.”

“Thank you.” Ironheart jerked his chin upward. “Now, let’s do this as efficiently as possible, given that it is a meeting with the queen. She does like to keep men waiting.”

Max hoped that wasn’t what happened this time. He was intensely eager to return to his bride.

* * *

Sophie carefully removed her gown, wanting to return it to Tabbie without blemish. Carefully hanging it in the armoire, she put on her regular gown and settled herself to wait in the library. Max was simply meeting with the Queen, he wasn’t out chasing villains, so she attempted to put aside her pacing and instead use the library for what it was intended for... reading a book.

She settled into a chair, picking up a book of fables. She passed the afternoon away, reading stories that reminded her of childhood until she reached the story of Red Riding Hood. Frowning at the page, stared at the words, her thoughts twisting on the similarities between the story and her own circumstances over the last year.

She'd made the journey to what she thought would be a family member, only to find herself in the house of a wolf. Good thing she'd happened upon a woodsman. With those thoughts, she set the book aside and moved to the fire. She'd read this story many times in her life, and she'd always wondered how the girl hadn't seen the truth.

Her hands clasped over her heart. She understood now. Facing the truth would be to understand that the situation was near hopeless. Still, it was a girl's mistake. Blindly trusting...

A creaking noise on the far side of the room caught her attention. She turned and gasped in a breath when she saw her "uncle" standing in the late afternoon sunlight.

"Sophie," he said with a sneer. "Good to see you looking so well."

Automatically, she reached for the poker, lifting it in her hand and holding it out. "You're trespassing on a duke's property."

With long strides, he crossed the room even as she let out a scream. She could only hope someone was close enough to hear. He reached her, knocking the poker from her hand, and then grabbed her by the back of the neck, covering her mouth with the other. She tried to fight, but he crushed her cheek to his, subduing her in an instant.

"What happened to the obedient girl who lived in my house for a year?"

She didn't answer, she couldn't. His hand was over her mouth. She'd like to point out that it wasn't his house and never had been. For all she knew, it was hers, being the

closest kin. He'd kept her a prisoner there, locking her in a room and keeping her quiet by meeting her most basic needs as she allowed him to prepare her for slaughter.

He pulled her toward the open patio door. She had no idea why he wished to take her or what he hoped to gain, but she knew she could not leave this house. Sophie fought as she'd never fought in her life before. With nails and teeth, she tugged and pulled and bit and scratched.

He let go of her mouth to bring his hand down across her cheek. Pain exploded through her skull as stars appeared behind her eyes.

He snarled as he shook her. "Behave, you little bitch, or I'll have to knock you out."

"Why are you doing this?" she cried as he dragged her again. She was losing her strength even as she tried to fight.

"Because I'm getting my money's worth out of you one way or the other. You've ruined everything and now you're going to pay."

They were almost to the door. Sophie cried out, pulling hard again, stumbled, and fell so that he was dragging her to the exit.

That was when the doors to the library burst open. Max paused for a single second, his large frame filling the double doors, a snarl pulling at his lips. A cry of relief fell from her lips before he barreled toward them, hands balled into two fists of rage.

Her uncle dropped her, taking a large step back even as he grabbed a sword from his belt. He swung at Max, slicing through his clothes, blood appearing on his shirt. Sophie cried out, but Max did not seem to notice as he charged in again, grabbing the man's wrist and squeezing until he dropped the weapon, bones cracking under Max's

grip.

Ironheart rushed in, grabbed Sophie, and pulled her from the fray. “Close your eyes,” he whispered, pushing her face into his coat. “It’s better.”

Sophie did as he commanded. Not just out of blind trust, but because she knew he was right. Max grabbed the other man by the scruff of the neck, dragging him back out of the library. “You’re going back to the tower, and this time, you’re staying there.”

Sophie opened her eyes again and Max’s gaze met hers. “I’m sorry, my love.”

She shook her head. What was he sorry for? Saving her? Protecting her? “Go,” she whispered. “Thank you.”

Max gave a terse nod, dragging the other man out the door.

“Is he really taking him to prison?” she asked Ironheart, who was still holding her.

He was quiet for a moment. “Whatever he’s doing, you can be assured you are never meeting your uncle again. Max will keep you safe.”

It was true.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It was after midnight before Max finally returned to Ironheart's. It was no longer his wedding day. As much as it had been productive, he'd wanted to spend it with his bride.

First, the queen had required a detailed accounting of all that he and Ironheart knew. This was tricky considering that they had a club no one knew existed. Ironheart had glossed over that detail as only he could. A "private gaming society" was what he'd called it. The fact that Whitehouse's son had been a member seemed to satisfy the queen's curiosity as to why they'd been targeted. She'd listened to all of it and then thanked them for their contributions. Max supposed it wasn't every day that a third son stopped a plot to overthrow the crown.

Her recompense had left him reeling. She'd bequeathed him a barony in the north of England. It came with a small manor and enough assets to support it. Today, Sophie had become a baroness. He'd come home to tell her that he'd be able to provide the life she truly deserved when he'd found that imposter with his hands on his wife. Even now, Max's fists clenched with rage at the sight of Sophie being dragged across the floor. He'd barely kept himself from tearing that man limb from limb.

Instead, he'd brought the imposter to the New Police and delivered him into custody. He'd insisted that a barrister for the crown be brought in to hear his testimony and had mentioned that he'd been awarded a barony from the queen herself hours earlier. He'd stay in London long enough to make certain that the man was hanged. He'd not risk him ever being free again.

Now, he walked through Ironheart's home, the darkness and quiet helped him relax.

"My lord," Ironheart called from the top of the stairs.

"Your Grace."

"Jail or death?"

"Jail."

"Really? I thought for certain you were dumping his body in the Thames."

"Hmm," he answered. "I'll cut the skin off him one piece at a time if he touches my wife again."

Ironheart chuckled. "Your control is admirable. And thank you for not killing him in the library. Blood is murder to get out of drapery."

Max's brows lifted. "You're welcome."

"I know you're eager to make your way upstairs," Ironheart said as he swept his hand up the stairs. "But I wanted to say thank you for working with me. It has been an honor."

Max trotted up the stairs to the second-floor landing. He grabbed Ironheart's elbow, and Ironheart did the same, in a warrior's handshake. "For me too. You're more than you give yourself credit for."

Ironheart looked away. "I think if you asked Lady Tabetha, she'd tell you that I am exactly what people think I am."

“You haven’t let her see the best parts of you.” He let the man’s arm go. “You should. A woman like that would keep you on your toes.”

“Hmm,” Ironheart said, which was no answer at all.

Max grinned as he trotted up the stairs. He opened the door to his room to find Sophie already in bed. She lifted her head, her forehead resting on her hand as she pulled back the covers. She’d lit several candles about the room so he could see as she pulled back the covers. She was as naked as the day she was born.

He closed the door, but he didn’t move immediately to the bed. Instead, he crossed to the chair in the corner, stripping off his clothing. “Wife.”

“Husband.”

He sat, tugging off his boots. “I missed you today.”

“The waiting has been endless.”

He grimaced as he unbuttoned his breeches, shucking them down his thigh. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” she whispered, pulling the covers back a bit more.

He accepted the invitation, slipping into the bed and pulling her body against his even as he tucked the covers back over her. He kissed her lips. It was long, slow, and full of the love he wanted her to know was in his heart.

“You saved me,” she murmured against his lips. “I thought...”

He gathered her closer, his hand slipping into the thick silky strands of her hair. “I

will never let anything hurt you, sweetheart.”

“I know,” she wrapped her arms around his neck. “Thank you for being my safe harbor. My home.”

“You’re my home. My life. My love. My everything.” He rolled onto his back, pulling her on top of him.

She came willingly, her body pressed to his as her knees settled on either side of his hips. He ran his hands up the back of her thighs, kissing her over and over as he massaged her flesh. He wanted her to feel loved but also powerful. Sophie was his woman and his guiding light.

They kissed. Their bodies moved together as they warmed each other, the passion building until he finally slid inside her sheath. He moved slowly, carefully, but she didn’t wince. Instead, she met his hips, arching her own to take more of him. They moved slowly at first as he made love to her gently, to make certain she understood. Her happiness was above all.

Soon, their thrusts grew more frenzied, her breath coming out in short gasps as she chased her pleasure. His desire rose, his finish growing closer as she tightened around him, her cries only making his own need heighten.

And when she broke apart, he did too, their bodies like one.

“I love you,” he pushed out through ragged breaths, knowing the words weren’t enough but unable to find better ones.

“I love you too,” she held his face between her small palms, kissing his lips. “Forever.”

He wrapped her tight in his arms, knowing that he'd never let go.

Six months later...

Max pulled his coat tighter, the scarf about his neck helped with the biting wind. It was nearly dark, and with Christmas approaching, the nights were cold. It's not that he'd noticed all that much though. He spent those nights wrapped in his wife's embrace where he'd never been warmer. He stepped inside the kitchen, knocking the mud from his boots.

It had been a long day of travel. He'd rode for three hours to the village where Sophie had been raised to oversee the sale of her family's home and her father's business. In his hand, he held a large bag of coins. He'd add them to her collection. By right, Sophie was now a rich woman, having saved quite the sum.

He'd already begun saving Abigail's dowry. Should anything happen to him, Sophie would have all the funds she needed to care for herself. She'd never find herself without options again. He'd make certain of that.

Max trotted up the stairs, finding Sophie and Abigail curled up together in the library.

"Reading?" he asked, dropping the coin on the table before joining them on the settee. He wrapped an arm around Sophie and Abigail climbed into his lap.

"We're reading 'Red Riding Hood' and 'Cinder Seat,'" Abigail said. "'Red Riding Hood' is Sophie's favorite, but I like 'Cinder Seat' best."

"And why is that little one?" he asked, kissing Abigail's head.

“Because Pop-Pop,” Abigail said, using her nickname for him. “Cinder Seat becomes a princess like Sophie became a baroness. Red Riding Hood only gets pulled from a wolf’s stomach.” She wrinkled her nose. “Icky.”

Sophie laughed. “Perhaps you only need be in one wolf’s belly to know what sort of blessing it is to be rescued. That’s what happened to us. Max saved us.”

Max looked over at his wife, brushing his knuckles down over the velvet of her cheek. Is that how she felt? She needn’t worry. No wolf would ever make it through his door. A prince for Abigail maybe, but the only very best.

“My favorite is the ‘Princess and the Frog,’” he told Abigail, chuckling when she clicked her tongue.

“You can’t kiss a frog and make him a prince. That one is silly.”

“Oh, I don’t know. Seems plausible to me.” He leaned over Abigail and kissed Sophie. Her love had transformed him, there was no doubt about that.

Abigail hopped off his lap, fetching the doll he’d given her after the wedding. As promised, he’d let her choose it herself from a shop in London.

With Sophie’s sister occupied, he could snuggle his wife even closer. She rested her cheek on his shoulder, sighing as she snuggled deeper into his arms. “Do you need to travel anywhere else before Christmas?”

“No.” He kissed the crown of her hair. He’d had traveled more than he liked as he’d ordered the estate, but it was all worth the trouble. The manor was beautiful, and it would make an excellent home to fill with children. “It will just be you, me, and Abigail.”

“And Ironheart,” she said, leaning back. “And, he claims he has a surprise for us.”

His brows lifted. “A surprise? Did he buy a distillery?”

Sophie laughed. “Stop. He’s been a good friend. And besides...I’ve hardly seen him drink at all.”

“He’s on his best behavior around you.” So, Ironheart would be there for Christmas. Max actually missed that degenerate. He hoped it was a good surprise.

Ironheart is up next! Preorder Master of Games , the next Duke Fraternity book, today!