



Tall, Dark and December

(The Rake Review #12)

Author: *Tracy Sumner*

Category: Historical

Description: In the frosty heart of Regency London, American engineer Weston Whitaker has arrived with a singular purpose: to perfect his steam-powered inventions. But his reckless disregard for England's stifling social codes earns him a notorious reputation as "Tall, Dark, and December", putting his project—and his prospects—in jeopardy. Bound by blood to a powerful duke, West is reluctantly drawn into society's gilded web, where every glance and rumor can make or break him.

Tasked with taming this brooding American is Lady Penelope, London's sharpest etiquette tutor and a woman who embodies the very aristocracy West disdains. Yet, beneath her proper exterior, Penelope is as fierce and unconventional as he is, and West finds himself captivated by her bold mind and dangerous wit. As sparks fly between them, Penelope battles to remain detached, unwilling to fall for a man who could so easily unravel her carefully constructed life.

Total Pages (Source): 13

CHAPTER ONE

WHERE A RAKE RECEIVES A REVIEW

An icy morning on the docks, 1820

He didn't like London.

Weston Whitaker tightened the bolt on the engine's flywheel with more force than necessary, his decision as chilling as the draft racing through a split in the warehouse doors. The whirl of the gears vibrated through his fingertips and down his arms, calming him when the city couldn't.

The weather was horrendous, the general public entitled, and the food marginal at best. He'd been forced at dinner last night—with a smile because he was pursuing funds for his project and no small amount of it—to eat pudding made of suet and dried fruit. Which sounded passable until he'd come to find suet was a fancy term for the hard fat surrounding a kidney. The seasonal twig of holly atop his generous portion hadn't improved the taste once this dubious fact was revealed to him.

West drummed the wrench on the flywheel's metal rim and questioned who in the hell mixed meat and fruit, then called it pudding.

The English, that's who.

Still, there were benefits. Rocking back on his heels, he wiped his hands on an oilcloth while giving England its fair due. Crumpets smeared with apricot jam had

become a breakfast favorite. Too, his rented curricie—what he'd call a shay in Philadelphia—was the speediest rig on this side of the pond.

And the women...

A grin ripped across his face as the image of Lady Pilson popping her head from beneath his counterpane three nights ago frolicked through his mind. Her hair a magnificent color caught somewhere between coal and onyx, the vision begging him to gently twist the tangled strands about his fist and draw her to him. If not for the horribly proper, on the edge of grating pronouncements tripping from her lush lips, he could almost imagine she was an American girl happy enough to be entertained by a self-made man of means.

At home, with the empire he'd built enhanced by the face he'd been born with, he was more than popular.

As it was, every time an English chit, as they called them here, thought to look down on his lack of pedigree, he knew only to kiss them silly. Thus, unlocking the equation. A secure spot, as mathematics was a piece of life he was fucking brilliant at. Women, whether they be duchesses or milkmaids, weren't so different. They liked a man to focus on them and nothing but for a time, the kind of patience West owned in spades. Truthfully, they seemed as curious about him as he was about them—once they overcame the sad fact there wasn't a title hanging about.

At least he wasn't lonely. Or not often. No lonelier than a man could take, in any case. His childhood had prepared him for solitude.

West jammed the rag into his waistband, reminding himself there was no reason to feel an ounce of guilt over his romantic activities.

He and Emelia had decided to wait until his return to America to determine where

their brief affair was headed. Maybe it was already over. She didn't love him, and he was reasonably certain he didn't love her, but they made sense. Practical, common sense. Her father was an early investor in his design enterprise, and Emelia was embedded so deeply in Philadelphia's high society she could do nothing but pull him in alongside her. And drown them both.

Although essential elements of the relationship were missing.

West paused as his chest spasmed, the wrench hanging heavily in his hand. When had love been a thing he could count on, anyway? Never in his life. Not once.

He was measuring the flywheel's alignment when the staid footfalls echoing through the warehouse's storage bay told him his handler had come to call.

"Sir, if I may be so bold but to intrude?"

The austere tone struck him with the same force as the pop of a ruler across his knuckles. Better that than the leather strap, a practice the orphanage headmaster employed until West grew too tall to be threatened. He held up his hand— one moment —closed his eyes and committed the altered design to memory, where it would remain until he pledged it to paper.

Unlike life, numbers were always reliable.

Bracing his fists on his thighs, he wiped the sweat from his cheek and stood with a pleasurable, groaning stretch. Stepping back to observe the prototype he'd built by hand, he struggled to conceal the joy he received in toying with his manservant. Everything about West—manner of dress, manner of speaking—were signs of the most dreaded of English difficulties.

Trade . Labor. Employment .

West turned to Brixworth to find a gaze as gray and penetrating as a bullet casting judgment. “Call me Weston, I beg of you,” he asked for the hundredth time.

Brixworth dipped his chin in polite refusal. “Sir, I’ve brought your correspondence.”

Holding out his hand, West blew a breath through his teeth and perched his bum on a crate. “What could possibly be important enough to travel to the wilds of the East End, dirtying your boots tromping through sleet and muck?”

Brixworth rolled his top lip between his teeth in the first show of unease West had ever seen in him. “Well, sir, unfortunately, you’ve been reviewed.”

Taking the small stack of letters, one emitting a sugary aroma that meant Emelia had finally decided to write, West tore into the envelope bearing Cambridge University’s shield. He rather liked the elegant design, three open books on a breastplate of some sort. They’d sent him enough requests for him to commit this emblem to memory right alongside his new calculations.

Brixworth smoothed his palm down his lapel, striving for crispness when he was as hard-pressed as a slab of steel. “Another appeal to give a lecture to engineering students, I gather? An impressive feat for a man not of their legacy if I may say so, sir. Cambridge doesn’t generally welcome foreigners into their brethren.”

West grunted and let the note flutter to the floor, barely able to contain his amusement when Brixworth recorded its demise with a sorrowful sigh. “Everyone wants to jump into steam and ride to glory. And make fifty thousand pounds the first year while doing it. I’ve had the young pups ask me how, bold as brass. Versus, and I use your country’s term, the answer being bloody hard work.”

Although West wasn’t much older than the pups, three or four years at most.

The difference was, brutal circumstances forced a man to grow up quickly.

The next letter was from the Royal Society. West had been invited to a roundtable with other industrialists involved in the steam trade. This event he wanted to attend, unlike most dumped upon him. Giving the card a crooked fold and tucking it in his trouser pocket, he ignored Brixworth's punitive tongue click. "I know valets have rules and regulations for every little thing, attire, appropriate behavior and such. We've gone over it to hell and back, Brix, but I'm not made of the same cloth as the gents you're used to serving. We do it differently across the ocean, thank God."

Brixworth took a step back and came close to tapping his heels together. "I'm not a valet, sir. I'm the Duke of Mercer's majordomo, and assisting you in an official capacity is outside my typical responsibilities, but I've been with the Tierney family for—"

"I don't care," West murmured, governing the faint rush of anger. "A fact you can convey to His Grace when you scurry back to Mayfair."

Brixworth frowned and fiddled with his cuffs, apparently uncomfortable having to settle strife, even if he had been with the Tierney family for eons. "I hesitate to discuss private matters, but in this case, I will go against code. His Grace didn't know about you, as I've repeatedly stated. Indeed, I was there the day we went through the deceased duke's papers. If you'd only meet with him, you would understand. He is a family man to his bones. And you, whether you value this or not, are family."

West shrugged and ripped into the next envelope, though he wasn't quite as indifferent as he'd like to be, which was his problem and his alone. "I'm not interested in family, not anymore."

Except, he'd conceivably accepted the invitation to consult with a London engineering firm after he found out about his lineage whilst reading his mother's

diary—not long after a duke discovered the secret buried in his father’s papers. Maybe West had known the close resemblance to his half-brother that his investigator had mentioned would cause a stir. Maybe he’d even been surprised by Tristan Tierney’s response to finding out his father had sired a bastard with an American heiress who fled the country upon learning she was pregnant.

The Duke of Mercer wanted them to be brothers —when a hidden kernel of fear wouldn’t let West grab that familial rope and hang on.

His past simply wouldn’t let him.

Turning back to his mail because West wasn’t going down a gaping chasm in front of a man sent to snoop on him, his breath caught upon reading the next missive. “The Earl of Sutherland has dropped out. He’s pulling his funding.”

West’s valet-cum-spy did another nervous press of his coat. “Your misdeeds have caught up with you. I tried to educate you about the proper standards of society, even for visitors to our fine city. Yet, you failed to listen.”

West crumpled the earl’s rejection into a wad and tossed it to the floor. Sutherland had promised half the backing he needed to get the project for the Philadelphia Mint off the ground. He couldn’t go back to America without a working prototype. England was at the forefront of engine design and production, with steam power currently being used in textiles, mining, and transportation. Even if he loathed the truth of it, the knowledge to move him further along was here . The funds to move him further along were here.

At this rate, the city of his birth would be employing hand-operated screw presses to create coins for another century. Frustrated, West lashed the letters across his knee. Why the earl had withdrawn his support was the question. “When you mentioned I’d been reviewed, Brix old boy, what did you mean?”

With a grimace that dragged the corners of his mouth practically to his chin, Brixworth gestured to the remaining correspondence. “You may want to start with the gossip clipping.”

Wiggling the sheet free, West skimmed a column that had already had enough handling to smear the ink. It was one of those ridiculous chatter rags the English loved so much. He read a few lines before coming to the good part. “Lady P__ was seen leaving the leased Marylebone terrace of Mr. W__W__ in the wee hours of dawn,” he murmured. Skimming the rest in silence, his brief scan bagged the gist. Scandalous. American scoundrel. Moonlit dinners.

The final line included the reveal, as it were: long-lost, disgraced half-brother of a duke.

“‘Tall, Dark, and December’ she’s calling me,” he finished, unable to keep this horrific bit to himself. If there was anyone in England who hadn’t known he was related to the Duke of Mercer, the secret was out now. As for the other, he was no debaucher. Women often—as was the case with Lady P, as this mindless Belle creature was calling her—came to him .

Tall, Dark, and December. Brixworth mouthed the moniker, seemingly pained to his bones if his twitching eyelid was any indication. He’d likely never had to deal with such degradation with his saintly duke.

West strode to the hearth at the far end of the cavernous space and tossed the sheet into the flames. “I’m losing a business partner over something called The Rake Review ? As in, reviewing rakes ? Who gives a damn, might I ask?”

“The woman you dallied with is the earl’s cousin, fourth or fifth removed according to Debrett’s ,” Brixworth stammered as his cheeks stained a rosy hue. “The Belle’s column is extremely popular, and the only saving grace in this debacle is that widows

have more societal freedom than most. Lady P might actually benefit from being this month's entertainment if a week of whispering behind her back doesn't bother her. Whereas you, an interloper of questionable birthright, will be given no quarter. I assume your connection to His Grace put you in the Belle's line of sight, and some in Town may not esteem the connection."

West dusted his hands down his thighs, thinking he didn't esteem the connection most days. "This Debrett's whats-it has written about me, too? What did they say?"

Brixworth grimaced, his displeasure almost splitting his cheeks in two. "You most certainly are not listed in Debrett's . Unofficial children are never mentioned, Mr. Whitaker."

"Bastards, you mean. Or by-blows. Isn't that the favored term?"

"Yes, well, those . The volume is the final authority on the aristocracy, as well as a valued reference on etiquette, manners, and social customs for well over a hundred years. You could"—Brixworth slid a disdainful glance down West's person—"benefit from a passing review of said sections. I shall have a copy sent round to your terrace posthaste with a bookmark noting the relevant chapters."

"I'm beginning to truly despise this place," West whispered and pinched the bridge of his nose. A headache was building behind his left eye, and when his vision scattered, he'd be done working, as the pain drove out every calculation. This had been the case since he'd taken a knock to the head from his stepfather's fist when he was eight years old.

Talk of Mercer and family had his blood churning in time to the uneven clank of his steam engine. Striving for calm, he drew a shot of the one thing he loved about London into his lungs, the rancid bouquet of the Thames. The scent reminded him of honest work and humble beginnings.

“It’s not like you can hide the association, sir, with the two of you looking rather exceptionally like brothers. It’s the eyes,” Brixworth murmured and drew a tight circle around his own. “The Mercer men have been carrying that particular shade for going on two centuries. Like a ripe lime, perhaps. Or a very sour apple.”

West shrugged, wishing for a whisky when he’d sworn off the stuff as a boy—before having the chance as a man to make imbibing a habit. He’d seen what too much drink did.

Felt what too much did.

However, like it or not, the eyes were what got people—even him—the only time he’d seen his brother up close. On the marble steps of one of those suffocating gentlemen’s clubs, another place he’d visited only for business. Fortunately, he’d been on the stair above Mercer, giving him the option of gazing down on a duke—but also allowing for a disconcerting reflection back.

“You might smooth things over with the Earl of Sutherland at your brother’s Yuletide ball in two weeks, sir. You were invited, as we’ve discussed, and it is the event of the season. Another investor or two could be in attendance as well.” Brixworth tapped his jaw with a thin, incredibly pale finger. “The bruise will be gone by then, one hopes.”

West scrubbed his cheek and winced. Still tender. “The race in Hackney Marshes. My highflyer got away from me for a flash on the last turn, though I captured the lead in the end. And Viscount Dudley’s purse in the winning.”

“It’s pronounced VI-count,” the manservant said and issued one of his well-crafted exhalations of dismay. “Granted, the situation could be worse.”

West drilled him with a look that said: How so?

“Another reprobate, Mr. Notorious, pierced a delicate part of his anatomy with a silver garnish of some variety, and this circumstance was printed in black ink for the whole of London to see, the lowest of this year’s Rake Review lows. Possibly due to the kindheartedness Miss Belle feels for this wondrous time of year, your story isn’t the worst by half. Actually, December was quite mild in comparison to some of the others. February was distressing and April not much better.” Brixworth gestured to the hearth and the smoldering column. “It’s filthy gossip, every line, charring just the thing for it.”

Yet, Brixworth had committed the “filthy gossip” to memory, a point West wasn’t about to mention. The old crow probably kept past editions in a cheroot box under his bed.

West crossed to his prototype and crouched before it, the spinning cylinders and pistons as much art to him as the David was to Michelangelo, as this Debrett’s absurdity was to the ton . His world was encased in brass, iron, and steel mechanics, reassuring and rational.

And numbers. Glorious, often sensual (to him) numbers .

He tended to avoid the nasty stew of sentiment involved in everything else.

Debating, he glanced at the duke’s emissary, the infinitesimal glow in his chest over anyone caring enough to send this creaky dodger to check on him the lone thing keeping him from booting the valet out on his rear. West had received little regard in this life outside the consideration of adoring women, and even if it was from a found brother he had no intention of keeping, he figured it was worth something.

West reached for a rag and scrubbed a streak of grease off a valve, needing a place to fasten his gaze while he plotted. He’d been told the piercing look he got when he was conspiring tended to unnerve a person. “I wasn’t planning on attending a ball. I’m not

exactly the fancy party type.” Although he’d been to loads of gatherings with Emelia, but Philadelphia didn’t compare to the folly surrounding London.

Apparently unable to stop himself, Brixworth crossed the space to retrieve Cambridge’s request from the floor, where he then did a neat tuck of the card into the depths of his waistcoat. “Might I add, because you aren’t wholly aware, that your connection to His Grace may be startling to some, but in the end, will be very good for business. As this seems to be your prime pursuit.” He yanked his superfine coat into place and straightened his shoulders as if preparing for battle. “Does it matter how you get the funds you seek? Brother of a duke speaks volumes in England. In fact, sir, it shouts .”

West rocked back on his heels, bemused despite himself. Mercer’s majordomo strategized like a general. Impressive, because the way to get to Weston Whitaker was talk of industry and engineering.

Frankly, it was the only way.

West shoved to his feet, thumbing the rag into his waistband and enjoying like hell the fleeting grimace that crossed old Brix’s face. “What’s involved in this gambit? Because I sense it’s not one without payment.”

Brixworth drew an imaginary line from West’s muddied boots to his sweat-streaked hair. “You’ll have to pass muster with society. And for that”—his derisive glance narrowed like he was squinting through a keyhole—“you’ll require assistance.”

West wanted to argue but couldn’t. Emelia had polished off some of his rough edges but not enough. “How?”

Brixworth’s lips lifted in what could almost pass for a smile, and West’s heart gave a little quake. Did his agreement truly matter so much to his brother? “A cousin of our

second footman has an aunt who works in the household of a deceased earl's daughter. She's on the cusp of society, admittedly hanging by a thread due to a transgression some time ago, but now so proper, she cracks when she walks. She's prepared multiple young ladies for their debut, and we only can hope, with sufficient fiscal enticement, she'll agree to prepare you for yours."

West sighed, the vision of a spinster who smelled of camphor and mothballs flashing in his mind. "Does this cracking proper female have a name?"

Brixworth inclined his head in affirmation. "Lady Penelope Anstruther-Colbrook."

The pain behind West's eye began to pulse. Lady Penelope Anstruther-Colbrook. Could the name be any more English?

"My father actually worked for her grandfather as a hall boy at the beginning of his tenure serving aristocratic households. Despite any years-old scandal, the family is respected."

"Centuries of advantageous association," West muttered and lifted the scented letter he still held in his hand to his nose. He wished thoughts of Emelia brought comfort when they only brought uncertainty—and the same pang of aloneness he felt while standing in a crowded parlor. "Send the address and time to meet around to my terrace, and I'll make it happen."

In accord, Brixworth flashed a set of yellowing teeth—definitely a smile—and exited the warehouse with the same regal stance he'd carried upon entering it.

The ills of his childhood and being judged every second since swirled about West like London's soupy fog. Still, he could stomach being insulted if the degradation helped build his empire.

What was another slice of disrespect in the overall scheme of things?

Deke, a burly American version of a valet, materialized from the shadows. He flipped a closed silver blade between his hands in time to the engine's gentle hiss. The docks weren't a place for a man with means to roam without protection, even a man like West who could take care of himself. "You're getting yourself a governess. Is that what I heard, Boss? I've never seen one of them in this godforsaken country who hadn't a face like a horse."

"So it appears," West whispered, wondering if his time in London was going to coerce him to drink. He glanced at the smoldering hearth, his temper flaring at the trouble this Rake Review foolishness was causing him. Interfering in his work was the final straw.

He tapped Emelia's note against his hip, his mind clicking. "Have flowers sent in apology to Lady Pilson, and this Brazen Belle female— find her ."

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:28 am

CHAPTER TWO

WHERE A RAKE RECEIVES AN UNWELCOME SURPRISE

He'd planned on his governess being ugly.

Horse-faced, as Deke had predicted. At the very least, wrapped up tight, a gift no one in their right mind would want to open. West had been promised someone so proper they cracked. Not a female with a face suited to poetry and hair a glorious, honied shade he'd instantly imagined spread across his sheets.

West didn't like surprises.

The chit was twenty years younger than expected and a thousand leagues more attractive. Glancing around the neat parlor he'd been escorted into, he ignored the tug of awakening slithering through his body, though it wasn't easy. "Lady Colbrook?"

In reply, the earl's daughter, dangling by a thread from society's quilt according to his erstwhile valet, glanced up without a hint of wonder at meeting him .

Rolling his shoulders, West soundlessly laughed at himself. He wasn't used to his appearance going unnoticed by females from nine to ninety. In his world, attractiveness usually recognized the same and spoke to it. He rarely met a woman who didn't force hers into the conversation immediately.

"I'm Lady Penelope Anstruther-Colbrook," she said after a brief examination, her eyes hidden behind spectacles that did nothing to smother her splendor. "Mr.

Whitaker, I take it?” Slipping a timepiece from her pocket, she glanced at it. “I was told to expect you an hour ago.”

Review of his punctuality imparted, she gestured to the armchair across from the desk she sat behind. One of those hulking varieties every English home he’d visited possessed. It was a family piece, he’d wager, moved from more palatial environs to the small residence on the outskirts of London that circumstance and a niggling scandal had forced her into. Islington was respectable but no Mayfair. He’d done his homework before arriving, though he’d never thought to inquire about his governess’s looks .

Faintly cautious, another telling reality, West decided to dodge giving a bow that wouldn’t impress and moved to the chair she’d indicated. The air surrounding him as he dropped into the buttery leather was salted with her scent, a decidedly floral wash, nothing camphor and mothballs about it. The scowl twisted his lips before he could stop it.

Lady Penelope Anstruther-Colbrook tilted her head in question, then made everything worse by removing her spectacles to wipe the lenses with a cotton square. His apprehension multiplied into a quiet roar. Her eyes, a luminous shade near the color of burnt amber, flicked over him, assessing. Regrettably, she couldn’t hide the intelligence swimming in her gaze any better than she’d hidden her attractiveness.

Which made the package almost perfect, in his estimation.

West wasn’t impressed by titles or royalty or anything these damned Brits were, but by God, he was, on the rare occasion, impressed to speechlessness by beauty and brains.

“Go ahead, look,” he managed when she continued to stare, a habit his starched valet claimed was the height of uncouth. “I’m the latest novelty dumped in your lap

because being related to a peer evidently allows a man to leap certain social barriers if he suffers through sufficient tutelage first. I'll exercise this luck of the draw because it's good for business. You should start off understanding that's the only reason I'm here."

Much to his satisfaction, his brash comment washed away a trace of her self-possession, leaving her lips, also relatively fetching in the scheme of things, slightly parted. With knotted movements, she deposited the cloth on the desk and replaced her spectacles before speaking. "I apologize, Mr. Whitaker. I wasn't judging."

He hooked his ankle atop his knee, then wrestled his gloves from his hands, one sodden, kidskin digit at a time. At least he kept from removing them with his teeth. Rain was coming down in sheets outside her tidy abode, and his every article of clothing was wet, damp being the predominant state of being in this country. "Of course, you were. It's the English way. Courteous cuts, granted, but after a thousand or so, they start to bleed."

She halted, the glow from the wall sconce anointing her in luscious radiance. Hellfire, but she was gorgeous. "Let's be reasonable, shall we? You're an American. Lost brother to a duke. Handsome. Wealthy. Things making you, perhaps tactlessly, a curiosity."

Ah, finally something in this exchange he could work with. West flashed a grin he'd been told was wolfish by a countess last week, a word he hoped to wiggle into conversation as he rather liked it. "You think I'm handsome?"

Lady Penelope Anstruther-Colbrook didn't labor over his heckling, her gaze slicing to the folded sheet on the desk he assumed held his review. "There's only so far one can travel on good looks, Mr. Whitaker, before they become a liability."

He paused, allowing his deduction to settle in his gut. This sounded like advice from

a woman suffering the same burden. West nodded to the gossip rag, guessing they had to discuss it. “I figure you read the nonsense that got me into this mess.”

Her mouth kicked up on one side, her crooked smile the first hint of mischievous he’d seen. He hated he was drawn to it. “I imagine most of London has read it. Lord Danvers was tossed from every club in Town while vying to be listed. In fact, he’s most displeased a Yank, as he called you, managed to capture The Rake Review’s December slot.” She tried to smooth out her smile, but it bloomed, making his blood kick in his veins. “It’s become something of a contest among a certain set. Congratulations on your win.”

Unable to face her provocation when he couldn’t turn the tables and provoke right back, West got to his feet to prowl her parlor. He preferred to hold dicey conversations while pacing. Plus, you could tell a lot about a person from looking at the items they surrounded themselves with. Grubby boots belonging to someone with small feet sat cock-eyed in the corner near a forlorn table housing a vase of wilted flowers. A painting of a hound on one wall, a dour ancestor from years prior on the other. Crossing to the bookcase, his favorite spot in any room, he smoothed his fingertip down a creased leather spine. The books lining the shelf, unlike most, looked read. This room felt... homey. Lived in. Definitely not something he was used to.

“Shall I ring for tea?” she asked, her chin propped on her fist in surprising casualness as she watched him roam. Nothing about her was adding up. “While we go over the particulars? Although I only have two servants, and one has an irksome hip and the other a touch of rheumatism, so I usually serve myself.”

Resigned, West ambled back, eyeing the armchair like he was set to face a dental procedure in it. “I’ve had enough tea to sink a ship already this morning, so thank you, but no.”

“You don’t have to do this, Mr. Whitaker.” She gave a dainty shrug, her chin barely lifting from her fist. Female tedium was another novel experience. “No one is forcing you to work with me. I have a surfeit of clients awaiting instruction. A waiting list, as it were.”

“It’s business,” he shot back and reclaimed the seat with a decided lack of enthusiasm. “If following the rules, so many of them I can’t keep up, helps me secure financial backing, then I figure I’m forced to do it.”

Her lips twitched, holding back another of those devilish twists. “Our association is confidential, should you be worried, as my services aren’t publicized for various reasons. I’ll admit I’ve never tutored a man before.”

He shrugged, a sturdier effort than her delicate one moments ago. “Consider me your philanthropic project. An unpolished Yank in need of training. By the end of our sessions, I’m sure I’ll be inserting ‘by Jove’ into every conversation.”

Picking up her quill, she tapped it atop the open ledger before her, deep in thought. “I’ll draw up a list of topics to review. We can start with titles, acceptable subjects of conversation, and decorum differing from what you may be used to at home, not a single ‘by Jove’ on the roster.”

His gaze fell to her hands. Slim fingers, the nails neatly trimmed, pale-pink crescents at the base. The dab of paint staining her thumb, a bold streak of crimson, was a curiosity.

When he was rarely curious about women. Lust, yes; interest, no .

He’d tried to form more lasting associations once or twice, but if women had desires beyond the ones they sought to soothe with him, they didn’t share them. Naturally, Lady Penelope Anstruther-Colbrook would never tell him what made her tick. Their

arrangement meant her taking him apart like one of his engines—not the other way around.

Noting his studied regard of her hands, she glanced at the gloves sitting in a neat fold at her side as a trace of color lit her cheeks. It was the first indication she was hiding something in her pristine package. “The Duke of Mercer’s valet mentioned the need to complete your instruction quickly, so we’ll meet three times a week if that’s acceptable.”

West inclined his head, copying Brixworth’s move to a T. If he made more of an effort with these people, less training would be required. “He’s actually Mercer’s majordomo, whatever in Hades that is.”

“We’ll add an explanation of English staff and expressions to avoid using in formal conversation,” she murmured and made a notation. Then, frowning, she drew her quill along a page edging its way from beneath her ledger.

West squinted. The sheet held rows of numbers, his favorite thing.

Coming to his feet, he circled the desk until he stood directly behind her. “What’s this you’ve got?” Her scent—lavender?—penetrated his senses, reminding him that getting this close might be a mistake and was surely a protocol blunder. Moreover, not having seen her from behind the protection of her desk, he found a more diminutive woman than he’d envisioned.

Another bit of bad luck because petite women were his type.

Waving him away, she tucked the sheet beneath her ledger. “It’s merely a miscalculation.”

Closing his eyes because he’d seen enough, the numbers swam into view.

When he opened them, West found her gazing over her shoulder, thunderstruck. Damned if he hadn't been wooed by his own conceit into performing his party trick. "It's fifteen pounds, three shillings. You have thirteen listed." He drew a circle in the air around the supposed error and stepped back, away from the lady. "In the second row there."

She gave him another decisive appraisal, the pleat between her brows growing. Perhaps he wasn't adding up for her any better than she was for him. "How old are you, Mr. Whitaker?" After a second's delay, she released a faint, dismayed exhalation, having asked a question she likely shouldn't.

Strolling to the armchair he had no intention of inhabiting again, he picked up his gloves and wrestled into the damp kidskin while striving to appear unaffected. The air was charged with tension he wasn't comfortable with or used to. Not with so-called colleagues. "Twenty-five," he returned, casting her a fleeting glance. "Don't think this is the first time I've answered the question. I left the equivalent of what you'd call a workhouse when I was fourteen, and the undertaking caused me to assume certain responsibilities before most. So, if I seem impatient during this process, maybe that will help you understand why."

They turned at the slam of a door down the corridor.

"My sister," she said and, bracing her hand on the desk, pushed to a stand.

His governess was slender, elegant, nothing unusual aside from her one-in-a-thousand face. Yet, there was something unusual, an aura crackling about her like lightning.

"I can't meet here three times a week." Decided, he gave the damp kidskin a bruising tuck between each finger. After all, couldn't he make demands when he was the client? It was a verdict he'd committed to only seconds ago, but he wanted these lessons to be held on his turf. "My work involves compiling data at frequent intervals,

requiring me to be at the warehouse with the equipment. Often overnight.”

The quill fell still in her hand as she debated the change in plans.

Before she could disagree, he added, “Also, what shall I call you? Lady Penelope Anstruther-Colbrook is quite a mouthful.”

She shook her head, nonplussed, trying to keep up. “Warehouse?”

His laughter rippled across the distance separating them. If he kept her as on edge as he felt, there might be a nugget of fun buried somewhere in this arrangement. “Limehouse.”

“Limehouse,” she said as she would a curse.

With a jaunty tilt, West settled the beaver hat he’d tossed aside when he entered the room on his head. “I’ll send a carriage to gather you, your escort a bruiser no one would dare lay a hand on and the coachman I employ one better.” With any other woman, he would have added a wink to drive home his point, but Lady Penelope Anstruther-Colbrook seemed the kind to waste a lifetime of flattery. “Nicer than Prinny’s rig, I can guarantee.”

She shifted from slipper to slipper, the gentle sway of her skirt drawing his gaze to her trim hips. “I’ve never been to Limehouse.”

He gave the top of his hat a reassuring pop. The gusts whipping down her lane had nearly lifted it from his head on his way in. “There’s a first time for everything, right?”

Her gaze narrowed, suspicion about his motives catching up with her. “I’ll concur if this is a requirement. Since your country’s rules are more relaxed, and you’ve agreed

to tread the way of mine to foster your interests, you may call me Lady Penelope.”

Penelope . West shrugged into the greatcoat he'd rejected relinquishing to the aging butler at the door. She didn't look like a Penelope. And he had no intention of calling her Lady anything. He was saving the niceties for people with funds to invest, not an associate he was set to argue with at every turn. “There's a reason for the warehouse. I needed room, and Limehouse provided the space to get dirty. Not like I can build steam engines in Mayfair.”

“Dirty,” she whispered as her chin dipped. But he caught the word and the tone. Mischievous, as if they had secrets between them—when, of course, they didn't.

Sensing again she was more than she appeared, the nickname hit his brain like a shot of liquor.

Go ahead, West, you know you want to.

Digging in his pocket, he came up with a coin. It gleamed in the light, having been cast at the Philadelphia Mint just last month. West had pilfered it from a cooling case during his private tour with the facility's engineers. Strolling to the desk, regaining control his tutor had no clue she'd stolen from him, he slid it across the scarred surface. “Lady Liberty. Introduced in 1816, replacing the Classic Head design. My engines will allow these to be printed under steam power. Financed, in part, by the integration of your fine lessons.”

Her gaze met his, shifting the ground beneath him as he sought mightily to conceal it. Her eyes deepened in color, going from molten honey to a dark, quelling sepia.

A weaker man would find himself distracted by such a change.

Good thing he wasn't a weak man.

With a slim finger, she edged the coin her way like she would a burning ember.
“Penny,” she said in a breathless rush, in answer to a question no one had asked.

CHAPTER THREE

WHERE A LADY PONDER'S A RAKE'S IMPUDENCE

Penelope stared at the penny, a gleaming copper provocation.

“Lady Liberty,” she murmured and finally dared to pick it up.

Weston Whitaker was long gone, his carriage clattering away at full speed—much like the man. He wouldn't be there to see her caress a coin warm from his touch, then pocket it for dangerous safekeeping. She sighed, eyeing the wrinkled gossip sheet. It was resting on her father's weathered desk, begging for examination. As the mantel clock ticked off the seconds of her indecision, she took the page in hand with the same enthusiasm she had Mr. Whitaker's penny.

Dearest Reader,

Ready your lorgnettes, for this Season's intrigue has reached new heights! None other than Lady P_ was seen leaving the leased Marylebone terrace of Mr. W_W_ in the wee hours of dawn. Yes, you read that correctly—a lady of her standing, seen scurrying away under first light, leaving us all in a flutter!

Mr. W_W_, the long-lost, disgraced half-brother of the Duke of M_, clearly has London abuzz with his charm and scandalous habits. From midnight promenades to moonlit dinners, this audacious fellow seems intent on sweeping the women of society into whirlwinds of impropriety.

Now, whispers fly. Is Lady P_ besotted enough to disregard decorum, or is she simply indulging in a passing infatuation with our colonial upstart? Will this dalliance end in matrimony or, more likely, another feather in Mr. W_W_'s cap of discarded romances?

Until next time, my friends, as London's mischief continues to unfold.

The Brazen Belle

“He drove his own carriage away from here,” Isabella said from the doorway where she lingered. Penelope heard her arrive as her sister wasn't a person to enter a room without notice. “Hopped right up on the seat with his coachman, a ragged brute of a man, and whipped the horses into a frenzy like he'd been born to it.” She stepped into the room, her voice threaded with delight. “Can you imagine Merchant steering his own team? Sent his mount into a ditch at Epsom last season. Not a talented equestrian.”

Penelope tucked the Brazen Belle's latest edition beneath her ledger while adding a mental note to her client's growing list. Men in society do not manage their own carriages unless entered in a race. “Lord Merchant rides as well as he needs to, Isa. A marquess doesn't have to be anything but a marquess to impress.”

Unimpressed, her sister hummed and sank into the armchair Weston Whitaker had inhabited for all of two minutes. Where he'd then proceeded to prowl her parlor like a panther on the loose, looking for signs of life. Her life. He'd made no effort to hide his inquisitiveness as she planned to instruct him he should. When she didn't put anything on display she wanted hidden. Not anymore. Never again.

Penelope closed the ledger before Isabella got a look at the sad state of their finances. “I know you don't like Neville. You've made that clear.”

“I don’t dis like him.” Isabella drew her legs beneath her skirt and dropped her chin to her knees. Penelope’s heart ached in sympathy. Twenty-one years of age without a proper dowry, even if one had a respectable name, was a vulnerable place to reside. “I simply don’t think he’s good enough. You’re the most stunning woman in any ballroom, and he looks rather like a toad.” She trailed her fingernail along a scratch in the armchair’s leather. “An old toad. A dull as a rock toad.”

Beneath the desk, Penelope wiggled her worn slippers free and stretched her toes. One benefit to employing so few servants was the ability to be as relaxed as she liked at home, exploring her passions while maintaining a dignified front elsewhere. She’d learned the hard way that a decorous facade was of the utmost importance. The English didn’t keep the faded rugs out of the main parlors for nothing. “He’s forty, Isa. Only eleven years older than me and quite attractive in a distinguished manner. There would be absolutely nothing improper about the union. Second marriages are common. Third, even.”

Isabella chewed on her bottom lip, hesitating, then spilled her thoughts in a rush as was her way. “You’re considering his proposal because of me. I just know it. These gowns”—she pinched cream silk between her fingers—“cost a fortune. Not to mention the rest required to keep us looking like we still belong when we both know we don’t.”

Penelope collapsed in her chair in a sprawl similar to Mr. Whitaker’s. This conversation was overdue. “Of course, if I agree to marry Neville, I’m doing it for you. You have a Season coming up, and those aren’t without cost. A marquess’s sister by marriage isn’t anything but advantageous. However, I’d also be doing it for me, for our family, what’s left of it. Bessy’s hip is getting worse, and when she retires, it’s our duty to provide some type of pensioning for her. It won’t be what her mother received from our grandfather since the cottages in Derbyshire aren’t mine to lease anymore, but there must be funds for her to live on. Basil won’t be able to serve much longer, either, and he’ll need the same. We’ve done well so far. My tutoring,

your embroidery, which brings in more than I'd imagined it could, have kept us afloat, but our expenses are greater than the money coming in."

This statement was also true, though rarely mentioned, but it was time to mention it. "In addition, I'd like to have children, and I'm not getting any younger."

Isabella grimaced, likely imagining what Penelope would have to do to get them, a fact she worried a little about as well.

"Basil is starting to look rather stooped, like a wilted daisy," Isabella finally said, wrapping her arms around her legs and giving them a squeeze. "And my... embroidery projects can only sustain us for so long. That's valid. I've sold something to almost every household in the ton ." Her gaze drifted away as it did when she was telling a fib, landing on the corner of the gossip sheet jutting from beneath the ledger. "So, how goes 'Tall, Dark, and December'?"

"Bloody society and their monikers. I'd hoped you hadn't read it," Penelope whispered and yanked the column free, only to crumple it into a ball and toss it to the floor. "I suppose I should be thankful December's article wasn't as horrid as November's, silver ornamentation to appendages and such."

Isabella dropped her legs to the floor with a gasp of laughter. "This sounds like the Penny of old! The sister who would say anything, do anything. Run through the fields of Derbyshire and come home with brambles in her hair and one slipper missing!"

Whitaker's coin burned where it sat in her pocket. Penny . No one called her Penny, not since her father's death. But, oh , she'd adored that girl and her unflagging spirit. Until a senseless summer and the consequences that followed, she'd been quite fearless. Pushing aside a past she couldn't change, Penelope wiggled into her slippers. The girl who'd routinely lost them in fields of clover was long gone. The girl who'd dreamed of art and love. "I was reckless."

Isabella gave a forlorn groan. “You were fun.”

Her sister had been too young to understand, and thankfully, too young to be caught in the vortex. Penelope had spent the past seven years making up for her mistakes to ensure Isabella’s future wasn’t riddled with them.

Penelope scrubbed at the streak of paint Mr. Whitaker had been keen enough to notice, deciding she’d have to be more careful in the future. To save money, she only allowed herself to paint twice a week, and today had been one of those days.

“So, tell me!” Isabella clapped her hands. “How was he?”

“He was—” Penelope’s gaze traveled the route the cagey American had taken about the room as she debated what to confess. “Tall and dark, indeed.” His skin warmed by frequent exposure to sunlight, not a common attribute in England. And there’d been an earthy fragrance swirling about him. Wood shavings and something oddly metallic, not unlike her paints. Not unpleasant, merely foreign. Enticing. Perhaps it was the scent of labor.

What happened in places one went to get dirty.

The fissure of sensation was so unfamiliar Penelope bolted up in her chair to send it scurrying away.

“I heard he’s involved with the Royal Society and their research on steam engines, although one wonders if he’s merely getting by on his looks.” Isabella brought her hands to her cheeks and sighed. “I had a tough time seeing his face beneath that frightful hat, and I tried.”

“The hat was dreadful,” Penelope murmured, adding a tailor’s visit to her list and wondering where her sister was getting information about this American cad.

Although, the sheen of intelligence in Mr. Whitaker's startlingly green eyes, his split-second calculation of her mathematical error, proved an astuteness beyond that of a frivolous man. A dangerous breed she avoided at all costs. The kind she'd expected to show up on her doorstep today—another silly Brazen Belle selection.

Instead, she suspected neither she nor Weston Whitaker were what they seemed. How appalling a notion. She loathed the slight prick of remorse she felt because, like he'd claimed, she had been judging him—when she'd spent a lifetime being judged herself.

Isabella swung her legs over the arm of the chair and exhaled dramatically. "You're to beat the brashness out of him like you do your first-Season misses? I can't wait to see it."

Acting before she could talk herself out of it, like the impulsive girl she'd once been, Penelope wiggled the coin from her pocket and slid it across the desk.

Isabella took it with a fluttery breath. "Mr. December gave you this?"

Penelope nodded, unable to explain when she had no explanation.

Her sister tilted the coin in the lamplight, where the brand-new copper shone. "How very, very un-English of him."

"Making him a better actor is all I can truly hope for," Penelope said and beckoned for the return of her gift. She wanted the penny tucked safely in her pocket, a notion she had no intention of dissecting. "Mock modesty, a sheen of civility as false as gilt on cheap porcelain."

She silently ticked off the items that had to occur before he was officially introduced to society.

The bruise on his jaw healed, the burns on his hands not as angry. A set of suitable clothing meant to make a statement unlike the farce in *The Rake Review* , a proper shave, and a stylish haircut. Courteous conversation centered around conciliatory topics. Cutlery used from the outside of the setting heading in the direction of the plate. Titles, titles, and more titles—one of which could help him greatly if he'd get over his stubborn wish to disregard it. Regrettably, she couldn't do anything about the way he looked , a significant distraction. "Considering Miss Butterfield, who is now a countess, Mr. Whitaker can't possibly be more of a challenge. Over the course of two grueling months, I turned that ragged young woman into the epitome of decorum, suitable for an earl holding one of the oldest designations in England."

Isabella returned the coin with a thin glance. "Miss Butterfield was in love and willing to endure your guidance. It was affection to the extreme, or you wouldn't have done it and neither would she. Making someone into something they're not without reason goes against your principles. I know this, even if you won't admit it. A rebellious American is a different story entirely."

Penelope pocketed the penny without comment. Her sister was right, of course. She only accepted clients if her instructions were going to change someone's life for the better. Dragging an unwilling victim into matrimonial hell wasn't worth any amount she would be paid to do it. She knew what dire hopelessness felt like, and she'd never be a party to another woman's unhappiness, only her own.

Mr. Whitaker, on the other hand, wanted the polish she was promising.

Penelope wasn't dragging him anywhere.

"Nothing else to impart?" Isabella asked in a singsong tone, her legs swinging. "I feel like you're hiding something. You never tell me anything."

I had to remove my spectacles to dim his brilliance , she could have declared but

didn't dare.

"It's not your fault your governess is as fetching as the first flower in spring," Deke said and wiped his hand across his mouth. With a shiver, he ducked into the collar of his overcoat as he hopped from the carriage seat to the ground. "Godforsaken country, the wind bites harder than a mule wearing a poor-fitting harness."

West drew a breath so crisp it hurt his lungs, although the scent of woodsmoke and frost riding the air calmed him. This little slice, aside from the briny aroma of the docks, felt like home. "As if what she looks like matters," he muttered and tossed the carriage's reins to his groom. He simply hadn't expected to spend hours each week with someone who'd sent a lusty frisson streaking through him upon first sight.

An earl's bleeding daughter, an untouchable.

Not that he was planning to touch.

He could, however, without being able to prevent it, want .

"Women like her are a fascinating mix," Deke continued as they took the winding path leading to the front door of his terrace. He was an endless source of romantic guidance once you got him going. "An invitation and a refusal all at once can incite a fella beyond what's wise. I had a lady friend in my younger days, the niece of a high-up politician, who presented a similar quandary. Lands, that girl, the trouble she got me into. She was wrapped up tight but loved being unwrapped if you get my meaning." He stared into a midnight sky that had begun to spit snowflakes, his gaze misty with memories. "She's married with four children now, last I heard. Or maybe it's five."

"Any news from our investigator about the identity of this Belle person?" West asked in an effort to change the subject as he sprinted up the stairs. They were marble and

slick as shit, sending him skidding across the landing and shoulder to shoulder into the man waiting patiently beneath the alcove, hat in hand.

The headache pulsing gently in West's temple flared at the sight of his half-brother, Tristan Tierney, the Duke of Mercer, who stepped back with an oath, clutching the bricks to keep his own feet from leaving him.

"Whitaker," Mercer said in a perfectly enunciated drawl once he'd recovered his regal bearing. "I was hoping you had a moment to speak."

West opened the door and gestured to the foyer. "You could have waited inside in this weather, Your Grace. I have staff, more than I care to employ, but every soul attached to the lease. One of them would have let you in with a forceful knock, even at this late hour. Hell, dukes are welcome everywhere at any time, aren't they?"

"And families of dukes," Mercer added and strolled into West's terrace like he owned the place. After glancing around for a servant who wasn't arriving, he shrugged from his greatcoat and hung it on the hall tree along with his hat.

Stepping inside, West gritted his teeth but avoided saying anything to start a fight. There was a spark in the air when men needed to settle things with their fists. The spark had been growing until it was an ember near to igniting. West wasn't, for once—and with this man in particular—going to fall for it. "How about we discuss the matter in my study? Second door on the left."

"Gads, it's the brother," Deke murmured as he followed them in, closed the door, and leaned against it.

West made a slashing gesture across his neck to quiet his friend and shadowed Mercer down the corridor. Once inside the room, his own coat and hat removed, he offered his guest a chair and strode to the sideboard. Tea before noon, liquor after.

Fortunately, the rules were the same on both sides of the Atlantic.

At least, in this, he wouldn't bungle the task.

When they were both seated before a hearth that smoldered only a little less than his temper, West held out until his brother buckled.

Fiddling with his glass, Mercer smoothed the beveled edge down the pleat in his trousers from thigh to knee. "I wanted to tell you... that is, I'm sorry you lost Sutherland's funding over that senseless Rake Review prattle. Being married has saved me from such notoriety. Before Camille, I would have been a prime target. Our personas are alike in this regard."

West shrugged and took his first sip of liquor in months while wishing the man sitting across from him didn't look so much like him. Apparently, this town and its lunacy was going to lead him to drink. "Nothing to do with you."

The duke laughed, a sound with a pained edge, and polished off his whisky in one shot. "You can't be that naïve, Whitaker."

West gazed about a space he hoped didn't reveal much about him, then turned back to his brother, giving in slightly. "It's the eyes I'm told. A bit hard to deny."

The Duke of Mercer glanced up slowly, as if a secret had been launched into the night. "I didn't know about you. Not until I found the correspondence in our father's papers. I grew up nearly the loneliest boy in Yorkshire, trust me on this. I would have loved to have someone to share that time with. Family might have"—he frowned into his glass—"kept me from Waterloo, even."

West felt the pinch of compassion, although anger soon followed. He'd fought his own war on the rough streets of Philadelphia, he could tell His Grace. His mother had

been bribed to leave England, leading her—and him—into a future with a decidedly troubled outlook.

Sitting forward, jamming his elbows on his knees, West growled, “What do you desire of me this evening, Your Grace, aside from reminiscing about a past neither of us can change?”

The duke’s familiar green eyes widened. West needed to remember that the English— always —preferred to dance around the subject. “Brixworth told me you’ve agreed to meet with Lady Penelope,” he offered rather than answer the question directly. “For direction meant to send you sailing smoothly into society. I’m sorry it’s necessary, but as you’re wooing the ton for your investments, I can guarantee it is.”

West laughed, deciding to enjoy his damned whisky. “Your little watchdog is on the ready, following instructions as attentively as one of your soldiers. What else did he tell you over a warm pot of tea and crumpets?”

Mercer paused, debating his next words, then he smiled, seizing his own enjoyment. His fingers tapping against cut crystal, he ticked off the points. “That you have a fiancée who sends you scented letters, and most of your attire is gravely in need of being tossed in the rubbish bin. That the Royal Society wants to work with you, and Cambridge is asking you to guest lecture on their campus.” At this, his eyebrow winged up, and if West didn’t know better, he would have thought it was the sign of a proud older brother. “When I only got so far as blowing up a laboratory at Eton. I was rusticated, of course, the polite English version for being expelled. It took me a year to pay off the damages, and two for my hair to grow back properly. I guess brilliance went your way, not mine. The drive . By God, I can see it pulsing off you in veritable waves.”

“I’m not engaged,” West blurted, immediately wishing he could erase the admission.

“Nor am I anything but a modestly attentive engineer. I hear you’re quite the geologist, not exactly lacking in intelligence.”

His brother’s mouth kicked at the corner, pleased.

What a tangle . Bloodlines and brotherhood, debates fraught with complexities for ages. The truth being, West didn’t think he had the heart to give family another go. “If I do this, play along with this charade, attend your holiday ball, take the lessons, act the gentleman, the brother, it’s only for business. My business. Then I return where I belong, which is Philadelphia.” West let the last of his whiskey slither down his throat and roll with a burn into his belly. Liquid courage, as it were. “Are you agreeable?”

The duke settled back, seeming to claim a victory he damned well hadn’t earned. “Camille’s going to like you, and she’s a hard nut to crack. She’s vexed about the Brazen Belle’s slander whilst I don’t give a shite about pleasing them. They believe the war ruined me, and I let them. By the way, I’d be happy to join the ranks of those investing in steam engines, but I rather guess you’ll say no.”

West frowned, feeling caught. “Don’t drag your duchess into this.”

Mercer’s face softened at the mention of her. “She’s in my world, all of it, and always will be. Family, remember?”

West rose, ready for this meeting to end. “If you came to apologize about our relationship leading to my inclusion in that ridiculous column, Your Grace, I accept. Nothing but a harmless piece of commentary if I get my investments in line. I’ve made proper assurances to the lady in question, as she’s the one to be concerned about, when I’ll tell you, she wasn’t concerned so much as delighted to be mentioned.”

West didn't cite his effort to find the Belle and end The Rake Review for good. It was the least he could do for this country seeing as he was half-English. And if he failed, no one need know that, either.

The duke placed his glass on a side table and got to his feet. "Tristan, my name is Tristan. I can't stand being called His Grace, Your Grace, or the like. If you get to know me, you'll understand I loathe the dukedom about as much as you do." Chuckling, he headed for the door, seemingly content with what he'd gained this evening. Meaning West had given up too much. His brother knew when to stand down; he must have made an excellent leader. "Although Lady Penelope might advise you to keep it formal in public. She's a stickler for society's rules, I've heard."

West followed the duke down the corridor and to the vacant foyer, thankful Deke had removed himself. His friend only stirred the pot in sticky situations. "Of course, I can't wait to spend the next two weeks learning to sip tea with my pinky extended at the correct angle."

Mercer shot a wicked glance over his shoulder as he jammed his arms into his coat sleeves. "At least she's the loveliest corrector in England. Don't forget to thank Brixworth for suggesting her, will you?" The duke shuddered and evidently not from the chill seeping through the front door's gap. "He could have gone with Lady Horton, and trust me when I say, it's better he did not."

West watched his brother adjust his hat in the hall mirror in exactly the manner he adjusted his. "Lovely? I hadn't noticed."

The Duke of Mercer—Tristan—tossed his head back in glee at the absurd comment, almost losing his blasted hat in the process. "Keep telling yourself that, Weston, and see how that goes."

CHAPTER FOUR

WHERE A LADY RECALLS WHAT DESIRE FEELS LIKE

He was a mess. A grand, gorgeous mess.

One she'd been hired to clean up.

Penelope stood in the entryway of the warehouse's sprawling main room, the box she'd brought for their lessons filling her arms. She'd agreed to this location without initial consideration of the fact that none of the items she needed for instruction would be housed in a working space. Place settings, cutlery, and the like. Hence, her arrival a day early to ensure they were prepared to start tomorrow.

Plus, she'd been too bloody curious to stay away another minute.

Her breath slowed as she sighted her erstwhile pupil leaning over a partially disassembled engine, a wrench in his hand as he adjusted a part. He was dressed more carelessly than any man she'd seen since her downfall, thin cotton stained with sweat clinging wonderfully to the straining muscles of his arms and shoulders. His midnight hair disheveled, his trousers rumpled and being held on his lean form by braces that cut a sharp, incongruent crease down the center of his back. Light blazed from an assortment of lamps and fixtures, a brilliant burst raining over him.

It was quite the presentation.

Pulling her attention away before she was too taken by the scene, Penelope lifted her

gaze to the detailed sketches and calculations tacked to the wall, and the books tumbled around his feet, pencils jammed in the open folds as if the reader had taken flight during the browsing. The collection spoke of intellect and industry, passion and progress, a life being led without compromise.

For the first time in years, Penelope Anstruther-Colbrook seized temptation simply because...

...she wanted to.

Leaning against the scarred doorjamb, the sounds and scents of Weston Whitaker's world flowed through her. In Limehouse, of all places, a realm she'd never seen and certainly never been invited to, this time purely due to commerce. The acrid odor of heated oil mixing with a salty brine straight off the Thames danced across her nose, the thrum of spinning cylinders and the soft burst of steam presenting a strangely calming murmur. In the distance, shouts from the dock and the bang of goods being unloaded whistled through gaps in the warehouse's planks.

Nothing was as it should be here, and she'd be lying if she said she wanted it to be.

She shifted the box in her arms with a shiver of expectation, the penny in her skirt pocket warm against her thigh. Her life had become incredibly staid by design while the man across from her was more vibrant than a post-squall sunset—bursts of color like those she spilled across repurposed canvases in an effort to save her purse and calm her mind.

The moment spoke of revelation, one she couldn't define.

Stretching to reach a section of the engine, Mr. Whitaker's untucked shirttail rode high, revealing a sliver of skin above his waistband—a moment's view, quickly lost. The leanness of his body wasn't a surprise, nor was the sight of firm muscle at his

hip. It was the contrast with Neville's flaccid outline that had her sighing in regret.

And appreciation.

For a brief summer, she'd investigated the male form in all its glory. Shocking to some, perhaps, but she'd liked her research. Memories, new and old, swept past. She feared her spectacle lenses fogging from her rapid breaths if she didn't calm herself.

Startled by a sound, Mr. Whitaker looked up as the wrench twisted in his hand. Muttering a curse, he let the tool slide free and brought his curled fist to his chest.

Then, she noticed the blood trailing down his wrist.

Penelope was across the room before either of them had time to utter a syllable. Placing her box atop a crate, she dug around until she came up with a napkin. Starched linen with her family's initials embroidered in the corner, but it would do.

"It's just a scratch," he said, though he winced when he flexed his hand.

Rolling her eyes, she pointed to the barrel at his side. "Sit."

Her firm tone prompted a flashing grin that only made him more attractive, she was vexed to note. Nonetheless, he complied, perching his bottom on the rusted iron rim, his hand cradled between his spread legs. "Do your worst, then, Penny, me gal."

Sighing, she stepped gingerly over strips of leather, an errant nail, and various tools she had no name for. "Lady Penelope if you please."

His penetrating gaze cut her way, taking her apart and putting her together again like one of his mechanisms as the seconds ticked away. "What if I don't please? Has any Englishman in history ever been courageous enough to ask?"

Penelope held back a smile and didn't risk laughter. He would take miles if she gave him an inch. "I don't suppose you have medical supplies in this, um, office?"

He tilted his head, debating, searching for things she was sure she should hide. "My assistant keeps a flask in his desk. The beaten one in the corner, second drawer from the top."

Thrusting the napkin at him, she went to find his assistant's liquor stash.

When she returned, he was holding the length of linen away from his body, nowhere near his injury. "You're letting blood drip on the floor, Mr. Whitaker."

He fluttered the napkin like a flag. "You want me to wrap this bit of stitched nonsense around a slice on my hand? The set probably cost more than my boots, and my boots are Hoby."

Yanking the cloth from his grasp, she slapped it on his wound, and he sucked a sharp breath through his teeth. "Sorry," she murmured, gentling her touch. When his eyes closed, she took the time to study him. It was easier without his startling gaze on her. He was handsome, more than. Too much. Young. Too young.

When his eyes opened, she refocused on her task. The whisky smelled divine, and she strived to catch this aroma instead of the teasingly piquant one encircling her pupil. Deciding it had been a long day, she lifted the flask to her lips and took a sip. While Mr. Whitaker choked on an amused snort, she wiped her lips with the back of her wrist, then concentrated on cleaning his. "It doesn't need stitches. I've seen worse."

"Have you, now?" he murmured, shifting forward on the barrel until his knee brushed her hip. The contact was a jagged point of heat, a reminder of how she'd embraced solitude in the past years—and this momentary weakness was the end result.

Cheeks firing, she nudged her spectacles high and dabbed the oozing wound, wondering at her bravado in being alone with The Rake Review's latest sensation. She'd expected several workers to be there, yet only the gorgeous half-brother of a duke inhabited the space, a charming cad with a reputation as depraved as Mercer's had once been. Although her driver was in the alley should she need him, minding the carriage so it wasn't stripped of its velvet squabs. Not that anyone would suspect Lady Penelope Anstruther-Colbrook of scandalous dealings. Aside from a random inappropriate offer, which every woman received on occasion, society left her alone. She wasn't even sure Neville desired her in this way, hunger in his eyes and a quiver in his hands, things she'd made someone experience one long-ago summer.

He wanted an attractive heir, and the betting book at White's likely said she presented the best chance of giving him one.

"It's fine," Mr. Whitaker said in his pleasantly level accent as he sought to remove his hand from her grasp. She got the sense he'd lost the conversation and was struggling to get back.

"There's no need to risk infection because you didn't take proper care." He'd caught the tender web between his thumb and index finger with his wrench, a painful nook. "I don't faint at the sight of blood, and I sew a straight stitch even through skin, believe it or not. When I was a girl, during my summers in Derbyshire, I often got assigned to doctoring domestics and, once, a goat that became tangled in wire fencing."

"Derbyshire," he repeated, doubtless having no idea where this was.

She glanced up, hit the intense lime green of his eyes, and glanced back. Sensation could slither through a person without being touched, she was learning. His scent wasn't the only thing teasing her senses as heat was pouring off him in waves. He was broader than he appeared up close. More luminous, if that was possible. "It's in

the East Midlands of England, very picturesque. Rolling hills, countryside. Years ago, these memories, since the entailed estate was delivered to a distant cousin when my father passed.”

Mr. Whitaker lifted his hand away but immediately held up a finger— one moment—as he removed his cuff and rolled his sleeve to his elbow. His forearm was finely muscled and covered with a faint sheen of dark hair. He shrugged his shoulder before giving his hand back, another of those wholly masculine behaviors that captivated Penelope for no reason she could determine. Possibly because she’d lived with women her entire life, except for her father, and had never seen the makings of a man’s intimate habits.

“No paint on your fingers today, Colbrook,” he said, conveniently ignoring her comment about Derbyshire, a sensitive topic at best.

She turned to the box, rummaging until she came up with the remaining napkin while denying how charmed she was . Colbrook . With a wrenching motion, she ripped the length of linen down the center. “I don’t know what you’re referring to.”

He eyed her makeshift bandage with apprehension. “Oh, yes, you do. And at some point, you’ll tell me your little secret. I’m skilled at tense negotiations.”

She scoffed and stepped in, hip to knee, as near to a man as she’d been since her ruin. If the warm breaths leaving his lips were known to her, the scar cutting across the underside of his jaw visible at this distance, it didn’t have to make him more appealing. It simply didn’t. Wrapping his wrist tightly with the cloth, she tied the ends off with a neat knot and left him to his healing. Before she capped the flask, she took another dainty drink for courage. Americans were casual in all manner of things, weren’t they? What could this hurt?

“Has anyone ever told you that you make a terrifying nurse, Colbrook? In addition, I

fear you'll be a foxed governess. Still, you're full of contradictory surprises, and this tends to keep a man actively on his toes."

"Governess," she whispered and laughed, unable to contain it. Stepping back, she leaned her shoulder against a stack of crates piled higher than her head. If her fingertips were vibrating from unfamiliar contact, so be it. "I'm capable. That's what scares people. Men, especially."

Oh, Penelope.

She uttered a silent curse and dipped her head. Those sips of whisky had the truth spilling free.

He braced his hand on the lip of the barrel as he prepared to jettison himself off it. His trousers stretched over his flexing thighs, and his shoulders tensed. He was beautifully built, there was no question, and held a brilliant intellect, too. What a combination. Nothing like the cad who'd ruined her, either point. He would look astounding on canvas if she were a portraitist, which she was not. "I'm not scared," he said as his boots hit the planked floor. "Even if you should be."

"Why?" she asked, then understood she'd been caught in his trap. Blast it.

He crossed to pillage through her supplies. "Aren't you supposed to have an elderly companion trailing along, surveilling for mischief?" Turning to her, his dark brow winged high. She'd seen the Duke of Mercer pull the very same move. "You brought dishes and flatware? And a day early, too."

"We need these items to review proper dining etiquette. You asked that the lessons be held here, so I'm holding to our arrangement and preparing in advance." Penelope edged the box away from him, stepping out of reach, although the trace of enchantment clinging to his skin strolled with her. "I've passed the point of needing a

chaperone. I'm firmly 'on the shelf' if you're familiar with the term. No one would suspect I'd engage in anything scandalous. It's not beyond reproach so much as it is beyond contemplation."

Whitaker slid a cool look her way. "Are they blind?"

It was the most cleverly veiled compliment she'd ever received.

She closed the box with a snap. "You're too young to know any better."

He paused, his lips parting and a slow breath sliding free. Had he assumed they were a similar age? "How old are you?"

"Whitaker," she said, employing his surname if he planned to employ hers, "don't ever, ever ask a woman that question. Or if she's expecting, because she may simply be plump. Those are topics never to be broached."

He spun a butter knife he'd somehow managed to sneak from the box between his fingers. The silver edge glinted in the light and off the healing burns on his hands. He looked like a magnificent criminal. "Was that my first lesson?"

She carried her supplies out of range of his scent and his heat and plunked them down on another spare crate. "I understand you had tea with the Duke of Mercer at his club."

He laughed, a sound with an edge. "No secrets in this town, are there?"

"No, there are not," she murmured in silken reply. That was his first lesson.

He tapped the knife on his engine as he circled it. The muted tings added to the curious mix of sounds, a pulsing vigor she was coming to appreciate. Except for

children, she'd rarely seen a person who needed to move as much as Weston Whitaker did. Though his movements were swift elegance, beauty in motion. "I also bought new cravats you'll be happy to hear."

"Cravats?" She wasn't sure what he meant, but nonetheless, he needed new everything .

He glanced up, waving the comment away. "I also made an appointment with the tailor you recommended in one of the multitude of notes you sent me this week. I had to pay double to get an upmarket rig in time for Mercer's ball."

She blinked, not having considered this point. "If Jonathan Meyer is too expensive, we can find another tailor adequate enough to suit. I shouldn't have suggested the finest in London, perhaps. I merely wanted to give you the best chance at a stellar presentation. Dressing is in the details, you know. Don't forget, you'll also need a proper shave. Brixworth can help you prepare beforehand."

"Your words are like poetry and a smack across the cheek all at once." Whitaker trailed the dull edge of the knife along a curve in the metal, his emerald eyes dancing. A slight dent in his cheek that could almost be called a dimple slipped into view. "I employ the finest tailor in Philadelphia, but I guess it's not fine enough. In any case, I have money for the English version of the best, Colbrook, more than some dukes and earls even. Most are forced to marry to save their legacies, right? It's the backing to build an enterprise I'm seeking, a foundation for an industry . These are Astor dollars, not Whitaker ones."

"Your family is notable in the Colonies, then? We can weave this information into the narrative I plan to diplomatically share before the duke's ball. Whispers are better than newsprint for communication." That was lesson number two .

His smile vanished, and the air throbbed with tension. "My family is decidedly un

remarkable, Colbrook. My mother passed when I was eight, and my stepfather was worthless, meaning there are no auspicious stories to tell.”

“I didn’t—” Penelope stumbled when she rarely stumbled. “That is—”

“Let’s start the torture sessions since you’re here, and you’ve brought the trappings of polite society with you. I don’t know one fork from another, and this lack has surely been keeping me from living a full life. First, though, I have a minor errand. Five minutes, and I’ll be back.” This said, he was off, loping across the warehouse floor and, from the sound of a door opening and closing, marching into the alley out back.

Penelope’s shoulders slumped. His expression had taken a deep dive as he’d erected walls between them in the span of two breaths. She’d been callous without meaning to be. At every turn, she’d made assumptions about him that weren’t true.

He wasn’t frivolous. He wasn’t heartless, hostile, or oblivious.

He was clever and talented, ambitious and...

Vulnerable . Amidst such a robust bearing, a brilliant mind, a distinctly handsome visage, his eyes were filled with sadness. She suspected heartache was the reason he was pushing his brother away when it was clear Mercer desired a relationship.

Penelope brought the napkin she still held to her face and pressed her nose into it. Closing her eyes, she breathed his tantalizing scent deep. Weston Whitaker’s face swam before her as his contradictions twisted her belly into a knot. Her heart gave a scolding knock as a thrum of fascination battled for prominence above her always steady reason. Her curiosity made sense, of course. She liked solving problems, she liked helping people, but this man wasn’t her problem. His journey to restore his family and find his fortune wasn’t hers to resolve. She merely needed to keep him from making a cake of himself in polite society, end of story.

He was her client. Not a friend, not an enemy. If she kept his penny on her bedside table, that was her secret.

Her heart settled into its normal, solitary state.

Weston Whitaker was nothing to her, actually. Like the rest.

West enjoyed throwing his tutor off-balance.

Because Penelope Anstruther-Colbrook sure as hell threw him off his.

“This is your cat,” she said from her crouched position by his desk, her lovely amber eyes round as disks behind her shimmering spectacle lenses. “You gave her a name and everything. Like a true pet.”

He loved that Penny’s eyes changed from the color of whisky to dark peat, shifting with her mood. The feline she couldn’t seem to believe he’d given a home, an opportunist minx he’d decided to call Elizabeth after President James Monroe’s wife, snaked between her legs.

The name was a slice of home he’d sneaked into England.

The Colonies , he thought, and laughed softly into his fist. These damn Brits think they own the world.

Penelope glanced up at the sound, ready to challenge his teasing. He didn’t mean anything by it, but he had a feeling she’d taken more than her share from those who did. The scandal Brixworth had mentioned, something West had chosen not to investigate further. Searching for the identity of the Belle was enough intrigue for one lifetime.

“Lazy creature sleeps on the bed in the loft I have for nights I stay over. Haven’t you ever had a pet?” he asked from the rickety chair he inhabited in his untidy office, a squat room off the main space he’d taken as his own. They’d relocated here after she decided he couldn’t listen while fiddling with his engine, and that their mission, of critical importance, required his full attention. Finally, after minutes of his fidgeting and losing track of their lesson, she’d left the room and come back with a sack of cookies she stated were called scones.

This is how he found himself eating silly-named snacks on a December afternoon while a beautiful woman puzzled over him. It was plain to see from the charming fold between her finely arched brows, as she reviewed appropriate topics of conversation over dinner, that she didn’t know what to make of him.

As for West, he was wrapped up in trying to feed her captivation—against his better judgment. But such was a man’s purpose in life.

He’d never had a woman interested in him, even professionally, who fought it so hard.

“Oh, pets, no,” she said and gave Elizabeth a tentative caress from ear to tail. “My father was allergic, and my mother against the idea completely. Animals were unsanitary, in her opinion. Though Isabella and I always wanted a dog.” Then she shrugged, erasing her desires as if this was simply the way of it. “I don’t know why we haven’t gotten one now that they’re gone. My sister is full of mischief and disappears for long periods of time. Maybe something to take care of would keep her home where she belongs.”

West polished off his cookie in two bites, then dusted sugar from his fingertips. Unfortunately, watching Penny stroke his cat bald was having an unwelcome effect. Her gentle but efficient ministrations to his injured hand had deepened into sexual tension the longer she touched him. Tension he was familiar with even if she wasn’t.

His cock shifted in awareness, pressing against his drawers. Not good.

Grabbing another scone, blueberry this time, he tore into it. A gust off the river rippled through the room, sending a golden, candlelit flutter over his tutor and his cat. Penny leaned into the draft, a slight move that molded silk against her legs. The gown was simple, high-necked, lots of buttons and ties, a shade not far from a ripe banana, and it blazed in the glow. Her profile, smiling at Elizabeth, lessons forgotten, wound a spring inside him near to bursting. She was kind. Misunderstood. A nurturer, as his mother had been. A guarded gaze, watchful, likely not far from his. Intelligent, more so than a woman needed to be in a world that didn't care for it.

He trusted himself in this assessment; he was a damned good judge of character.

His secret, never to be revealed? He found her as delicious as her scones.

A troubling predicament because he didn't need the distraction. Appreciating a beautiful woman was one thing, starting to like her another. Emelia was an ocean away, far from body and mind. A woman he had a steady friendship with that tumbled into intimacy on occasion. No rules had been broken over the earl's daughter. Could he help it if he'd dreamed about her two nights ago, a passion-filled series waking him in the dead of night and leading to a stronger release than any he'd had by his own hand in months?

He flicked crumbs from his palms with a hushed oath. It was the damned spectacles.

In the dream, she'd been wearing nothing else.

A supple snore from the depths of the room had them turning, laughing, thankfully easing the knot inside his chest and the tinge of heat in the air. His second surprise of the day for Lady Penelope Anstruther-Colbrook.

Penny shook out her skirt and rose to her feet. “You didn’t have to find a chaperone, though I appreciate the gesture. No one knows I’m here, and even if they did, my activities are unremarked upon.”

Turning his chair around, West straddled it, folding his arms along the top rail. His restlessness was getting acute, and it seemed as if his lessons weren’t over yet. “Her grandson is a dockhand I met last week. She was a seamstress, but her eyesight isn’t the best anymore, and she’s been looking for work. I thought it might be advisable, given the circumstances, to employ her for our lessons. Although I told her we were starting tomorrow.”

Penny’s lenses shimmered. “This seems benevolent charity,” she whispered with a glance thrown to the old woman draped in a woolen shawl and sleeping soundly on a crate in the corner, “disguised as good business.”

He shook his head, his injured hand flexing around the spindles. “Don’t ascribe kindness where it isn’t warranted, Colbrook. I’m as ruthless as they come.”

“Of course, you are,” she agreed, sounding like she believed her judgment more than his. Crossing to his desk, she leaned her hip against it and hefted the tome they’d been discussing before taking a break to pet felines in her arms. His very own copy of Debrett’s , a gift from his erstwhile valet with pages marked he needed to review. “Let’s begin the introduction to titles before we end today’s session, then we’ll go into more detail tomorrow. You did very well with place settings.”

West threw a longing glance at the empty cookie bag. Titles .

Penny crossed her ankles, giving him the faintest view of slippers a shade darker than her gown. She was slender as a reed, the top of her head not reaching his chin should he decide to take her splendid face in his hands and kiss her.

West groaned loudly enough to be heard.

“This is important, Whitaker.” Her fingers did an impatient skip along the book’s leather spine. “You’ll need to know your earls from your viscounts if you want their money. And the proper address of their wives. Not all the aristocracy is destitute, you see, and society holds firm on nomenclature.”

“Elitists, that’s what you are,” he said and rounded his shoulders in a bruising stretch.

Her glance hit him, and held, before dancing away. Her split-second hesitation wasn’t lost on him, nor was the faint flush on her cheeks. Or her teeth sneaking out to charmingly catch hold of her lower lip.

Like a leaden weight, he let the suspicion sink deep.

It appeared he wasn’t the only one attracted, God help them both.

As if she’d heard his silent acknowledgement, his tutor cleared her throat and pressed a slender fingertip to the page. “Let’s start with your brother. He occupies six paragraphs in Debrett’s, quite an accomplishment.”

West yawned, his mind straying to mathematical calculations. They were off on mass distribution, leading to a flywheel with an uneven rotation. A critical issue to resolve as this regulated motion of the entire system. “The fifth Duke of Mercer, Viscount Wimble, Baron Easley, because every gent needs three. The ducal title dating from 1642. Ancestral homes in Somerset and Devon. A duchess who is interested in botany, of all things. The last part, the only remarkable thing about him.”

Penny frowned, her adorable pleat creeping between her brows. “You’ve already read this.”

He yanked on his bandage, which was holding up nicely, tucking a tattered end into the main fold. The wound stung, but he'd certainly had worse. "Brix noted the key passages, so I gave it a quick skim the other night before bed. It did the trick. I was out like a snuffed wick. That book is better than laudanum."

Her lovely lips parted, and by damn , did he crave covering them with his own. He wanted her shocked expression to be propelled by other reasons entirely. "You reviewed this once and remembered everything?"

West rocked forward in his chair. "Who would read that drivel twice ?"

"Goodness," she murmured, glancing at the page.

Uh-oh , he thought as a familiar sensation radiated through him. Scenes from his childhood and being bullied for his unusual abilities. "I recall things when I read them. It's—" He dragged his chin across his shoulder, unable to define the skill. He only knew he found it helpful in his line of business. He wouldn't add that his mind had caused problems until he learned to hide it. Until he grew into a body and a face that brought attention he used to divert the rest.

"Duke, marquess, earl, viscount, baron, in order of rank," he added, a tad showy, but he'd already unmasked himself, so why not? It had been ages since he'd done anything to impress a soul. "Not including the courtesy titles, because again, what man doesn't need five. I also reviewed every investor I'm hoping to meet, though I could use some help with when to use lord versus a surname and such. At home, we tend to go with first names from the start."

"Let me make another list," Penny whispered and leaned over the desk, rooting about for paper and a quill.

Stop , he started to say but didn't.

He couldn't hold to his seat as she located the exact letter he wished she hadn't. When there was nothing to hide, nothing he'd done wrong.

Nonetheless, apprehension danced along his spine.

When he reached her, West slipped Emelia's missive from her hand and tossed it aside. Grabbing a folio and quill, he placed them beside her. "Ink is on the shelf, Colbrook."

With a sly smile, she nodded to the desk. "What a comely scent those pages were emitting, Whitaker. I would bet on roses if I were to wager."

The urge to kiss the smirk from her face took hold of him like a fever. Behind her lenses, her eyes were golden bursts shot through with threads of amber. A dusting of freckles he'd never noticed before—very orderly, like the owner—marched across the bridge of her nose. He didn't allow his gaze to again lower to the breasts straining against her bodice, an image he planned to bring forth later this eve.

His cock was getting used to visions of her as a matter of startling fact.

"I can't guess what you're thinking," she whispered, her words calm, though her smile was luminous.

Probably for the best, he decided, wondering if Penelope Anstruther-Colbrook recognized flirtation when it smacked her in the face. "She came to me," he said, a completely unexpected admission.

Baffled, Penny glanced at Emelia's letter.

"I'm referring to Lady P and that cursed Rake Review," he said and nudged Emelia's spirit out of sight, which only served to launch the aroma of roses into the air. "The

other, well, she's a friend."

Penny's lips twitched, her skepticism evident. "A friend who sprays her notes with perfume before dispatching them across an ocean is a wondrous friend, indeed. As to Lady P, do you always say yes when a woman comes calling?"

There was no way to win a discussion he shouldn't have started, so West took the easy way out. "Only if the right one asks."

Her smile dipped. She obviously didn't like this answer.

"It's none of my business who you cavort with," Penny said and gathered his book of nobility close to her chest, extinguishing a view he'd already committed to memory. "You only make our job harder as we work to secure your acceptance."

He didn't follow her as she gathered up her things and quit the room. He'd have one of the junior engineers shadow her conveyance until it entered a safer borough.

With an oath, West yanked Emelia's letter from beneath the pile and gave it an irritated sniff as the low rumblings of a working warehouse returned to his consciousness. It was none of Lady Penelope's business who he cavorted with, a genteel word for fucked.

None at all.

So, why did it feel like it was?

CHAPTER FIVE

WHERE A RAKE WOOS SOCIETY

Penelope stood close to the veranda doors in the event she needed to make a quick exit. It wasn't the setting that was frightening, a fittingly seasonal display of holly, candlelight, and pine, as the Duchess of Mercer's sophisticated style reached each corner of her ballroom. The orchestra was proficient—not always the case—and the gathering exclusive, therefore it was not a blind crush of bodies, heat and stench.

She'd come to her first ball in years for two reasons.

To keep a close eye on her sister.

And her pupil.

Her beautiful concerns stood across the way, one seeking a profitable start to business endeavors, the other a profitable start to a Season. Penelope sipped from a glass of ratafia that was as horrid as she remembered while considering her chanciest gamble of the two with pride and apprehension.

Dear heavens, did her rebellious American clean up well.

For almost two weeks, she'd worked to mold Weston Whitaker into what was needed for his success, their meetings notations she drew fanciful circles around on her calendar. She looked forward to them in a way she'd never looked forward to etiquette lessons, and she'd miss them madly when they were over. Recognizing this

folly, she nonetheless treated her instructions as professionally as she could in the midst of their profound conversations and deepening friendship.

She didn't care to mention the flirtations, though they were there as well.

"Don't shake hands," she'd told him yesterday. "We don't understand the gesture."

"You're offended, you mean," he'd added with a wry smile as he munched on a lemon scone, his new favorite. Then he'd winked, a first.

And her heart took a slight but noticeable tumble.

Penelope tunneled her hand into the concealed pocket of her gown and touched the penny she'd brought for courage and luck. His luck, her courage. Whitaker would be fine—and so would she despite her unease. He knew to avoid discussing politics and finances until liquor was introduced later in the evening. He knew to keep his curses to a minimum and his thoughts on the rigidity of English society out of the conversation completely. He knew which fork was used for salad versus mutton. Under his own guidance, for personal reasons he'd not shared, he'd vowed to keep his intellect moderately hidden.

The rest she'd left to Brixworth—who had done a remarkable job.

Penelope's breath had seized when she walked into the ballroom and spied Whitaker strolling down the marble staircase sandwiched smartly between the Duke and Duchess of Mercer, his sardonic expression stating he recognized he was being managed.

For one, she'd never seen him entirely clean shaven. If he had the face of a god before, his chiseled jaw was on glorious display now. His formal coat accentuated the broad lines of his shoulders, the ivory waistcoat adding a touch of elegance against

sharp shades of black. His cravat was perfectly knotted, his thick hair finally cut in the latest style. Still, there was a singularity about his interpretation, or perhaps it was the way he carried himself. A rolling looseness no Englishman had perfected, not even a duke.

Despite her wishing it weren't so, her gaze was drawn more to him than any other person in the room.

Including Neville, who'd been delighted to find she was attending. The marquess passed her on a turn on the dance floor, his smile pleasant. Quite agreeable, really. His jaw didn't appear to be crafted from marble, certainly, but he was acceptable in every other way. She'd arranged to waltz with him during the next set, one strike off her card.

Because she had to, she smiled back.

Seconds later, a warm sensation stirred her as surely as a caress.

Whitaker's bright green gaze lifted over the mostly feminine group surrounding him, possibly because he was the tallest man in attendance with the exception of his brother. She was the focus of his attention for mere seconds—and he hers—before he glanced at Neville with a frown she shouldn't be gratified to see.

Possessiveness had no place in their relationship.

And a man who received scented notes from Emelia Rossmore of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania had a life elsewhere. One he was set to return to as soon as he finalized his dreams.

Before Penelope could decide how to solve a problem with no immediate solution, a specter from her past cornered her.

“Who’s the man talking to Colbrook?”

Tristan Tierney, the Duke of Mercer, muffled a sneeze and glanced in the direction West pointed. He claimed the chalk covering the slick marble floor, sprinkled about to keep the aristocracy from ending up on their asses, aggravated his allergies. “Weeks of lessons, and you’re calling Lady Penelope by her surname? Americans are a rare breed, I will say.”

“It’s nothing, simply a way to aggravate my tutor. Who is he, Tris?” After days of close proximity to a woman he was harboring a veiled infatuation with, he recognized her tells. Penny chewed on her bottom lip when she was distressed. Twisted a strand of flaxen hair about her finger. Tapped her toe. Twitched her skirts.

The flushed cheeks he wanted to shelter with his palms as he drew her into a kiss, he’d figured were his and his alone.

Tristan turned to him, his grin exultant. “Tris. Only my darling duchess calls me that.”

West groaned when he realized what he’d said, questioning if it would be improper to ask his brother if he had a flask hidden in his jacket. “Can we discuss brotherhood and your continued obsession with your wife later? Now, I need information.”

Tristan adjusted his cravat, his lips closing on ducal secrets. Obviously, he didn’t want to tell West about the man who had Penny trapped against a row of overripe ferns. “Between family, I’ll admit I once had a reputation for unruly behavior. I returned from Waterloo a bit of a lost soul, and I often let my grief get the best of me. Camille wouldn’t appreciate my getting into a brawl at my own ball, even for a brother who’s conceivably in the midst of his unruly phase. I recognize a feral look when I see one.”

The answer only made West's blood heat. This, and Penny's fingers clenched around the skirt of a gown in shades of pale ivory and gold that made her look like a goddess stepping from a painting. He wished she wasn't the only person in London who made his homesickness disappear as swiftly as smoke hit by a gust off the Thames. "I can take care of myself."

"That doesn't change the fact of my not letting anyone mishandle you in front of me." Tristan nodded to West's hands and the knuckles he was popping. "Though I long to hear the story of your life in Philadelphia, as you're fearsome for someone with such a professorial mind. Brawn and brains is rather the unique combination, a rare sight in England because most have neither."

"Fine," West growled and started across the ballroom floor.

He'd do this on his own, like he always had.

"West," Tristan whispered and grabbed his elbow before he parted a crowd that wouldn't appreciate it. "Do you want to undo everything she's worked for over the years? All you have the past weeks? You've done an excellent job charming them this evening. Don't wreck it."

West's steps slowed, though his gaze stayed locked on Penny. She and the gentleman—there was no denying he was one of them—were in a seemingly intense exchange.

"If you must go charging over," Tristan murmured with a smile, as if they were discussing a trivial matter, "use your intellect, not your fists. You have him there, I can confirm. In spades."

"So, she does know him."

Tristan rolled his shoulders, seeing no way out except the truth. “Lord Northridge. She was engaged to him for a time.”

Engaged . This information sank like a stone in his belly and increased the rosy haze coating his vision. It also confirmed how little he knew about Lady Penelope Anstruther-Colbrook.

“I won’t fuel gossip that has since died out. If you want to know more, ask her. Suffice it to say, there was a minor scandal Northridge made worse in how he handled it. It’s been years, most in society have forgotten. Though his viscountess, who is home with their infant, likely wouldn’t welcome him talking to his former intended.”

“This is why she hides herself away,” West whispered, blood streaking wildly through his veins. He was going to pummel that arrogant nob’s face into pulp.

Tristan released his arm with a muted groan. “I’m afraid to ask, but what, precisely, is your relationship with Lady Penelope?”

“We’re business associates,” West lied and straightened his cuffs, finally grateful for Brixworth’s devotion. “I’m going over there. If you want to lead to make it look incidental, act the protective older brother and concerned host, here’s your chance.”

“Bloody hell,” Tristan whispered and shouldered through a crowd appreciative of any interaction with a duke.

Every eye fixed on them, West nodded as he circled the ballroom’s perimeter. Luckily, the Tierney genes were robust. Height was an advantage when one wanted to look over a crowd or down on a man.

Which is exactly what West planned to do.

The viscount was laughing while Penny was stone-faced when they reached the dessert table, located close enough to the couple to make this a valid reason for the trip. Tristan selected an iced cake and glanced to the side, reacting as if he'd just noticed who stood there.

Gesturing to West to follow, he strolled over. "Northridge, Lady Penelope," Tristan said, taking a neat bite of cake, "I hope you're enjoying the ball."

"Your Grace, it's lovely," she said and gave a subtle curtsy, exhibiting no indication of her displeasure. "I thanked Her Grace earlier for the invitation. I believe she had to get back to your son."

Tristan smiled, tenderness softening the hard line of his jaw. "Ethan is in what we call the 'fits.' He's delightful but also throws tantrums when he doesn't get his way. Bedtime is a struggle, and his nurse cannot always make it happen, but my wife can."

"Haven't talked to you much since Cambridge, Mercer," Northridge murmured, his speculative brown gaze bouncing between the brothers. Evidently, he didn't want to discuss children, a duke's or his own.

Tristan hummed, clearly saying, Yes, there's a reason for that.

Spurned but unrepentant, Northridge shifted his focus to West before Tristan had a chance to formally introduce them. "Mr. Whitaker, isn't it? What American university did you attend? I have a family friend currently at Yale College if you know of it."

Tristan frowned, his fingers nearly destroying the cake.

West discreetly elbowed his brother before he raced in to defend the slight. He'd already dealt with this question twice this night. "I'm self-made, as it were. I have to

say, Lord Northridge, this town is passionate about academia. Cambridge, was it?” West exhaled and scratched the underside of his jaw. Penny’s liquid amber gaze followed the movement, sending a bubble of heat dancing along his skin. If she looked away, he’d have a better time managing this charade. “I’m speaking there in two weeks. You should come.”

He’d finally agreed to the offer after a number of convincing talks with Penny.

The viscount’s lips parted in confusion. “Speaking? At Cambridge?”

West dipped his chin, glancing down on the blackguard. “To students seeking a profession in steam power. The administration was hoping for a series of lectures, but I can’t spare the time.”

“Don’t forget your work as a consulting engineer with the Royal Society,” Tristan murmured, popping his remaining dessert into his mouth.

“Can’t forget,” West said in sighing agreement, as if the world rested on his shoulders.

With a snort, Penny glanced at her slippers. Nothing ladylike about it, which is when West liked her best.

He caught her gaze when she lifted it, needing the connection they’d found in his dank office to exist here as well.

He didn’t know why he needed it; he simply understood with a jolt of terror that he did.

For a long moment, the clink of crystal and the hushed melody from the orchestra retreated. As it often did in the warehouse when they were surrounded by workers

and Penny's oft-dozing chaperone, truly, it seemed just the two of them. His fingertips itched to touch, his body to seize, commands he was starting to have trouble denying.

If he took a step closer to his desire, he would be unable to stop himself.

"Why, this is a popular spot," a voice behind West murmured. "I hate to intrude, but Lady Penelope, dear, I believe I have this waltz."

West would have thought nothing of Penny having a go on the dance floor—or not much—although she'd mentioned during their lessons that the waltz held more significance. Filling one's card was as important as breathing at these damned affairs, wasn't it? Ladies hung the slips of paper from their wrists, waving the signatures about like veritable trophies.

Yet, the way her smile vanished and the remorseful expression that followed meant he'd not only be waging war against a stammering viscount, but also a bloke who knew Penny well enough to call her dear. A man who, when West turned to scrutinize him, held a greedy sort of bearing another greedy soul instantly recognized.

The familiar feeling of unworthiness rushed over West like a wave. He was an outsider in a foreign land playing at being a duke's brother.

In that instant, West decided to forgo a war he had no chance of winning.

CHAPTER SIX

WHERE A LADY SHARES A SECRET

Penelope waited an hour before she went to find him.

She couldn't get it out of her mind—or her heart—that she'd hurt West without meaning to. His vulnerability stacked atop such a rough exterior presented a profound contradiction.

It drew her like little else in this life had.

He was a success, her task fulfilled. The ballroom was buzzing with positive commentary about the brash, young American. If he'd erred in any way over the course of the evening, it wasn't enough to halt the crowning of a luminary. His brother's obvious, and very protective, ducal support added a layer of icing to an already delicious cake. Nonetheless, when West left her with Northridge, a man she loathed, and Neville, a man she'd decided she only desired as a friend, there'd been an abruptness to the departure, a chill snaking between them that wasn't from the weather.

His probing gaze hadn't sought hers out again, not once.

Which left her struggling with a wildly inappropriate infatuation for the most confounding man she'd ever met. Though Penelope played the role of an even-tempered woman because society demanded it, in actuality, she was still that impulsive girl.

And when she was around her brilliant pupil, the girl wanted out .

She slipped through the terrace door she'd seen him use minutes before, as certain as he that it would provide an isolated nook in this weather. No matter the chill, the night was dry, a blazing three-quarters moon flooding the chipped flagstones beneath her feet with a golden shimmer.

She made no effort to conceal her footfalls slapping against stone. Or the rush of pleasure when the sight of his long body angled against a column became clear, the wink of moonlight against the champagne flute in his hand a flare in the night.

Luring her against her will and with it.

Exasperation was evident when she moved close enough to see his face, along with the same fascination she knew sat upon hers. Without comment, he held out his glass. When she took it, he shrugged from his coat in one of those masculine shows of graceless elegance that made her toes curl. She turned, presenting her back, unable to suppress her shiver when he dropped the woolen weight upon her shoulders.

It was warm from his skin and smelled like seven slices of heaven. Pressing her nose to the sleeve, she pulled his scent into her soul.

"You're hiding," she finally said, breaking a silence that had begun to pulse in her ears.

"So are you," he returned, his breath streaking across the nape of her neck. Pushing her to the point of lunacy, his finger dipped inside the coat's collar to gently work a strand of hair free. If he'd lingered a moment more, one bloody second , Penelope would have shoved him against the column, pressed her lips to his and been done with it.

She knew how to start an affair.

How to discreetly end one had been her problem.

Reaching around her, more touching she wanted and didn't, he snatched the flute from her hand and took a bruising sip. "Whatever you're thinking, stop it. Heat is blasting off you like a goddamn hearth. And from the looks of your admirers, I don't think they have the skillfulness to create it. I think it's me."

Turning to him, Penelope wrapped her hands around his coat lapels and drew them close to her cheeks. She hoped this served to hide her smile, just a little. She hadn't felt this wicked, or this wonderful, in years.

When Whitaker got a full glance at her, he took another fast drink. "Are you foxed? Is that it?"

She laughed and realized when it came out sounding like a giggle that what she'd thought was one glass of champagne had perhaps been two. This could account for the aura around him, a misty, winter wonder. Standing there in shirtsleeves, an ivory waistcoat, and his wonderfully knotted cravat. Ebony hair unended by his fingers and the wind, his jaw beginning to show the shadow of stubble it grew mere hours after a close shave.

And his eyes, his glorious, green-as-grass eyes fixed and holding on her.

If she was beautiful, as she'd been told but didn't care to classify, so was he.

He bumped back into the column, and she had the impression he'd run if a slab of marble wasn't holding him there. "Go inside, Penny, before I lose my wits. I've had my own fair share of champagne. It's the only way to survive it."

“Survive what?” she whispered.

He swore and yanked his hand through his hair, the silver sleeve fastener Brixworth had selected winking in the moonlight. “This country. My brother. My business. My past, which haunts me more here than it does at home. If I’m brutally honest, you are what I’m currently trying to survive. You .” Polishing off the champagne, he turned and flung the glass into the night where it hit the lawn with a thump. “What is this between us? Is it only me who feels it?”

She shook her head. It’s not only you.

“Northridge?”

“Long forgotten,” she murmured.

“The earl.”

Penelope shrugged beneath the weight of his coat.

“There was someone.” His gaze seized hers, emerald sparking in the pitch night. “You know what it’s like.”

She shook herself free of his hold. “Passion?” She pressed her wrist to her nose and dwelled for seconds in the crisp scent embedded in his cuff. Her body was beginning to hum, arousal she recognized only too well. Long dormant lust, like her impulsive nature, seeking release. “There was someone, but I paid the price, without as much regret as expected. This time could be—”

His stunned oath cut her off. “You’re an earl’s daughter. I’m a lad from the streets. A lad set on returning to his life in a month, maybe two. Do you truly desire an interlude with no future laid before it?”

“Isn’t that the definition of romantic interludes? They end .” A sizzle of temper spirited through her veins. She’d been told for long enough what was best for her. “I’ve done all I can to ensure your success, now there can be this. We’ll be on equal footing, and I don’t care what anyone thinks.”

He grunted, his gaze roving the veranda before shifting back to her. “Yes, you do. You will. I can’t see the need for so many forks, and I’m not going to try. What we’ve created the past two weeks is a facade of our, and my able valet’s, making. I’m not planning to reside in Weston’s fine clothes for long. I won’t reside in them for one second behind closed doors, even for you.”

She didn’t argue. Instead, she went where she knew he didn’t want her to go. “Emelia?”

“Penny, I can scarcely remember what she looks like.” He closed his eyes, possibly trying to bring her image forth. “She makes sense, like your starry-eyed marquess. We understand each other in the way formidable couples do. There are no agreements I’m breaking as we have none. Emelia is simply a possibility.” His lids lifted, his gaze spearing her. “You’re the one inhabiting my dreams, not her.”

Penelope’s temper settled into fear. She’d never been denied in this area, though she’d only asked once before. “Lady P would agree that affairs happen every day.”

“Blessed hell , there’s no comparison to the way you make me feel. Like I can move mountains.” He held up his hand to stop her when she took a step closer. “Emotion doesn’t make this a wise move. Like it is in chess, a reckless one will gut you. The heart deals a much crueler wound than a blade.”

“I make you feel like you can move mountains?” Tears pricked her vision, and Penelope blinked to keep herself from crying in front of him. She hadn’t shed a single tear over losing Northridge. She’d never been important to someone, never meant

enough.

Whitaker scrubbed the back of his neck, unease circling him like London's damned mist. "You make me feel safe."

She curled her fingers around the coin in her pocket, her words as uneven as her heartbeat. "Are you going to kiss me? Perhaps our angst is for naught."

Men are so easy to challenge, she thought as he strode to her.

She tilted her chin, refusing to glance at her slippers as every proper English woman was taught to do. If he only understood, she was as much of an outcast as he.

"Your audacity kicks me in the teeth every time," he whispered as he reached for her. Framing her cheeks with his hands, his gloves long gone, he tipped her gaze to his. Moonlight danced over his face, highlighting a regrettably solemn expression and the exquisiteness inhabiting her dreams. "I've spent the past days watching you, wanting you. You're an equation, one I desperately want to solve. Desire is battling reason, rare for me, meaning I won't seek the answers to you in half measure. I understand myself too well to imagine otherwise... but I can't live without knowing, either. Once."

Ready a thousand hours ago, her lips parted before his touched hers, a mistake.

What should have been a gentle introduction instead devastated from the start. An instant, explosive, chemical reaction even she, with her days of longing, hadn't expected. The first taste shot higher than her fantasies, vivid colors of the sort she layered across canvas spilled free in her mind.

Groaning at her swift acquiescence, his tongue drew hers into play as the backs of his fingers trailed down her neck, circling her nape and drawing her closer, hip to hip.

His capable response and the luscious trace of champagne on his lips evaporated awareness. The dull echo of an orchestra, laughter, a branch hitting a window above them, ceased to exist until there was only him.

Lifting her arms, she twined them about his neck, scraped her nails along his skin as she plunged her fingers into hair as wondrously unruly as she'd imagined. Suddenly boneless, sagging in his arms, his coat tumbled to the flagstones. Her body pulsed, desire finally realized cascading through her veins. The secreted parts of her, pleased in the dead of night by her hand, blossomed fully under his.

"I told you," she whispered on a ragged breath, in mere seconds having proven her case.

"You win," he murmured as he backed her into a darkened corner where they would not be seen. Flattening her against the wall, he pillaged, molding his broad body to hers. Then, his hands roamed. Her breast in his palm, tenderly cradled, his thumb searching for her hardened nipple. The other curving over her hip, urging her into a frenzied grind. Senses alight, she raced to catch up, to lead, on her tiptoes to reach him, but she lost herself as desire blurred her world and her poise. His shaft was a rigid length against her hip, his muscled thigh wedged between hers, giving her a way to ease the pulsing agony at her core.

There could be no kiss like it again in this life unless shared with him. Desire shouldn't have the power to consume a soul, yet it did.

When her hairpin hit the flagstones with a pop, as her fingers were curled in his cravat to tug it loose, as his fist was tangled in her skirt to drag it to her knee, their gazes met in stunned acknowledgment of how far they'd gone on a duke's twilight-misted veranda.

"Stay," she murmured, cupping his jaw, holding him steady before he could run

away. His cheeks were flushed, his shoulders rising and falling with his exhalations. Dropping her brow to his chest, she shivered in his arms, and thankfully, he curled them around her and brought her home.

“Better than dreams,” he said into her hair, his breath streaking over her scalp. “Dammit.”

Smiling, Penny recalled the dab of yellow paint on her palm she’d been unable to remove, now hidden by her glove. She’d concealed herself long enough.

“The note in your pocket.” She grazed her chin across the bone button of his waistcoat and purred like a cat. “From Lady Billingsly. I saw her give it to you.”

West kissed her temple and lingered with a drawn breath. “What?”

Pleasure flooded her. The poor man had forgotten all about it.

Leaning back, she noted his vacant gaze, his swollen lips, the moist sheen to his skin. Lower, his cock ready at her hip. His trembling fingers at her nape. Like her, he was caught in arousal’s grasp. “We’ll trade. Her offer for mine, though I have no quill and paper. You’ll have to take my word for it.”

Without delay, he tunneled his hand in his pocket and handed the folded sheet over.

She opened the note—mouthed “find me at midnight” with a scowl—then ripped it into pieces and let them flutter to the flagstones.

“I wasn’t going to accept. That damned Rake Review has the lot of them thinking I will. I can’t even tell you her name.”

She let his pronouncement sink in, deciding she believed him. Truthfully, he couldn’t

help it if he was the most appealing man in the ballroom. “You said I know so much about you, yet you know nothing about me.”

His lids dropped, shielding, guardedness creeping between them.

Well, she wasn't having it. Not with her body entangled with his and the greatest kiss of her life only moments behind her. Determined, she guided his mouth to hers, and after the slightest hesitation, he let her tug him into another, gentler, but no less potent, engagement.

When he started to pull away, she decided it was time to quit hiding. “What if I were to share my biggest secret?”

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHERE A MAN ADMITS TO AROUSED UNEASE

Debating his options when he suspected he only had one, West lingered in the courtyard behind Penny's terrace, knocking his boot against an uneven stone and recording the play of shadow and light over ivy-covered brick.

He believed the English called this space a mews.

His wish to know the inner workings of Penelope Anstruther-Colbrook this desperately was a hazard. A threat. Risky behavior of the romantic kind he always avoided. Lovemaking on the run, as it had been with Lady P and the others, even Emelia for the most part, suited him. Suited the women involved. Everyone was happy. Agreeable. He gazed at the moon in admiration, deciding a cloudless sky in London was quite the rare thing.

Making love in a moonlit garden would be an adventure.

Despite his varied experiences, he hadn't had many of those.

Removing his timepiece from his pocket, West ticked off his motives for delaying with the minutes. A man of detail, he'd discovered new aspects of sexual congress during each encounter until confident proficiency had taken over. Striving for her pleasure over his seemed, to him, a good thing.

Accordingly, lack of skill wasn't the cause of his apprehension.

His dilemma lay in the certainty that he couldn't like Penny any better than he already did. She was intelligent, kind, strong, loyal. And so, so beautiful. What could come from seeing her secrets spilled before her like jewels from an open vault, but a fall he wasn't prepared for? She'd neatly shelved their professional relationship into a drawer for completed projects and now wanted to let him into the deeper recesses. When his future was cogs and spinning gears, the things he'd found he could trust. Numbers that led to equations that led to designs were what he used to navigate the world without destroying anyone in the process.

Including, maybe weakly, himself.

When he'd told Penny, under the drunken power of her allure, that she made him feel safe, he hadn't been joking.

Safe wasn't something West was used to.

Every time she'd arrived at his warehouse looking fresh as a flower of the English variety, something pristine and straight-stemmed—thirteen visits, to be exact—he'd slipped a little deeper under her spell. Along the way of learning which spoon had been crafted for soup and soup alone, he'd discovered the oddest thing.

A lesson he would impart to his son someday.

When a man slipped under said spell, and the woman casting the spell didn't know she was casting it, the spell and the woman became more powerful.

Too powerful for someone who held his pleasures and his hurts very, very close.

Seeing bits of himself break off like the edges of a dry leaf and drift over to her during their discussions in his balmy warehouse had been illuminating in a scared-as-hell sense. West suspected this is how friendships were built, brick by brick. Story by

story. Smile by smile. Over the days, he'd become comfortable. Looked forward to hearing her sultry voice define acceptable topics of conversation for a dinner party and ways to properly knot a cravat. If lovely, witty, delightful Lady Penelope took the time to ensure a ruffian like him knew an earl held a higher rank than a baron, who was he to argue?

Traces of her lingered in his world. A cracked vase on his desk, the scent of her embedded in his coat, her delicate scrawl on notes scattered about his office, none of which he'd made any effort to dispose of.

Yet, through this blinding temptation, he'd held steady.

Until a ball, two glasses of champagne, and a moonlit veranda. Their kiss was an undoing. The shedding of a base layer, leaving raw, throbbing desire exposed.

Where did a blossoming friendship go after the best first kiss in history?

"Ah, hell," West whispered and clenched his trembling fingers into a fist.

Remembering the cheroot his brother had given him, he unearthed it from his trouser pocket and stalked to one of the torches lining the gravel footpath. With a deep inhalation, the tip blazed to life. The flavor was sweetly arid and calming for no reason he could determine. He wasn't a smoker or a drinker of any consequence until this country and a woman he couldn't get out of his head. Now, the taste and scent of her was ripe in his blood and his cock. He'd been hard since they started making love; there was no need to deny what it had been on Tristan's terrace.

He could have had her against those bricks, then climbed atop her, or she him, in his carriage on the ride home, then again in his massive tester bed where they'd claw and bite and moan until dawn—and still not had enough.

The conversation after, he almost looked forward to more.

There was his bloody dilemma, as the English would say.

They fit. In kisses and conversation. An unusually coordinated synchronization, a blueprint for the beauty of perfect mechanics.

The kiss, for instance, how to describe it? There'd been no awkwardness, no hesitation. Where did his hand go? Her arm in the way. Stepping on each other's toes. Hair tangled about his fingers. He'd flowed into Penny like lava into stone, forging a path. He'd never had such a seamless encounter originate from an abrupt and emotional start. If he designed a steam engine that ran with such precision, he'd have conquered the industrial world by now.

Her lips had been open, welcome and waiting, before he touched them. Never, not on his deathbed, would he forget this staggering find.

"I don't believe people are made for each other," he reasoned and expelled a wrathful stream of smoke to punctuate the statement. "Fairy tales are bullshit."

"Are you out here talking to yourself in the freezing cold, Whitaker?"

West dropped his head back and sighed into the night. His breath frosted the air, testament to the frigid temperature. When he turned, it was worse than he'd imagined.

It had begun to snow, wispy flakes adding splendor to the scene. They drifted to land in her hair, down about her shoulders in the least formal arrangement he'd ever seen, the colors finally freed for his study. Golden strands, darker auburn, mahogany. He longed to gather the thick length in his fist and bury his face in it. Her gown was outdated, tattered at the hem and bodice, spattered in paint, a small rip on one sleeve. Boots, likely one of the scuffed pairs he'd seen that day in her parlor, peeking from

beneath.

Unpretentious, genuine.

This is the real girl, he realized in dazed recognition. Closer to the real you than not.

Before he could tell her he had to return to the warehouse to review a prototype, she shivered, her slender arms going around her chest to contain it.

“Inside,” he whispered and ground the cheroot beneath his heel, knowing more of her waited there. Learnings set to alter the situation between them for better or worse.

Nonetheless, he longed for those pieces too urgently to say no.

Their footfalls crunched over gravel and across stone as they traveled the side path to enter the house through the service entrance. He didn’t blame her for hiding him, a man recently exposed in London’s most scandalous gossip column arriving at her residence after midnight.

As he recorded the shift of Penny’s hips beneath her ragged gown, a sizzle of temper lit his senses. He made a mental note to ask his investigator how progress was going on finding the identity of the Belle. She’d made this whatever he and Penny were doing harder by focusing light on him he now had to ensure didn’t shine on her .

She turned at the base of a narrow staircase clearly used by staff. “It’s the top floor, the garret.” Bringing her hand to her lips, she placed a finger before her lips. Quiet . “The third plank on the second landing groans, so follow me and step over it. Heat rises from the chambers below if the hearths are lit, and it actually stays warm enough most days.”

“A garret is an attic, I’m guessing,” he whispered as they climbed.

Her gaze shot in his direction, her laughter low but joyful. Her irises behind her lenses were dark amber and honey, colors he believed he'd influenced with his kiss. "No one comes up here. It's quite my space and mine alone."

She was enjoying this, and as usual, he was enjoying her .

Then, she did something no woman ever had and grasped his hand, her slender, slightly chilled fingers twining with his. His chest ached, time skipping back until he was a smitten boy experiencing his first crush. West faltered, stubbing his toe on the stair, and owing to her kind heart, Penny acted like she didn't notice.

To keep his mind off troubling yearnings and the hand tucked neatly in his own, he studied her home as they made their way higher. The walls were papered in once-fashionable damask, colors faded to a muted rose, corners peeling to show stained plaster beneath. The faint odor of damp lingered, and the scarred mahogany banister beneath his hand wobbled. The staircase, created for the lesser inhabitants of the household, was without a runner and grumbled mightily with each step. He couldn't imagine who they were hiding from if this was the deafening procession.

All in all, the dwelling spoke of better days long past, leaving West to question how an unmarried woman with meager funds was managing to hold her family's life together.

When they reached the top landing, she halted in the vestibule and, with a tumultuous sigh, slipped her hand from his. Laughing softly, she ironed her palm down her bodice, a habit he'd seen before, one that meant she was nervous.

When she didn't have to be, not with him. Although he could see she vacated the indecisive place he had minutes ago in her courtyard.

To his mind, Penny had two choices. Either she disclosed the part of herself she'd

hidden from the world, or she snatched him into another tantalizing kiss and perhaps more, secrets forgotten.

Selfishly, he craved both—but one was profound, the other customary.

Was he someone she trusted, or was he merely a man of the hour? He'd never been the first, only the latter. He was skilled at the latter, comfortable with the latter.

Yet, he found himself strangely breathless at the expectation of meaning more.

Decided, he reached around her to open the squat attic door and, with a ducking motion to avoid bashing his head on the archway, stepped inside.

Illuminated by at least a dozen candles, the attic revealed a vastly different world from the one below. Slanted beams and rough stonework walls, the aromas of linseed oil and turpentine mincing the air. Canvases leaned drunkenly against every available surface, and the floorboards he crossed were strewn with streaks of paint. An antique vanity had been put into use as a workbench and was covered with dented cans housing brushes and rags spotted with a multitude of hues. Before a grimy-paned window, a stool and a small easel sat waiting.

West could imagine her there, her brow split by that charming pleat, her singular focus on her work.

His perception of her in transformation, he recorded the cacophony of strikes, his brain buzzing as it did when he designed an engine. He paused, afraid to move too fast and miss something. Her nook was creative chaos, what he reasoned about his own working spaces, vibrant and unfinished, thoroughly suiting an artist's temperament.

Penny drifted about like a ghost, grazing her fingers across a set of brushes, a blank

canvas, twirling a tool with a blunt metal blade between her fingers. “Like your designs, I see colors, connections. The way the world appears to me, the way pieces fit.”

Fit. He exhaled roughly, visions flooding his mind of their bodies entangled, bent over a settee or flush on a bed, hers rising above his, her face coiled in ecstasy. He stayed the urge to adjust his cock to hide his arousal. If she noticed, she noticed. He was past being able to control how badly he wanted her.

Like any man suffering under infatuation’s thrall, one word, one look, was enough to envelope him in a misty, erotic haze.

Thankfully, Penny was too preoccupied to notice.

She picked up a powdered cake the color of blood and held it into a candle’s glow. “I purchase dry pigments, then I mix them with binders and grind them into paste. It’s hard work but more affordable than buying premixed. Ceramic paint pots are a luxury. Watercolors are used often among amateurs because the materials are less expensive. I also reuse my canvases when I can.”

Before he saw her paintings at close range, his snap, albeit patronizing judgment was, oh, this is her hobby. How nice. Watercolors, like ladies in society favor.

Then, he moved closer.

Going to his knee to view a series of canvases propped against a sagging sofa jammed along one wall, he reached before jerking his hand back. Nothing was as he’d expected, simple portraiture or bland sketches of fruit. Rather, her artwork depicted stormy skies, fiery sunsets and brilliant dawns, paint tossed about with ferocious resolve. They were evocative, dazzling, and though he was no expert, like nothing he’d ever seen.

They were nearly violent in interpretation.

His gaze met hers across the candlelit distance. “Sweetheart, these are incredible. Why have you been hiding this?” He glanced back to the painting he was most drawn to, a blurred sunrise bursting with shades of red, yellow, and blue.

“Because they’re not conventional or appropriate, like everything about me. For years, I’ve repressed my needs, my desires. Painting is merely one of them.”

This was the secret, West realized, and slowly rose to his feet. He made no move to cross to her. He didn’t think he could touch her while she told him—and he had the feeling she felt the same.

“Unbelievably, I’ve never experienced a kiss like ours. Though, I have, as you asked, done more.” She smiled scornfully, the tool she clutched glinting. “He was my tutor. French.” The golden highlights in her hair shimmered as she dipped her head, and he had to force himself not to go to her. “How banal a tale, isn’t it? A sheltered young woman from a respectable but impoverished aristocratic family becomes smitten with her art teacher. My father hired him because I continued to paint”—she jabbed the blade toward a particularly striking piece at her side—“what he called monstrosities. I was to be taught how to create proper landscapes and the like. Instead, I seduced, because I want you to understand it wasn’t the other way around, my instructor. I was naïve but determined.”

West brought his bowed hands to his mouth and shot a tense breath between his fingers. One wrong step, and she would shut down. Jealousy, though it flamed fiercely in his belly, had no standing here. Lowering his hands, he smiled ruefully. “I understand, knowing the determined woman.”

Penny’s lips kicked, though her hands were shaking. Placing the knife in a can with a clatter, she strolled to the easel, dusting her finger over the unfinished piece atop it.

“There were two encounters, and I won’t deny I liked them. They weren’t glorious but... they were crudely exciting. As an artist, I appreciated being allowed into a domain prior denied me. I didn’t love him. It never occurred to me to love him. Am I wrong to admit this? Men say it every day in a variety of subtle ways. I suppose, in part, I did it to ease the hunger and the loneliness.”

“No, you’re not wrong,” he whispered, fairly vibrating with the need to touch her. This conversation was giving him insight into her isolation while feeding his need to protect her. Also, if she didn’t know it yet—and he was moderately surprised he did—loving someone never occurred . It simply struck you in the head like a stone.

No one in their right mind would ask for such an assault.

“Northridge requested my hand in marriage, oh, sometime that summer in a stoic conversation with my father. My family was ecstatic. I was twenty, and it was time. He was suitable, handsome enough, from an established title, and wanted me despite my meager dowry.” She did another ironing press of her bodice, and his gaze trailed to her breasts, unbound beneath the tattered cotton gown. No corset, it appeared.

“Even then, I was the responsible one, taking care of my sister because our mother was ill her entire life, in her mind not her body, which may be worse. Suffice it to say, Northridge walked in on a relatively subdued episode during my art lesson, much less than he could have seen. No one ever knew how far we’d gone.” She dusted her hands together. “No matter, that was that. Currently, Isabella shoulders the burden for my downfall.”

West cracked his knuckles, holding back his rage. “That bastard said something about what he’d seen?”

Penny’s gaze hit his, her spectacle lenses shimmering. “Northridge?” Her smile was wise, knowing, the first true time the disparity in their ages and social expertise

appeared. “Of course, he did. Very discreetly, very diplomatically over drinks at White’s or across a billiards table. My actions besmirched his good name and his offer . You must understand I was from a respectable family, but my so-called beauty was the catch because I had no money backing me. He went lower than he could have, far lower, when he asked for me. Thank heavens, the only story he was able to repeat was tamer than the truth.”

“I hate these damned rules,” West said and gave his cravat, tightly knotted and choking him, a violent tug. He wrestled with it, finally ripping it from around his neck. “So many, one holding the other up until the entire setup is on the verge of collapse. It’s no wonder England lost the war as you’re all too concerned about using the correct fork.”

Penny braced her hip on the window ledge, her expression luminous, the snowflakes swirling behind her soaking the scene in charm. Even she couldn’t have painted a prettier picture. “Now, I’m seducing my student. An American this time. The tide has shifted across an ocean.”

Unable to endure being fifteen feet away while she was teasing him, West sent the attic’s floorboards creaking as he crossed to her. Seeing him coming, she brushed a strand of hair from her cheek with a shy smile that did nothing to deter him.

Moody over her admission about a French tutor and with a marquess who seemed set to take her from him looming, he didn’t ask before he cradled Penny’s face in his hands, bringing her to her feet to seize her lips. Every ounce of his angst flowed into her, his greed, his passion, his want . She moved up and in, her body bumping his, where she then matched his ardor. Her fingers coiled in his hair, nails scraping his scalp, her groans as effervescent as frost on a winter morning, driving him wild.

Alarmingly, she seemed made for him.

“Lock the door,” she murmured, racing her hand down his ribs to his belly, on track to dive below his waistband.

His heart jerked, thumping madly. Thought scattered, replaced by blind hunger. Kisses aren’t meant to throw a man off-balance like this, he reasoned before he went under.

Cupping his rigid shaft, she stroked while he murmured mindless endearments against her lips, her delicate jaw, the exquisite curve of her neck. Her breast fit his hand with ease, her nipple a puckered bud beneath his thumb he could actually feel this time without a corset in the way. Impatient, she worked his trouser buttons with one hand while hanging on to his biceps with the other.

It was awkward, laughingly breathless, and wonderful.

Somehow, she released him from the confines of his drawers and trouser close, her fingers closing around his pulsing length. She was capable and had him gasping in seconds flat.

He grabbed her wrist, the cravat he held fluttering over their hands. “I’m going to spend before you if you keep this up, and that’s not my way. Like discussing politics at a ball, it’s utterly unacceptable. The lady has first selection.”

She giggled—the sweetest sound in his world—and caressed the crown of his cock with her thumb in agonizing circles. “How to rectify that, I wonder?”

Dropping his head back, he groaned softly. “I had a lewd dream last night. Want to recreate it?”

Her fingers tensed around his shaft. “Was it about me?”

He glanced down to find displeasure twisting her features. She was damned adorable when she was vexed. “Sweetheart, it was most definitely you .”

Appeased, she turned, scraping her hair off her neck to hold it in a high bundle. Thunderstruck by her brazenness, he brushed the overlay of fabric aside to expose her gown’s hook and eye closures. A neat row down the center seam he could unfasten in seconds if he set his mind to it. The mechanics of attire had nothing on Weston Whitaker, future Cambridge fellow and inventor of steam-powered engines.

He pressed his lips to the nape of her neck and sucked gently but with intent. He had no intention of treading lightly if they were going to do this. First, however, he had to ask. “This Neville fellow, he’s set to remove you from this shelf you’re on? Am I taking something from him? I don’t like to step where I shouldn’t. I’m not that man.”

Penny hesitated before answering, a duration where his heart ceased beating. “It’s nothing like that. We aren’t committed to anything but friendship. He hasn’t asked for more, but I think perhaps he will. I haven’t even kissed him, not once. After my disgrace, my choices are limited. Being the sister of a marquess through marriage would greatly assist Isabella as well. And—”

The whisper was urgent and so low he had to strain to hear it. “I want children. I’ll soon be too old to have them. You have time. I don’t.”

Another comment about the difference in their ages he chose to ignore. Settled, he unfastened the top closure, then the next, revealing a creamy expanse of skin. Tracing his knuckle along the curve of her shoulder blade, he gently captured her shiver with his teeth. “What about what you want, Lady Penelope?”

Her golden gaze met his. “That’s where you come in.”

Ah, he was the man of the hour after all.

The valuation was expected, hurt he'd been trained to handle his entire life. This was simply another lesson she'd imparted, nothing to do with etiquette.

Wordless, he opened her gown to the waist, baring her body. The sting of her words hadn't slain his yearning. Love, if he'd been toying with the distant emotion, could be extinguished. In any case, it was a foreign concept.

After they feasted, there would be time to mourn what could have been.

CHAPTER EIGHT

WHERE A LADY LEARNS A LESSON

West left her with her gown gaping, silk spilling into her hands. He walked to the door, locking it with a decisive click. After, he turned to lean against it, his gaze going a smoky, inspired green as he stared.

A fleeting expression of hurt stormed his features and was gone before she could record it. Such a swift appearance, she'd tell herself later she was mistaken, though she would add the color to her next painting, a depiction of a volatile, restless sea.

Although there was more than lust here, more than passion. Penelope was as fascinated with his mind as his body. His dreams, his past, his future were mostly unknown to her, and she coveted them as much as she coveted the pleasure he'd give her. After they soothed their hunger, if he let her in, there would be time to plan what could be.

He shook his head—when she hadn't asked a question.

Bracing his hands on the door, he shoved off, taking two steps before divesting himself of the facade he loathed. The facade she'd helped him create.

Her breath streaking past her lips, his expensive attire tumbled to the paint-scarred floor while her heart thudded. Each piece he shrugged off in a thrilling, masculine show of muscle. It was clear from the speed that he dressed himself without the aid of a valet. His trouser close was open, of course, by her hand, and he stepped from them

with an elegance she'd wager he had no idea he exhibited.

The Tierney bloodline was as evident in him as in his brother.

West gestured to her, the cravat clutched in his fist an ivory splash against his skin. "I'm going to unlace the ribbons of your drawers with my teeth, just so you know. Where I will then make you come with my mouth, leaving you gasping, spent, and feral. That was my dream." He tugged on the tie at the waist of his drawers. "Frankly, it's what I was thinking about most days during your readings from Debrett's. I shall forever link the scent of musty pages and the sound of your voice reciting ancient English titles with pleasure."

She smiled, willing to play his game. She loved when men thought they were in complete control. Letting her gown slide to her ankles, the stumble in his progress delighted her. "I prepared for your visit by only wearing a shift beneath. No ties to destroy with your teeth, I'm afraid."

"Your boots," he said in a hoarse voice, motionless, the waistband of his drawers gripped in his fist.

Backing up to sit on the sofa, she removed them without looking away. When she reached for the hem of her shift, he stopped her with a whispered plea, "Save that for me. And leave your spectacles, please."

Obedying the command, maybe the only time she would in this life, she rested back, observing. Her encounters with Alain that long-ago summer hadn't allowed for true intimacy.

It was good she was sitting because her legs went boneless as more of his body was unveiled. She'd not pictured Weston Whitaker well because he was more beautiful than her visions of him. Broad, but not too, lean and long where it counted. Wide

shoulders flowing into narrow hips with such a dazzling play of muscle in between. A faint scattering of dusky hair on his chest angling into a slender trail racing to his belly. He displayed scant modesty as he worked his boots off and rolled his stockings down his calves, comfortable with nudity in a way she'd never been.

When he stood, his rigid shaft swung high, brushing his belly. It had been years since she'd done this, and Alain hadn't been generously endowed.

West noticed her unease, his teeth a white flash in the muted candlelight. "We're not in a hurry. I mean to take my time with you, sweetheart. Give my time to you, as much as you need. We'll go only as far as you'd like and no further. In fact, this may be all we do. I'll introduce you to pleasure without more than you're ready for. Because what I'm going to do to you is pleasure."

Her blood sizzled at the thought of going far, indeed. "I don't normally sketch figures," she whispered, "as I'm not skilled at proportions. But for you—" She brought her hand to her mouth and sighed behind it. "For you, I would try."

West kicked aside his clothing and made his way to her, male satisfaction stamped across his face. Before she could decide what to say, how to act, how to move, what to do, he dropped to his knees before her. There was an ink stain on his thumb she'd yet to notice. She was engrossed with the streak as he slid his hand from her ankle to her knee, where he grasped the hem of her shift and glided it to her waist.

"In the dream, you were wearing this gossamer bit that flowed over your body and mine like cream. We were wrapped in it and each other. I came seconds after I woke, one stroke, like a fucking boy." He leaned, nudging her leg wide with his shoulder, exposing her to his hot breath and the cool air.

She shifted as a flood of yearning pooled, heavy and throbbing, in her core.

“ Don’t ,” he whispered, his fingers gripping her knee to keep her from closing her legs. “Don’t hide from me. No one on this planet desires you more, wants you more. And God , Penny...” He nipped the tender skin of her inner thigh, and she released a weak whimper, a sound that had his gaze shooting to hers. “Force thoughts of your beauty aside because you have more of it than a person should be allowed, more than I’ve ever been gifted. Know that you’re more to me than the physical. I want you, all of you. And I mean, with your leave, to have you.”

Consenting, her head fell back. Her curiosity and trust was stronger than her fear.

He started slowly, feathering kisses along her thigh. Letting her catch his rhythm. His stubbled jaw abrading skin unused to such handling added an element of stimulation to the suction from his mouth, the gentle pinch from his teeth. His calloused fingertips teasing, an easy glide across her skin.

I can handle this, she thought, but when his lips settled against her, as her hips rose to instinctively meet him, her fingers drilling into his hair to hold herself steady, the moment spun away from her. The sensation of his tongue slicking her sex was the most indescribable feeling, no way to imagine or plan for it. West groaned in aroused agreement, his hand working its way beneath her bottom and lifting her, where he began to devour her in crude, helpless, panting pleasure, as he’d promised.

Both of them were gusty-breathed and moaning, both in the race. She seized hold of one sensation, fissures of awakening racing from the base of her spine to her brow, only to be captured by two more. Too much to battle after minutes comprised of his tongue probing her swollen folds, her hips moving in a cadence of his design meant to drive him deeper.

Knowledge was nothing when faced with innate physical response.

Mindless worked well for this endeavor, so she gave herself to going forward without

conscious thought.

“There, that’s it,” he murmured, draping her leg over his shoulder. “The lady submits.”

Intentionally or not, his wicked words and the teasing gust of breath against her lit her up, sending a flutter cresting beneath her skin, bubbling in her veins. A wondrous thrill separating her from herself. Bright splashes erupted behind her closed lids as her heartbeat quaked in her ears. “More, Wes, more .”

Struggling for breath, she opened her eyes to find his, as brilliant a green as she’d ever seen them, observing her.

“Wes,” he murmured, his finger penetrating her. He stroked, calmly, then faster, his chest lifting on his own hard breaths. Their fraught exhalations echoed about the space, wrapping her in need.

“I can’t,” she started, tensing her leg around his shoulder.

“You can. You will .”

Believing him, she gave in, gave up when he dropped his head and caught her sex, sucking, his tongue circling. Her hands cradled his head, guiding the tempo.

All at once, it was too much, it was everything . His fingers—now there were two—his mouth, his teeth, the scrape of stubble on the tender skin of her thigh. The wave took her, carrying her away, overruling anything that had happened before. An upheaval, the ground shifting beneath her.

In the best of ways, she was reborn. Her slate erased.

Tremor upon tremor traveled through her, the raw response working its way through her in its own time, pulses both swift and lingering.

He stayed until her ecstasy became too deafening to conceal, where he rose over her, seizing her lips with his while palming her mound. “Cry into my mouth, don’t waste a second of this. I want to swallow you whole if that isn’t obvious. If we were alone in this dwelling, I’d demand you bring down the walls with your shouts.”

Her body bowed, his words, his touch, the pleasure wrecking her.

“You,” she found the strength to gasp, scarcely decipherable.

With a ragged laugh, he untangled her fingers from his hair and moved her hand to his engorged shaft. She stroked, beginning to understand what he liked when he moaned low in his throat, his hand folding around hers to guide her.

“ Ah, yes, just like that. I’m so close, too close.” Dropping his brow to hers, he released a tortured exhalation. “I have a plan. I come, you come, quick, dirty. After, we’ll get to the true business. Once I... catch my breath. Men sometimes need time... to gather themselves.”

“True business.” What had they been doing before?

“Just wait,” he gasped and rocked his hips into her tight grip, “and see.”

Curving her hand over his jaw, Penelope pulled his lips to hers, needing to share his delight when it hit him. He was leaning over her, a knee braced on the sofa, their motion rocking it on its spindly legs. She was glad they’d tried this before lovemaking because the piece would not hold them.

Breaking the kiss, he tucked his lips into the curve of her neck and whispered a moan

across her skin. His cheek was warm, flushed, moist, his body shaking. She didn't recall this level of hunger from her summer affair. Alain's craving had been sternly wound, controlled, like the man.

Lowering his head, he sucked her chemise-covered nipple between his lips. "Your breasts are magnificent. Next time, they are getting more of my undivided attention." He was honest, a rare thing among her set. He desired—and admitted to his desire. He didn't seek to hide his yearning from her.

He didn't pretend to be perfect, and she loved him for it.

Penelope's body still vibrating from her release, now bound so tightly with his, she circled her thumb over the crown of his cock and recorded the impact as it shuddered through him, marveling over being the cause of such bliss. The hot words he pressed into her skin, lewd pleas and promises, dreams and fantasies, ignited her passion until she was seconds from begging for "true business" ahead of his grand plan.

"Now," he whispered and took her lips, his cries lost within her. His arm came around her and held her to his chest, where they shivered and shook.

The intimacy was... astounding. A revelation. Erotic, chaotic, messy. She didn't recognize herself. A woman's understanding colored her vision like she'd dashed the scene with her paints. A couple's desire unfolding in the privacy of their world.

Penelope rolled to her side, and he collapsed to face her. The sofa wasn't built for such bulk and it didn't hold all of him, but for the moment, it was enough.

"I'm sorry, let me clean you up," he murmured in a thready voice that made her feel like a bloody queen. She'd brought Weston Whitaker this low, this wondrously low.

She wiped her hand on her chemise and shook her head. She wanted his long body,

damp from exertion, trembling against hers.

She wasn't giving him up until she had to.

"Come here," she said and drew him as close as she could without dumping them to the floor. "Just for a little while."

"I'll fall asleep," he mumbled, sounding halfway there. "Orgasms exhaust a man. Especially when they're like that one."

Penelope would have preened had she been a peacock. As it was, she grinned and gazed at the slanted wooden beams above her head. West was gone in seconds, his body going slack beside her.

Such was a man's uncluttered existence, she reflected in amusement and fondness.

And love.

Accepting this, she shifted to study him as she'd never seen her brilliant engineer out of motion. He was wedged in the tiny crook next to her, one arm thrown over her waist, the other cushioned beneath his head. His hair was a ruin, the thick breaths streaking from lips she'd chafed with her own, scattering the ebony strands hanging in his face. There were new things she noticed, too, thrilling little finds all her own. His lashes were light brown at the tips, and he had a freckle, just the one, beside his nose. His nipples were small, dark disks she longed to taste as he'd tasted hers. Her gaze slithered over his ribs and down his lean belly. His member lay in a softening curve on his thigh, vulnerability in repose.

Heavens, he's beautiful, she decided for the hundredth time as she traced the scar beneath his jaw with her fingertip. Exceptional and compassionate, but at times, unapproachable. Stubborn, with the belief his way was the best way. Guarded, like no

one she'd ever known. He wasn't looking for love; this she knew. He and Emelia had an arrangement which suited him. They'd been this intimate, possibly. Naked and knotted about each other, blissfully depleted.

Add to that, Lady P and the others.

He hadn't been Tall, Dark, and December for a life blandly lived.

Penelope swallowed back tears and hugged him close. It wasn't the perfect time to fall in love, and he wouldn't be an easy man to love. A foreigner set to return home, a man with a shadowy past who believed he wasn't worthy. He only believed in his engines.

Her heart had taken a gamble.

Or would if she told him.

CHAPTER NINE

WHERE AN ENGINEER PUZZLES OVER THE MECHANICS OF LOVE

West glanced at his timepiece for the tenth time in an hour and, when he looked back to the row of calculations on the page, realized he'd lost his place.

"Shit," he whispered and tossed the quill to the desk.

Penny wasn't coming. The invitation was too forward, uncouth in some stiff, upper crust way he didn't understand. He didn't know how to ask a woman to dine at his home.

An invitation, if accepted, that would lead to more.

More . The word, breathless and shallow, stirred his senses as clearly as if she'd stepped behind him and whispered the plea in his ear. She had whispered it, in fact, when he had his head tucked between her creamy thighs, two fingers, if he wasn't mistaken, deep inside her. Christ , she'd pulled his hair out when she came, more than a few strands.

He shoved back from the desk with a fierce exhalation, his chair skidding across the floor. It had been two days, and he missed her. He'd have been agreeable to another etiquette lesson if that got her here. Because no lessons meant no Penny. No Penny meant no kisses, no smiles, no laughter.

No more .

After their interlude in her attic, he hadn't been able to get his mind off more .

He spun his quill in a slow circle, caught by indecision. He'd woken after dawn in her makeshift art studio, hanging half off the sagging settee, his arms full of her. She'd been sleeping so deeply, and he understood what could happen should he be seen leaving her terrace in a disheveled state at an intimate hour. Or discovered by one of her two servants. So, he'd done the courageous thing—the easy thing being to stay and make good on his pleasure promise—and gathered up his clothing, made what he could of his appearance, exiting her residence through the entrance from whence he came.

Not the first time, but maybe the last, he sneaked away from a woman's abode.

He only lingered long enough to leave her a note—his invitation to dinner—and, helplessly, to take a daylight study of her artwork.

Lady Penelope Anstruther-Colbrook was a painter, he reflected with a lovesick grin. An incredibly talented one. A singular soul in a sea of mediocrity.

And she'd shared her secret, her gift, with him .

The next day, unable to get her out of his mind and with no response to his invitation, he sent flowers. Without a sender's name, of course, since his had been connected to a sordid gossip column of late. One of his lessons with Penny, about the many levels of aristocratic staffing and how word traveled from house to house quicker than newsprint, had put the fear of God into him. Domestics were the terror of London. He didn't want to cause trouble for her, not after she'd clawed her way back into society. Seeing him creeping about after dawn looking like he'd had the greatest oral encounter of his life would do just that.

As would gifts arriving at her home with a rake's name attached.

Though he couldn't honestly say, if he saw Viscount Northridge on the street, he wasn't going to make the blackguard pay for the damage he'd done. What peer of the realm didn't need a knock upside his jaw every now and again to keep world order?

The only adverse aspect of his encounter with Penny was that West, for the first time, was angry with his mother over her decision to leave England. It was senseless, he knew, but if she'd stayed, worked out some arrangement with his father, he might have been raised under better circumstances than he had been in Philadelphia. There would have been no monstrous stepfather or a blinding punch that gave him headaches to this day. The English Weston Whitaker, acknowledged by a duke and a doting brother, might have been a better match for an earl's daughter. He wouldn't have needed to run to catch up with her, anyway.

He tossed the quill aside, ink splattering his ledger.

You know better, West.

This quaint daydream played upon the whimsy that there was one person meant for him, and no matter where he'd been raised, Penny was it. That they would somehow find each other. Fated to be together when he didn't believe in love, not that kind. He believed in sex, passion, friendship. Mathematics. Excellent coffee. Lemon scones. Steam power. Trim ankles, which Penny had. Orgasms powerful enough to dim one's vision, which he'd had two short days ago.

Maybe, just maybe, he was even coming to believe in brotherhood.

The rest? Not to sound tactless about it, but what a bunch of hogwash.

As he was talking himself out of the whole thing, his obsession walked through the door and changed his mind right back.

She was balancing a package in her arms and had a leather satchel looped over her shoulder. Strands of gilded hair were trailing down her jaw in windblown magnificence. Her coat was open, revealing a crimson gown that set his blood on fire with one glance.

“You left a note on the door for me to come in?” She laughed and wrestled with her package. “That is the most American thing you’ve ever done.”

“I let the staff go in case you showed.” He paused, allowing the pleasure of seeing her to cascade through him, his effort to grasp the rare feeling of happiness and tuck it close. Strength and serenity, that was his girl.

Seconds later, he was on his feet and striding across the room.

West didn’t give her time to think. Taking the chilled skin of her cheeks in his palms, he drew Penny into a heated kiss that said all he couldn’t. She tasted as magical as he remembered.

“I can stay the night,” she whispered against his lips. “And I didn’t wear a corset.”

He tipped her head until every thread of hazel running through her eyes was made known to him. His heart gave a decided, final thump he’d worry about later. His cock merely rejoiced. “My dreams realized.”

Stepping back because he had to, he lifted the package from her arms. “What’s this?”

She flashed a hesitant smile, her cheeks flushing. Her satchel landed on the faded Aubusson rug with a thud. “The painting you were admiring. *Lever de soleil violent*. The violent sunrise. I thought you’d like to have it. It’s been gathering dust in my garret for three years now.”

He glanced away and, after a moment of internal assembling, back at his gift. “Thank you,” he murmured over the rush in his ears, in his heart. It was too much, sometimes, with her. Esteem, affection, admiration, desire. He’d felt one or two, here and there before, scattered about like pebbles—but never all ambushing him at once.

Truthfully, his growing love for her seemed a bit like an ambush.

A breathtaking, terrified-to-accept assault.

“Unwrap it later,” she said and waved her hand, glancing about his study with what he suspected were nerves.

Maybe he wasn’t the only one under attack.

He leaned the painting gently against the wall. “This is the first present I’ve been given since my mother passed.” When he looked up and noted her stricken expression, he scrubbed his hand across his jaw, heat toasting his face. “Forget I said that.”

“I want to know. I want you to tell me.”

He shrugged away the offer. A man of the hour didn’t need to share his life story. “My cook made mutton something. I have wine, cheese, bread. I stocked up since I often eat at the warehouse. I also picked up a comb and some trinkets, trifling items, you’d possibly need.”

Her smile was radiant, and a hard thing to fight.

West frowned, half discomfiture, half fondness. “Anyone would do the same. You’ll need to brush your hair if I rough it up.”

She didn't comment, simply removed her coat, and held it out to him. "Show me your home, Whitaker."

Penelope shadowed him as they toured the ground level of his terrace as he claimed the upper floors were nearly vacant except for his bedchamber. They held a hot glance at the word, then quickly moved on.

Yet, it lingered in the air, testing their resolve.

Bedchamber .

He was dressed for the informality of home in a shirt and trousers, the shirt open at the neck, the sleeves rolled to the elbow. As he moved and the fine cotton shifted, she was allowed views of his muscular chest and the dark snatch of hair between his pectorals. She nearly shivered as visions of what was set to happen rushed through her. She marveled at the change in her thinking, an unexpected reward. Her encounters with Alain gave her an understanding that removed fear and ignorance about the process. Her scandal finally had purpose . She was steps closer to experiencing true love and true love making thanks to what had happened—and been missing—before.

Although she longed to touch him, the insight given by examining his personal effects was an enthrallment she couldn't forego, not when he told her so little about himself. He kept his boots in an orderly line on a rack in the foyer, his coats hung on pegs, his quills collected in a dented cup on his desk. Pages upon pages of calculations, a bottomless sea of numbers, covered every table and an armchair, the only hint of chaos. He mentioned that living in an orphanage made a boy keep careful track of his belongings. She held herself steady when he said it, showing no dismay as she had with his earlier comment about her gift.

If she wanted West to share his past, there could be no tears involved.

As it was, she blinked them back when he wasn't looking.

He chose to have dinner in an informal area off the kitchen, which she declined to tell him was for his staff. He was so capable and willing, another surprise, in a fashion men of society were not. He poured wine and water, assisted her in loading their plates with roast mutton, stewed potatoes, and carrots. Regaling her with a story about his brother wrecking a carriage on Bond Street in the wild days before his marriage, they lounged at a modest table set haphazardly with his servant's flatware, candlelight their chaperone.

If the air pulsed with portent, they chose to ignore it.

For the moment.

"The words trip me up daily," he grinned, chewing on a healthy bite of bread. His eyes were as light as limes, glowing against his dark skin. She wanted to drown in them. "Wardrobe instead of closet. Mad instead of crazy. Pram instead of baby carriage."

"Biscuit instead of cookie," she added after a sip of wine. She'd almost finished the glass and was starting to feel it.

West saluted her with his scratched butter knife. "That, too. I should keep a list."

"Not quite as interesting as Debrett's, but I'll read it."

"Tell me about the paintings. They're good enough to hang in a gallery, Penny, no lie," he said and propped his chin on his fist, his elbow braced beside his plate. He looked dreamy and relaxed, the dimple in his cheek winking. Love roared through her, incredibly, with such simple pieces of him driving it. She wanted this life, this man, this refuge.

How to make him settle his heart and give them to her was the challenge.

“Tell me about the engines,” she countered, prepared to test him a bit. “They’re good enough to change the world.”

He lifted his head a fraction, his gaze sharpening.

She smoothed her napkin across her lips. “If you don’t want to, fine.”

“Sure,” he whispered, “some choice you’re giving me.”

She was patient, nibbling on rather delicious carrots while he deliberated. For all his brilliance, West had a readable face. When the wheels of his mind spun, it was bright as the sun.

“I started working in the pantry, what you call a larder, of the children's home when I was ten or so. Boys of a certain age were expected to contribute.” He circled his wineglass on the table, his eyes downcast. “Somewhere along the way, I noticed an error on an invoice. A delivery of potatoes it might have been. I saw the miscalculation a mile away without having had many formal lessons. Mathematics is difficult for some, where it’s easy for me. No—”

Pausing, he tapped his fingers against crystal, finally lifting his glass to take a drink. His throat pulled beautifully as he swallowed. “Numbers slip into place for me, maybe like colors and landscapes do for you. They’re a flawless picture in my mind. The headmaster, for his benefit, although I’m grateful, found a tutor to work with me so I could handle his accounting, in part. Eventually, I handled all of it. Soon, the first tutor wasn’t enough because he didn’t have an aptitude for algebra or geometry, which is where I wanted to go. Had to go. Compulsions and such. He taught basic mathematics only. The next was better but had no use for calculus, which I needed for the dynamic calculations central to engineering. Also, physics, specifically motion

and gravity, topics Newton pioneered along with calculus.”

Newton . Penelope finished her wine, the depth of his intelligence shocking her when it shouldn't. Cambridge and the Royal Society didn't give out invitations like sweets.

Wanting more from him, she drew a circle in the air. Continue .

He laughed, his gaze lifting. “Stubborn as the English are staid, aren't you, sweetheart? Anyway, to end this absorbing tale, I raced ahead, surpassing expectations until there was no stopping me. The final tutor, the only truly gifted one of the bunch, introduced me to steam engine design. He had a cousin in London who'd started investing and sending him information about the industry. I had an apprenticeship for a time, low-level and grueling, at the Philadelphia Mint. That's how I learned how inefficient their processes are compared to what you're doing here. They're still using hand-operated screw equipment, for God's sake. When England is a few short years from having steam-powered railways. I realized, this is what I want to do and it's a way to make money. It was really that simple.”

It didn't sound simple. Plus, he was leaving out a lot. His mother dying, the dreadful stepfather. Emelia. Her chest ached to imagine how much he was leaving out.

“Believe me,” he said and held up his glass in surrender. “Hard work, thousands of hours of computations, selling myself using successful designs I created for other businesses, and I was on my way.” He shrugged a broad shoulder. “And here we are.”

“Have you ever told anyone else this?”

An acerbic snort shot past his lips. “Why would I?”

“Trust. Friendship.”

He squinted, trying to grasp her angle. “I trust you .”

She wasn’t sure he did, not fully, but some rewards had to be earned. “And the duke?”

“Tristan?” he asked, his calling the Duke of Mercer by his first name overly informal but lovely. “We’ll see.”

A wicked smile curved his lips as he skimmed his thumb around the rim of the glass. A memory of his finger sinking inside her and curling sent a tremor through her that landed squarely between her thighs. “I had another dream last night. Do you want to know what it was about?”

In addition to mathematics, Weston Whitaker was gifted at seduction . This realization moved her halfway to aroused without his once touching her.

She didn’t speak, but her tattered sigh said yes .

His lids lowered as he seemingly brought the picture to mind. “You were lying on my bed, the one upstairs, naked, and you were touching yourself. Your hair, your glorious hair, spilled across my sheets like firelight.” He opened his eyes, spearing her with his hunger. Raw, blatant, exposed. “You let me watch.”

Penelope licked her lips, her courage growing when he rocked forward in his chair, his glass hitting the table with a click. “I’ll let you watch, Whitaker, if you let me watch.”

He braced his hands on the table and rose, his shadow falling over. “You have a deal, Colbrook. I’d like to start the negotiations now, please.”

Before she could agree, he came around the table, lifted her from the stool she’d been

perched on, and pulled her into his arms. Chest to chest, her feet didn't touch the floor. The kiss was ravenous, every lusty fantasy they'd repressed for two days ripping free. As he was carrying her from the room, she lost a slipper in the corridor, the other on the staircase to the first floor. On the landing, he let her stand but immediately pushed her against the wall, slanted his head, and carried the contact to a bruising place.

She gripped his shoulders, his hips, pressing her body to his and matching him strike for strike. They strained against each other, struggling for closeness they wouldn't find standing up.

Lurching back, he grabbed her hand, leading her up the staircase to the next level. Down a shadowed hallway and to a bedchamber door he bumped open with his fist. With a murmured apology for his inelegance, he swept her into another kiss, where they circled toward the bed. It was a mad, laughing dash, as fun as it was exciting. They tripped over clothing, ripped his shirt, and destroyed the strap on her chemise. The room looked like a tempest had hit it when they were through. One of his stockings ended up atop the canopy.

Gasping and giggling without a stitch of clothing on, she shoved him back. Removing her spectacles, she blinked as her vision blurred. Her eyepiece would not make it through this session, she feared.

He settled his hand on her cheek. "I want you to see me , sweetheart. Know it's me making you feel this way. The only one to do it."

His defenselessness awakened something inside her. Love stormed her heart. "I see you, Weston Whitaker. In my dreams, in each second of the day. I don't need these to do so."

Exhaling softly, he took the spectacles and placed them on the bedside table. She

recorded every move, firelight illuminating his exquisite body, making her promise she'd sketch him.

Her arms were open when he returned, and he stumbled into them.

West caught her around the waist, lowering her to the mattress and scooting her high upon it. Crawling over her, he braced himself on his forearm to gaze down at her. "Because I'm soon to lose all reason, I want you to know you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. The most everything, leagues above what I deserve. Despite my shortcomings, which are many, you provoke me more than anyone ever has, both in this setting and out of it." Leaning, he palmed her breast, lifting her nipple to his lips. Sucking the hardening nub between his teeth, he murmured, "Your mind fascinates me as much as your body. Therefore, I intend to explore both."

She didn't ask what he planned to do. Or perhaps she did. Her words, if spoken, were lost in a sensual cloud. This play was new to her, and she found she adored it, adoration soon turning to desire. When he started to move down her body, she held him to her breast, bowing into his touch.

"You like this," he murmured against the rounded globe. "Before?"

"Never ."

Satisfied, he hummed a response, a vibration intensifying the suction from his lips.

She gasped, a blissful fissure swirling in her belly and sinking lower. "Oh, Wes, you are talented."

His hand trailed down her side, over her hip, and across her thighs. "So, I'm Wes in bed and Whitaker out of it."

She started to offer up a witty rejoinder when his fingers nestled through the curling hair at her core, one long digit sliding inside her and beginning to thrust. She closed her eyes to the thrill of him pinning her to his bed, his face held in tight lines of concentration, his hot breath washing over her nipples three times before he circled the rigid peak with his tongue.

Making her wait, then not making her wait at all.

He added a finger to the pleasurable torture he was inflicting between her thighs and whispered kisses across her breasts, her aching nipples. His mouth was working in tandem with the rhythm of his thrusts, an incredible combination. “Come for me, sweetheart. Before .”

“Before?” she managed to ask in a frayed voice. Her heartbeat was a dull howl in her ears, the throaty sounds spilling from her gaining in volume. She might bring down the walls like he’d said she could.

Dragging his lips over her collar bone, his tongue laving each sensitive spot along the way, he leaned to whisper in her ear, “Before I sink deep inside you, before your quim milks me dry, as I’ve dreamed of since the first time I laid eyes on you. Before I make you scream, before I scream myself.”

Acting before her mind left her, Penelope traced her hand down his body, searching. His shaft was silky smooth and hard as stone, caught between their bodies. She raked her nail gently along the length and felt her orgasm creep closer when his ragged oath met her ears.

“Penny,” he said on a panting breath, “you undo me.” He seized her mouth as he pressed his thumb to the bundle of nerves topping her sex. He worked her, played her.

Pleasure clawing for release, she tightened her hold on his cock, but she was far

ahead of him. Her orgasm hit, a blind rush, pins and needles stinging her skin. A circuitous stampede of sensation that left her gasping, back arched, the cries she'd kept quiet in her garret hurtling from her. He continued to work his magic, his thumb pressing, spinning, exactly where she needed until it was too much.

This, too, he understood as he let her go and moved his cock into position at her entrance.

"Hang on here," he whispered and wrapped her hand around a spindle on the headboard. "And to me." He kissed her palm before placing the other hand on his shoulder. "Scratch me if you want, mark me in your bliss. Because I'm going to take you there."

It was leisurely at first, tender. The head of his shaft edging between her swollen lips, a shift of his hips to ease himself inside. Her hold on the spindle gave her leverage she'd have been missing, the strength to bring her body more fully into his. Hips rising, she took some of his direction and ran with it, sending his cock deeper, faster, than he'd planned.

"Sweetheart." His arm tunneled beneath her, palm flattening over her spine, fingertips digging into her skin. "Slow down. I'm trying... to be gentle."

Her nipples scraped his chest, tickling in his hair, delight clouding her vision. She shook her head, rising again, sending him deep. Bumping against his pelvis, grinding. Her hand lowered, curling around his hip and handling him. She wasn't an inexperienced woman he had to worry about. She could meet him, move for move.

He groaned, his head falling back. "I give up."

Control draining away, he sank his shaft deep until they were locked together, until they were two people lost in the fog.

He was rough but tender. His whispered words of appreciation mixed with lewd intent flowed over each other and into her ear. She released the spindle to slap her hand to his back, her nails marking him as he'd suspected they would. The one time she opened her eyes, his were on her, burning with resolve. His skin was dewy with sweat, his exhalations scalding her cheek. He looked feral and a little possessed, and she guessed she looked the same.

The bed began to creak with his thrusts, the headboard making dull pops against the wall.

Chest hitching, he grasped her waist and rolled slowly to his side, taking her with him until they faced each other. He didn't disengage, instead curving her leg over his hip, which sent him deeper, an impossible idea seconds before.

"Oh , incredible," she whispered in disbelief.

They clung to each other through what turned into a languid, more intimate joining. It took a moment to catch the new rhythm, a rolling grind. The still-groaning bed sounds mingled with terse gasps and hoarse moans. His lips swept her neck, ear, jaw, nipping, sucking, soothing. He teased her nipple, the skin of his palm hot, damp. While she touched every inch of him she could reach, his muscles rippling beneath her fingertips, the jutting bones of his back beneath her palm.

His lids fluttered, his pace speeding up. "Come with me," he urged. When she didn't reply, unable to with her senses aflame, her body floating in pleasure, he took the matter out of her hands.

He lifted her thigh a little higher, the angle hitting her perfectly. She groaned and rose to meet his thrusts, fingers twisting in his hair.

"I can feel you pulsing around me," he whispered against her neck. She was sensitive

from her earlier orgasm, and his skilled touch at her sex was all it took to send her over.

Her release splintered her consciousness, her mind vacating the room as waves of bliss stormed her, crest after crest. Breathless, she murmured her ecstasy into the firm muscle of his shoulder as the tremors ruined her.

The rest of the episode Penelope would have trouble recalling.

Cries, slick skin, and a groaning bed. Bodies bumping, the push and pull of fierce lovemaking as West arrived seconds later, crushing her to him as he thrust deeply. Words tripped from their lips amidst rushed kisses. In the end, they were nothing but tangled limbs, matted hair, and a crumpled disaster of a counterpane.

Brows touching, they dissolved, the most sated souls in England.

CHAPTER TEN

WHERE A LOVESICK ENGINEER PUZZLES OVER THE MECHANICS OF LIFE

West balanced the teacup on his belly, his brother's voice droning on about an earl's dramatic reading next week and the potential investors in attendance. Or a supper party, maybe it was? Another sorrowful ball, possibly, when he'd already been to one this week. He'd carried the stack of invitations to White's this morning so a duke could weigh in on which events were worth his effort.

Because his time was reserved for his engines and his girl.

Every spare moment the past week had been spent tucked in Penny's art studio until dawn or in his flat. They'd made utterly wondrous use of his desk in the warehouse when she showed up looking fresh as a daisy but with a naughty edge in her amber eyes. Surprisingly, the narrow iron bedstead in the loft didn't make any noise. That was the first time she climbed astride and rode them to completion, West recalled with a fast smile.

He dropped his head back, mind elsewhere, utterly absent from this posh space. Tristan was now expounding on the opera and fancy box seating he had there. The ceiling of the gentlemen's club was everything you'd think it should be, West decided as he lost himself in the swirling rosettes and Greek design. Actually, the chandelier plopping wax into the pans beneath created a calming atmosphere.

While his heart raced with every thought of her.

West's world was shifting, pieces falling into place without his orchestration, which wasn't common. He'd had to work until his fingers bled for everything he had. The letter from Emelia was in a crisp fold in his waistcoat pocket, no fragrance on these pages. She was marrying Oliver Brumble, a local magistrate West didn't hate. It would be an excellent union of two strong-willed and reasonably selfish individuals, a match made in commerce if not heaven.

His missive telling her he'd met someone and might be staying longer in England had likely passed hers in transit over the Atlantic.

West rolled his shoulder—the one Penny had bitten hard enough to bruise that first night—and wondered what the hell he was supposed to do next. He hadn't made smart use of his experience, and they'd played risky dealings on more than one occasion, meaning she could be pregnant. The rush of joy when he rationalized this fact said a lot. Then, he recalled who he was and who she was, and he talked himself out of his feelings. Until he looked at the glorious painting she'd given him, the best gift of his life, next to her .

Putting him back where he started, agonizing and lovestruck.

“Are you here, Brother, or anywhere in London for that matter?”

West shook himself and corrected his posture, sitting up straight, Penny's voice chiming, Elegance when seated as well as standing. “You were saying something about the opera?”

The Duke of Mercer's brow lifted, a regal show West could copy down to the bone. “Actually, I had moved to a discussion of Lord Bigsby's Christmastide musicale. There might be a man or two attending who you wish to speak with. Lord Taylor-Fontaine has blunt to burn from what I gather.”

West's gaze strayed to the roaring blaze in the hearth. I have no right to touch her. Not like the barons and viscounts and damned marquesses.

With a groaning stretch, Tristan propped his polished boot on the table, earning a cross scowl from the nob across the parlor who evidently didn't know dukes could do as they bloody pleased. "Would you like to talk about what is pulling you away today? From business which, from what I know, rarely happens."

West thumbed a drop of tea off the rim of his cup, his mind constructing calculations about life this time. Tristan and Penny worked extra hours to knock down the walls he'd created—and he was starting to let them. "Class is such a thing in this country. At home, being self-made is something to be celebrated. We have no titles to give, you see. I don't suppose bastard half-brother to a duke is a splendid one."

Tristan hid his smile unsuccessfully behind a wrinkled copy of the Gazette . "Society isn't real. It's more a concept to keep people in line. You can go outside it, West. No one's going to stop you, not with a duke standing behind you, legitimate or no."

"How real is not real?" West murmured, unsure if this was straight speak. Tristan didn't understand how low he'd been at the start in Philadelphia. His horror of a childhood hadn't been fully discussed, not yet.

Although, it was progress he considered sharing anything.

"Camille came into my life at exactly the right time," Tristan said, his own gaze having drifted to the flickering flames. Men didn't like going eye to eye when they talked of love. "Waterloo was over but not, and in every way, she saved me. An intractable girl who'd fought a swan in the Serpentine and adored me from the time she was little had the power to remove the bands strapped around my chest. For the first time in forever, I could breathe ."

When the silence rang without a response, Tristan sighed and laid the newspaper on his thigh. “Sound familiar?”

West glanced at his brother, his heart lifting at having someone to talk to. At finally having family. “It appears so. Except the woman releasing my bands is not so much stubborn as kindly relentless. The type of tender persistence that wears a man down after a bit.”

“Word in the betting book is that an earl’s daughter is rebuffing a marquess for unknown reasons. It was expected to blossom into a sedate romance but has not. Camille rebuffed a poor sod back in the day, I’m happy to tell you. The Tierneys are a breed who must fight for their women.”

With a hushed “Your Grace,” a footman of some sort interrupted them, the silver tray balanced on his open palm bearing an envelope.

Tristan calmly took the communication as if deliveries occurred wherever he went. Breaking the wax seal, he frowned as he read it, his gaze shooting West’s way twice before he tucked the page in his coat pocket.

“What is it?” West asked, the hair on the nape of his neck rising.

“If I tell you,” Tristan said, pressing his fist to his lips, “you have to promise you won’t buy a ticket on the next transport to the Colonies. When and if that ever occurs, you discuss it with me first. Your place, for now, is here. I only inquired about this matter because I don’t sanction my family being threatened in any way, no matter how trivial.”

The pain and pleasure of having an older brother, West reasoned as fear and fondness settled in his belly. After a time, he nodded. However, watching a duke struggle for words was more than West could withstand. Swearing, he snapped his fingers. “Give

me the note, Tris.”

The message was brief, four lines of black script on creamy vellum bearing the marker Bromley, Grimes & Beedle, Solicitors.

To His Grace, The Duke of Mercer

Regarding The Brazen Belle Inquiry

Your Grace,

Our investigator tracked a package sent from the business on Paternoster Row responsible for printing The Rake Review column to a home in Islington. The residence is currently leased by Lady Penelope Anstruther-Colbrook. The package was signed for by a domestic, Basil Pritchard, whose family has served the Anstruther-Colbrook’s since 1787. The contents of the package are unknown, although we will keep researching this matter in confidence, per your accord.

Yours Faithfully, James Beedle

Dumbstruck, West closed his eyes, the pain soon to be a blinding headache. Obviously, dukes employed better investigators than he did.

“Before you make a final judgment, before you destroy a budding relationship, can I advise you to talk to her first? If Lady Penelope is writing this ridiculous column, if she’s the Brazen Belle, it’s due to unstable finances. She has no one to support her, not a soul. There aren’t many ways a woman of standing can pay her bills aside from marriage. We don’t know what it’s like to be this desperate.”

“I know exactly what desperation feels like,” West whispered, rocking forward in his chair, tea splashing on his waistcoat. It made sense, actually. The Belle was overly

concerned with decorum and social strata, as his tutor had been. And wouldn't it make a solid case, if placed before a judge and jury, for the author of a column dedicated to exposing rakes be a woman abused by such a man in her past? A way for someone relegated to dark corners at balls, her ability to marry limited to aging viscounts, to seek revenge and, at the same time, profit?

West cracked his cup to the table, blood pulsing in his temples. Except this wasn't any woman, this was Penny. He'd shared things with her he'd never shared with another soul. He'd been close to telling her everything. Opening his heart and letting her climb inside.

He rose to a shaky stand, wishing he believed love could exist without trust .

Tristan was on his feet, his hand closing around West's arm. "Slow down and think. I made mistakes that almost cost me Camille, and I will tell you, her love was worth my fortitude. And mine worth hers ."

West shook off his brother's hold but paused at the salon's door. "I'm not leaving England, Tris. You're right, my place is here for now. If this"—he swallowed, shoving the slice of agony deep—"if it's true, this Belle mess, you aren't a part of it. I'd like you, Camille, and Ethan to be part of my future. I'd like us to be brothers."

Leaving a duke with a stunned expression, West departed on a quest to discover the truth.

Gilded moonlight from a crisp winter evening floated into the art studio through the garret's lone window to splash across the paint-scarred floorboards. Penelope leaned over the sketch pad, her charcoal hovering over the sheet. Trying to capture West's sleepy smile when he'd awakened this morning was a challenging endeavor. Faces were harder to capture than sunsets, she was finding. Although she could see every sharp plane and gentle hollow of his visage as well as any landscape, images burned

on her brain.

Images burned on her heart .

Smiling softly, she squeezed her legs together, her skin tender from his touch. They'd made love just before dawn, nestled in his bed, his body curved around hers, his chest to her back. A breathtaking position, lingering, intimate, his hand cupping her breast, his fingers teasing the delicate folds between her thighs as he moved inside her.

She'd never known such passion existed before him, and she hoped to never have another to compare because West was incomparable.

She was ready to tell him she loved him, days past ready. When she worked up the courage, the last time while lazing in that skinny iron bedstead in his warehouse, there would be a second's hesitation— his —that left her hesitating as well. He loved her, too, she suspected. She owned more of him than Emelia, Lady P, and the others. She hoped, she guessed. He was with her most times, present, but then he'd drift away after a comment sent him spinning into the past, his walls rising high. And quickly.

She wished she believed love could exist without trust .

Penelope glanced up as his boots sounded on the staircase, her pulse hastening. There would never be a time Weston Whitaker didn't send her heartbeat soaring the instant she saw him. She scrambled up and was scrubbing at a streak of charcoal on her cheek when he stepped into the room.

She turned—and immediately knew something was wrong. His face held a wariness she hadn't seen in weeks. Lines drawn, battle ready.

“What is it?” Penelope asked without crossing to him, the first time he'd come to the

garret she hadn't thrown herself into his arms. She couldn't when her gut was telling her don't .

His chest lifted on a stark inhalation. His lips parted, closed, then parted again. "Fuck," he whispered, yanking his hand through his hair. Sweaty and disheveled, he appeared to have run the distance from the city center to Islington. As always, a little maddened by his handsomeness, he took her breath away. "Was I fodder for more columns? Because of my connection to Tristan and, I don't know, the American bit? I knew I was a man of the hour, but this? You could have told me, I might have understood. Before ."

She squinted, trying to establish if he was foxed. "Have you and Mercer been drinking? What are you talking about?"

Glancing away, his chest rising on another harsh sigh, he tunneled his hand in his pocket and came out with a note, which he tossed to her.

She grabbed it midair, the action lifting his lips for a scant second before despair flooded his eyes, darkening them to a deadly emerald. Whatever was concerning him was serious.

She read the missive three times before her gaze found his. If he expected regret from her, he was going to be sadly disappointed, the stubborn fool. "I was betrayed, too, Wes, in front of all of London, but I didn't let it ruin me."

He shook his head as if to clear it. "I'm not ruined."

"You are," she said and marched to the hearth, where she tossed the note in the flames. The vellum caught, fringes firing much like her temper. "I take one step forward, two back with you. Constantly. Knocking down your walls, then watching them go right up again. You said you trusted me, but you lied." Turning to him, she

let her fury show. It felt bloody wonderful —because women had to keep their feelings crammed in a trunk to survive in this blasted world. She desired liberation. “You don’t trust anyone! Why should I be any different? A true relationship takes more than sexual congress. You don’t have it in you to do, to be , more.”

West frowned and shifted from boot to boot, truly confounded. She loved him, she did, with her entire being, but she loved herself more . Her days of lying awake at night loathing little pieces of herself she couldn’t change were over. Stalking across the space, right up to him, toe to toe, she slapped the penny she’d kept in her pocket since he presented it to her in his hand. “You can take this back , thank you very much.”

He stared at the coin, his fingers closing around it. Did his eyes have to be such an astounding shade unlike any other? Did he have to look so impossibly young and tormented and beautiful? “What am I to think, Penny? The package came here from the printer. Signed for by Basil, your family’s footman since before you were born.”

Her vision went rosy-red. Ripping her spectacles off, she rubbed her eyes to keep from throttling him. “He’s a butler. Basil is a butler. As for you, you could, perhaps, believe the woman you know intimately wouldn’t write a column set to destroy people, destroy families . That if she did, for financial reasons, conduct this business, which I’m guessing you and Mercer considered, she’d tell you before letting you into her bed. Into her heart. Especially seeing as you were December’s celebrant.” She laughed, a thready sound, and replaced her spectacles. “I’m not the only person who lives in this house if you recall.”

West’s expression loosened as realization hit. “Isabella,” he murmured.

Penelope stalked to her sketch pad and closed it with a snap, having no intention of finishing what was now a futile experiment. She wasn’t some silly portrait artist!

“Why would your sister do this? It’s reckless and senseless, and I mean, really, could she be the Brazen Belle? Is she as daring as that?”

Penelope glanced over her shoulder, love a stone weighing her down. Part of her wanted to save him from this struggle, which made her angrier. She was weary from being everything for everyone and leaving little for herself. “Reckless, daring, and senseless sum her up well. You love maths so much. You figure out the equation of Isabella Anstruther-Colbrook.” Penelope wasn’t happy about her sister and her possible involvement in this Rake Review muddle, but right now, she was dealing with a baffled lover and a broken heart. She’d deal with Isabella in a short hour or two upon her return. “You can go, Whitaker. You know the way.”

West took a step toward her, but she held up her arm to hold him back. “You have a dab”—he dusted his index finger across his cheek—“of charcoal, sweetheart.”

Sweetheart. With a stamina she couldn’t believe she possessed, Penelope let the streak remain on her skin. To spite him, she wasn’t going to remove it for days. “Close the gate, will you? Last time, it banged against the latch. A sound I’m used to, as it were. Your bedrails need adjustment.”

“Dammit, Penny, do you want me to lose what’s left of my mind? You know when you order me around like a general, so Britishly prim and proper, it makes my damned heart skip. And my cock, not to be too vulgar about it.”

“I want you to leave,” she whispered, images of him climbing over her, grasping her hips, and thrusting inside her hours ago swimming through her senses. “And I feel quite certain about the request.”

He took another step, arms held out in appeal. “You have a locked box under your easel. I was, well, not snooping exactly. I was studying your paintings the other morning, and I saw it. I thought maybe you kept the columns there. Editorials about

propriety and class and the lack thereof. Topics we reviewed for weeks until I was cross-eyed. You have a reason to despise certain members of society. Exposing rakes in a gossip column is a crafty way to seek revenge. What could Isabella have experienced so far in life that would have her involved in this? Thinking you were the Belle wasn't the craziest deduction."

She eyed the box, one of her father's he'd used for important papers. The rusty lock wasn't capable of keeping a child out. "They're sketches, Whitaker. Of you, mostly. I've been trying my hand at portraiture, a pastime I'm terminating this very minute. I didn't want Basil or Bessy to see them should they come up here because you're unclothed in a few."

West dropped his head to his hand as his cheeks flooded with color. "I've made a mess of this, just like Tristan said I would. I don't suppose you're willing to entertain an earnest apology from a broken American."

"I delight in you and the duke discussing me over drinks at his club." She picked up a brush and flicked the horsehair bristles across her wrist like a whip. "In addition, you can take your earnest apology and stuff it up your broken arse."

He sputtered in amusement before masking it. "He's trying to protect me, Penny. Believe me, he was shocked when he read the solicitor's note and sorry as hell I was sitting there to read it next."

"He loves you or is starting to. Yet, you fight him every step of the way." She slapped the brush to her cupped palm, unable to withstand his distress another second. His gaze had the power to melt her resolve and had on more than one occasion. "If we show affection often enough, despite your rejection, does that prove something to you? The issue is trust, your issue. The problem isn't with me. It never has been. I put my trust in you the night I arrived with my satchel. It was a yes in more ways than one. But not for you." She pointed the brush at him like it was loaded with a bullet.

“For you, it was only one way.”

Bewilderment shimmered in his eyes. Possibly a saving grace in the long run, his brilliance didn't apply to all areas. “If you think what's between us is merely physical”—swallowing, he gave his cravat a hard yank as if the air entering his lungs was scarce—“ hell , I've known what I feel longer than you have, I'll wager.”

The dreamy scenes a young girl holds in her mind—proposals and bent knees and wistful declarations of love—exploded like a kettle over a raging cookfire. “A bet. That's how you think to finally tell me?”

The brush left her grip to spin across the room and thump him in the shoulder.

It was the best throw of her life.

He blinked, then laughed, blast him, and reached to pick it up. “Sweetheart, calm—”

“You arrogant, smug... oh ,” she raged, beyond piecing together a sensible reply. The dented can was in her hand before she had time to formulate a plan. “ Out !” It hit the doorjamb near his head like a cannon shot, the dirty brushes spitting yellow and crimson paint across him. “Take time with your blasted cat and figure out your life!”

The last projectile, a spatula she used to mix gums, whacked the door he slammed behind him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WHERE AN ARTIST PUTS HERSELF FIRST

Isabella danced into the parlor with her usual jaunty step, her chignon spilling golden strands about her flushed cheeks. She had a straw basket looped over her arm, cloth from one of her embroidery projects poking out. Penelope believed this part of the story but, upon further reflection, realized the funds generated from the employment didn't match the task. She supposed they'd needed the money too desperately for her to question where it was coming from, which was her fault.

Isabella lingered in the doorway, sensing her sister's pensive mood. She was shrewd, secretive, and more attuned to Penelope's scandal and how it had shaped their family than Penelope had comprehended. As West had rightly declared, a gossip column targeting rakes was a fine slice of revenge, indeed. Shakespearean in nature. Rather cunning.

Taking a step closer, the basket banging her hip, Isabella's mouth formed a comical O. "Is that paint on your skirt? Did you have a mishap in your studio?" She sniffed, hand curling at her nose. "You're drinking."

Penelope was drinking. Actually, she was halfway to foxed.

Anger first, brandy second, tears last, after this undertaking.

Penelope slid the wrapped bundle she'd located beneath her sister's feather mattress on the table. "You were planning a special December column to usher in a new year.

Another exposé featuring Tall, Dark, and December , the first time a man's been featured twice. I'm thankful you didn't plan to share it was me Weston's been seeing, only a lonely matron and a rake still on the hunt." She acknowledged her sister with her chipped tumbler, grateful a thousand times over that the Duke of Mercer's investigator uncovered this before it turned into a disaster worse than Penelope's had been.

Isabella's lips tensed, her face going a waxy white. "It's not me. I don't write the columns. I'm just a conduit with access to the chatter circulating among society. My embroidery work gets me into a fair number of households and idle discussions with servants go along with it. I assume she has others like me as she can't be everywhere at once. I was contacted via messenger, and I've communicated as such the entire time. The package you found was supposed to be delivered tomorrow, an idea for a special edition, a gift to the Belle's readers for a successful year. She asked for suggestions. I merely gave her one."

Penelope took a shaking sip, relief making her dizzy. "A paid informant."

Entering the parlor, Isabella slumped into the armchair across from Penelope. "We needed the money. I saw how juggling our finances was tearing you down. I'm old enough to help. My embroidery work is real. I swear it, Pen. It brings in enough to pay the coal bill most months." She dropped her basket to the floor. "But it's not enough."

Penelope closed her eyes to the reality of their circumstances. Neville was out of the picture, too far from her heart to be a possibility, and Wes had drawn a line in the sand she didn't think she could cross. Dear heaven, what were they going to do now? "I'm sorry I wasn't able to keep you from this."

"He was going to ruin you, Pen, like the other one. Ruin us . I saw him leaving one morning, and... and I thought being mentioned twice might stop it."

The weight of her decisions dropped to Penelope's shoulders like a boulder. This helplessness must be what parenting feels like. "You were too young to understand the other, as you call Alain. I want you to know, as a woman, I wasn't coerced, and I don't regret it. I regret how it impacted you and our family. As for Weston—" She tapped her fingernails against crystal, his tormented expression and unholy green eyes flashing before her. "I think he loves me, Isa. As I love him."

"And?" Isabella asked in a breathless whisper.

Penelope sagged, boneless from heartache. "Sailing home on the fastest transport to America? I fear he's suffered quite enough of the English."

Isabella sniffled, her words cloaked in emotion one of them was comfortable showing. "I lost you after Mama and Papa were gone, after... Alain. You changed. My impulsive, exuberant sister became someone else."

Penelope laughed, rubbing her stomach with the rounded edge of the glass. "I grew up, Isa. We all have to, although I tried to shelter you for as long as I could. Mama's issues made it impossible for me to remain a girl. Someone had to put the pieces of our life together, and that someone was me."

She beckoned Isabella to her, opening her arms. Her sister crawled into the embrace like she had when she was barely out of leading strings. "You have to end this association with the Brazen Belle. Today. We'll write a note and send that through your messenger. It's over. We'll work this out another way. I promise."

Then she let her sister cry—as she longed to.

It took West two days to get the paint out of his hair. His trousers were ruined, according to Brixworth, and his boots sent to Hoby for repair no one expected to be successful.

“She’s got one hell of an arm,” was all his smirking brother said when he arrived at Tierney House covered in Penny’s fury. The duke’s estate was closer to Islington than his terrace, and if he was being truthful, this was the time a lad needed family. Camille had fussed over him in a maternal manner absent from his life since he was eight years old, offering tea and sympathy before getting down to brass tacks. With a steely-eyed sapphire gaze West feared in no small measure, the Duchess of Mercer advised him to offer the woman he loved her heart’s desire along with his heart.

Meaning his heart wasn’t the only thing he should bring to the negotiation.

He didn’t argue about the love comment, which he deemed progress.

Consequently, in his off hours from the warehouse, he spent the next three days strategizing with Tristan and Brixworth, who, for a stuffy old goat, had excellent ideas about how to woo a lady.

West also hoped the time would allow Penny’s blistering temper to cool.

In the end, brotherhood prevailed because the production required resources only a duke could muster.

Leaving West to skulk about the foyer of the furnished Highgate cottage he’d agreed to purchase in totality the day before, peeking through the velvet drape every minute like a girl awaiting the arrival of a trunk of new gowns. If he was going to stay in London, he needed space, and Limehouse wasn’t the place, not for her.

He went to his knee to scrub mud from his boot, nerves jumping, heart kicking—and this decidedly lacking place of power was how Penny found him.

“Oh, no ,” she said when she stepped through the doorway, bumping back into the Duchess of Mercer, her escort. “I had a feeling something was suspicious about this

visit. A new etiquette client in Highgate, my foot! The Tierney clan is up to no good.”

West glanced up from his crouched position, his heart taking the blow with poise. Her spencer and gown were matching colors of a sunset vista, cobalt shot through with a smoky gray. Her spectacles were new, and she’d gotten a haircut, leading him to believe she’d been as restless as he had.

Camille took Penny’s hand and, with the forthrightness of her nature and the confidence of her station, said, “Allot him thirty minutes, perhaps all you’ll give him ever again. Tie up the loose ends and make peace. I’ll be outside in my carriage. I have Jane Austen and a heated brick to keep me company.”

“What happens if I don’t come out in thirty minutes?” Penny asked without glancing his way. The tremor in her voice gave West leagues of hope.

The duchess flashed an easy smile, her eyes catching his over Penny’s shoulder and silently telling him: Don’t bungle this. “That’s up to you, darling.”

Penny turned to him when the door closed. “Are we alone?”

He nodded, silent as she removed her spencer and hung it on a peg on the hall stand and removed her spectacles, placing them on a shelf. She had a fiery look in her amber eyes he wasn’t going to challenge. Let her lead, Tristan had instructed. Advice West planned to follow.

When she started unfastening the hooks securing her bodice, his mind went blank.

Strolling past him, Penny crossed to the grand staircase, a feature he loved about the place, the steps wide and made of rich, dark oak. She and the house were too fine for a raggedy orphan from the Philadelphia slums, but he’d take both if he was able. She trailed her fingers over the carved newel post and along the banister he’d buffed to a

shine during a nervous burst of energy at dawn, one hand still working on her bodice closings.

She ascended the staircase like a vision from his dreams while he, discomfited and aroused, struggled to place his next move. Was she still angry? His gaze roamed the corridor to the parlor, where the pieces of his proposal lay in wait. The air was redolent of roses and the piquant scent of cranberry scones, her favorite. There were chocolates, too, and plans. So many plans.

Nonetheless, when Penny disappeared from view, he took the stairs two at a time.

He caught her on the second landing, hooking his arm around her waist from behind and tossing her over his shoulder. “Weston Whitaker,” she said on a gasping laugh, slapping at his back. “Put me down, you brute.”

“Do you remember how we said our next time would be?”

“No,” she answered, but a quiver lanced the word, betraying her.

He raced his hand up her leg to her thigh, her skin warm beneath copious layers. “A tight space, hardly enough for two. I find you. I take you. No words, no disrobing. Do you recall that fantasy?”

She’d whispered this while she rode him, her breath a hot promise in his ear, her luscious quim gripping his cock. He’d come while imagining it, powerfully enough to blur his vision. She liked lewd talk; a complete shock the first time she did it.

He hadn’t expected his day to start like this, but he wasn’t rejecting the boon.

The first room he hit was a linen closet. Perfect . In seconds, he had her out of his arms, backed against a shelf, his lips seizing hers. Her hands gripped his biceps, her

moan as she strained to reach him a delicious echo. Tongues tangling, they fought for control and balance, stumbling, rocking the shelves until a stack of sheets rained down on them.

She turned her head, breaking the kiss. Then they stared, the air around them sparking. The scent of rosewater and starch stung his nose as he drew a fast breath. Her teasing scent chased it, right into his heart.

“We make love,” he rasped, “ then we make peace.”

Before she could shut him down, West glanced about, strategizing. He wasn’t an engineer for nothing. A wooden bench buried beneath a pile of cotton cloths was wedged along one wall. Tugging her to it, he knocked the linens to the floor and tested it with his fist. Shaky but solid, it might hold them. “Like the carriage,” he reminded her, the image of her climbing atop him in the rocking vehicle sending a surge of blood to his cock.

Tunneling her fingers in his hair, she tugged his lips to hers. “No words, Whitaker.”

He made quick work of it, going with Penny’s lead as his brother had suggested. They instituted a combined effort to undo his trouser buttons, allowing his shaft to spring free. After, it was simply a matter of him sitting, her climbing astride, clothing yanked to her waist, no disrobing if they played by the rules. Simple mathematics, his favorite kind.

The only casualty were her drawers, which he destroyed in the handling.

Guiding him, she lowered herself on his shaft in a prolonged, blinding glide. He groaned as her back rounded, her breast bumping his lips, ideal placement, the inner curve exposed by her gaping bodice. Her nipples he’d have to cherish at a later time as the position was more grind than stroke, more wiggle than thrust. He was simply

too tall to reach them.

Along the way, he lost himself, the norm every damned time with her, although bits and pieces of the encounter would travel back to him. Her teeth catching his bottom lip when he grabbed her hips to increase the cadence. Kisses spinning into murmured cries, spinning into whispered pleas. Hairpins dropping to the floor, auburn strands spilling over his hand. Her eyes, a tawny wonder in the slice of light flowing in the high window. The sweet curve of her breast, her hip flexing beneath his fingertips. The scent of her bleeding into his soul. The sound of their bodies joining, raw and erotic.

“I love you,” he whispered as she clenched around him and began to shudder, her response sending him over the edge seconds later. He embraced her as they trembled, closing his eyes to the incredible sensations, wanting to protect her forever. Wanting to let himself adore her as he wished to.

Cheek to cheek, lungs churning, they tumbled into bliss.

Penelope loved West's cottage.

Newer than the musty wreck she leased in Islington, it was full of high ceilings and, she imagined, a flood of light on sunny days. The grand staircase was glorious and the carpets lining every parlor Axminster, not faded relics like hers. The furnishings were sedate but quality, the only change she'd make would be to remove the portraits in the breakfast room. A dour group she'd relegate to the garret if the choice were hers.

Penelope brought her hands to her cheeks with a flushed sigh.

Maybe the choice was going to be hers.

Cranberry scones and two dozen pale-yellow roses, her favorites, resided in the front parlor. Chocolates from the best merchant in London and a wrapped box she'd shaken and sniffed to no avail. Elizabeth the cat snoozing in a crate near the hearth, her presence making the house seem like a home.

She knew she owed West a response to his admission.

I love you, he'd whispered in a tender tone that softened her heart to butter. Men were dunderheads, even the kindhearted ones. She couldn't hold his foolishness against him forever, not if he was finally willing to trust her with the reasons for his scars and his headaches. She'd best get used to being vexed with him because it was likely to happen often.

Thus, Penelope lingered in his study just after daybreak, too nervous to sleep. She'd left West tangled in silk sheets, slumber claiming him moments after the close of their second encounter, an energetic romp atop his sprawling and remarkably soundless bed.

She laughed, delighted, her passion having worn him out, worn him down .

Sitting at his desk, snacking on scones and tea, she thumbed through the sheets spread across it, searching for clues about her endless fascination. His bold script was handwriting she'd recognize among a thousand others. She traced her finger down a row of equations that made her head ache to consider. He really was brilliant despite his idiocy about his feelings.

With her help, he would conquer the steam industry and love.

When he ambled in later that morning, the wrinkled sheet wrapped around him like a shawl, his hair an absolute fright, she coughed in amusement, choking on her scone.

He yawned and rubbed his eyes, not fully awake. “You weren’t supposed to come down without me. Or render me senseless during that last go. I think I pulled a muscle in my leg.”

She nodded to the wrapped box. She’d been waiting patiently for hours . “Can I open it now?”

Limping over, he emptied her teacup and inhaled the remaining scones. Between bites, he said, “That’s for Isabella. An embroidery set I saw at a shop on Regent. Studded with fake diamonds or something. We’ll give it to her together. It’s silly but, apparently, so is she.” Penelope had explained her sister’s role in *The Rake Review* , minor for the most part, to his masked but obvious relief. “Your present is out back.”

The wave of emotion hit her, overwhelming in its force. The past week with and without him had nearly broken her. Despite the trouble Isa had caused, he’d gotten her a gift? Penelope dropped her face to her hands and let out a gasping wail.

His sheet falling to the floor, West circled the desk to scoop her into his arms. He had on drawers but nothing else, and his body was hot against hers. “Sweetheart, please stop. I’m hanging by a thread here.”

With a sniff, she pressed her cheek over his thumping heart. “You’re kind.”

“I’m determined is all,” he murmured, his lips dusting the crown of her head. “I’m going to embarrass you. The wrong fork used at a duke’s dinner is surely coming soon. A controversial topic thrown into conversation like a stone. No one would pick me for an earl’s daughter. And this cottage, I mean, Highgate isn’t Mayfair, but the estates are larger with plenty of open land. I have five acres and, God, the air smells wonderful in the morning. Far enough from the city but close, too. I need space and, as it turns out, so do you.”

“I would pick you,” she whispered, “I do, I will if you ask.”

Grabbing the sheet to loop it loosely around his waist, he leaned to open the top desk drawer and came back with a box. His eyes shyly met hers as he opened it. He worked the gold necklace free of the velvet folds and presented it to her. The intricately scrolled locket shimmered in the lamplight. Cradling it in her palm, she flipped the catch. Inside was her penny, held in place by tiny fastenings like the ones binding her to him.

“Keeping a piece of me close to your heart,” he said and took the necklace, placing it around her neck with trembling hands.

She bowed her head, swallowing tightly. She turned when she could and stretched to cover his lips with hers. “I love you, too, Weston Whitaker. Even if you are far too young for me.”

Gripping the sheet at his hip, he grasped her hand, their fingers linking. “Come on, old girl, the main present is outside. Part of the need for space.”

Half-dressed and laughing, they exited a door leading to a side garden and raced along a pebbled path twisting through overgrown hedges. They were barefoot, their breath misting the air. When she stumbled on a stone, West picked her up and ran across the lawn toward a small structure Penelope assumed had once been a working stable. He burst inside the building with a shiver and let her slide down his body. “This damned country. You’ll have to keep me warm, sweetheart,” he said and tucked the sheet around her. “Two minutes, then we’re settling before a roaring hearth and never leaving. Actually, I’ve always wanted to make love before a fire.”

Moving away, he circled the space, pointing and gesturing, animated as he described his vision. This was the daring firebrand she was used to. “It’s large enough for me to section it off, half for my engines, half for your art. I’ve spoken with an architect

about shoring up the walls and installing a proper hearth, shelves and the like. More windows on your side. But it has good bones, solid flooring, and I quite like that the exterior looks like an old barn or something.”

Pressing the locket to her chest, the coin warmed beneath her palm. “My studio?”

He spun around, his gaze on the ceiling. “I already bought a carriage load of supplies. Canvases, new ones, and paints, the good stuff already in the tubes. Brushes and a larger easel. Yours looked a little small. I want your paintings in a bloody gallery by this time next year. I’m going to see to it. Tristan knows an art broker.”

She crossed to him, more tears threatening.

“ Ah , Penny, as I always say, you undo me,” he murmured and brought her into his chest. Kissing her brow, he held her tight. “Penelope Whitaker is going to show society exactly what they missed.”

She sniffled, burrowing into him. “Weston Whitaker, too.”

After a moment, he said, “I was thinking about something, sweetheart.”

Peace settled over her, merging into the steady beat of his heart beneath her ear. “Dangerous.”

He laughed, his arms tensing around her. “There’s a loft we could outfit as a bedchamber of sorts. Small, nothing fancy, but we’ll flesh out the walls and make a tidy room. For nights I’m working late and don’t want to wake you. And”—his sigh streaked from his lips and across her brow—“it might work, short hours, I’m meaning, when we’re here and the babe needs a nap.”

She lifted her head, catching his gaze. His were open in more ways than one. Finally .

“You’d be agreeable, that is, well, your work is at a critical building point and—”

“I want your children, Lady Penelope, and I want them now . I’m not getting any younger, as you’ve repeatedly declared. I already started a list of things to tell him. You taught me life lessons you had no idea you’d imparted. About love and generosity.” He paused, searching. “And patience.”

Her tears were beyond her control, pooling to trail down her face. “What if it’s a girl?”

West stilled as he sought to give her an honest answer, his sincerity vastly unique in a world of impostors. “I’ll love her so much, like I do you, blindly and forever, that the answers will come to me. It won’t be easy, her finding love, because there isn’t a duke or a prince fit for her. Already, I know I’ll fight to the death for her.”

Penelope longed to bask in her happiness for days, weeks, months , but when she shivered, West scooped her into his arms and raced, laughing, into their new life.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:28 am

EPILOGUE: WEST AND PENNY

WHERE A BEMUSED COUPLE ACCEPTS THE CHALLENGES OF PARENTING

A cozy Highgate cottage, 1821

West stumbled into the bedchamber, his vision blurred. He'd been up three times already this night, calming the beast. "He's asleep. Finally . A full belly did the trick."

His wife peeked from beneath the silk coverlet, her smile a delight he'd savor until his last day. She looked rested and beautiful, her cheeks still retaining a hint of plumpness from her confinement, her hair, an unexpected advantage to being pregnant, thick as ever, a gilded puddle across his sheets.

This vision had been his first wicked dream about her.

Penny rose to her elbow, the glint in her tawny eyes one he recognized. "What's that grin about? You look positively devilish."

He yawned and crossed the room, gazing down at the slumbering babe in the bassinet. Love stormed his heart, a battering ram racing right over him. His hand shook when he reached to touch, gently, so as not to wake her. His daughter was the best sleeper in the house. "If I tell you, we'll end up like we did two days ago, huddled beneath those sheets, making impossibly quiet love for hours." His cock shifted beneath his drawers, pleading. Lovemaking with Penny was like nothing he'd

ever experienced.

He sighed and tunneled his fingers through his hair, wishing he had the energy.

Penny nestled up behind him, her arms sliding around his waist. “I told you a baby and a puppy at one time would be a challenge.”

He trailed his fingertip along the hem of his daughter’s blanket, a gift from Isabella. Hannah had been born a month before Christmastide, so his sister-in-law had decorated the coverlet with intricately stitched holly berries and little green stars. “I had no idea a mongrel would be this much work. But I couldn’t leave George shivering on the post road in the middle of a storm. Plus, you and Isa always wanted a dog.”

Penny pressed a kiss to his back. “You are the sweetest man I’ve ever known. Kind to the ends of the earth except for naming our pet after your first president. The English are aghast at the notion.”

“Sweetheart,” he whispered and turned in the circle of her arms. “I’m not the kindest by any stretch of the imagination, but I’ll take it.”

“Isabella wants him to sleep in her bedchamber.”

He hummed and dipped his head, breathing in the scent of her hair soap. Lemons and lilac, she smelled like a fantasy. “Once he’s trained to do his business outside, he can leave the kitchen. I’m working on it, the rebellious bugger.”

His wife laughed, her round breasts quivering. Another boon to pregnancy. “Isabella or George?”

“She’s fine, quit worrying.” He pressed a kiss to her brow. “The Season went well.

Mostly. Who cares if she got into a little tiff with a baron? Women should have more educational opportunities.”

“She hates it,” Penny whispered. “Society isn’t a good fit for the Anstruther-Colbrook girls. Being outspoken and intelligent are curses.”

“Tristan and Camille are taking her riding the next seasonably warm day in Hyde Park. Dukes can erase any minor scandals on one’s blackboard. About the only thing I’ve found a title is good for.”

“They’ve been lovely. And you, delaying your next trip to Philadelphia.”

He hugged her close. “I’m not going without you, without Hannah. The one time I had to go to close up my business there was all I’ll ever do again on my own. The Mint can wait. My latest design is close to being finalized, then we’ll move into production. I have a meeting on Thursday with Lord Davenport. He has the most mining interests in Cornwall and Devon. Any success here will make it easier for me to sell the product there. I haven’t forgotten about those damned screw presses.” He paused, his heart squeezing in his chest. Watching the woman he loved work so much harder in life than a man had to was one of the toughest things he’d ever had to witness. “I’m sorry about the gallery.”

Penny laughed, her breath a heated dance across his skin. “Wes, my paintings are going into John Colnaghi’s studio, which is quite impressive for an untried painter. Does it matter if the artist will be known as William Colbrook?”

“Someday, Penelope Whitaker is debuting, I swear it. He said your work was the finest he’d ever seen from an amateur.”

She gave the skin beneath his collarbone a naughty nip. “Let William have his day. Colnaghi has to make money and a woman’s artwork won’t. I’m content with the

plan, for now.”

West rocked back on his heels, rethinking his exhaustion. He glanced at his daughter and the sliver of pinkish dawn fluttering around the drape. He might as well make use of being woken in the dead of night by a hungry canine. “How long do we have?”

Penny smiled and dragged her fingernail down his chest and over his belly. “I have certain things I can do to speed up the process.”

West groaned, the image of her lips closing around his shaft flashing through his mind. She had talent in areas apart from painting. “Leave it to my wife, the soon-to-be-famous artist, to create such a vivid picture in my mind.”

Penny grinned and tugged him toward the bed. “Oh, leave it to her entirely .”

EPILOGUE II: ISABELLA

WHERE A REBELLIOUS YOUNG WOMAN ENDS AN ASSOCIATION

Isabella winced when she bumped her injured finger as she alighted from the rented hack and slipped on the icy cobblestones. She'd jammed her needle into her skin this morning upon hearing her sister proclaim *The Rake Review* finished, the author retiring, which was the rumor around London after the year-long hiatus since the last edition.

The fog enveloped her legs past the ankle as she crept along the alley. The Belle had directed her to meet at the third door, bright blue and not easily missed, on the left.

When Isabella got closer, she observed a woman shrouded in secrets and gabardine standing there. The veil covering her face was too thick for Isabella to confirm her identity, although she had her suspicions.

Halting before the Belle, she held out the envelope. "This is the only information I was able to gather about the gentleman in question. I'm sorry, but I can't continue to help you. I've been instructed that an embroidery business isn't suitable for a woman on the hunt for a husband or related, by marriage, to a duke. Freedom is a rare thing in my world."

"I understand." The Belle paused, mist swirling, then whispered, "She loves him?"

Isabella frowned before the meaning of her question took hold. "Penelope? Gads, it's more than love. She and West can't stand to be away from each other for even an

afternoon. They're friends . If he weren't the absolute best man in every sense, I'd be sickened." She laughed, the pinch of jealousy she experienced over her sister's love story surely indicating she was irredeemable. She loved Pen more than anything and wanted her to be happy.

Nevertheless, her loneliness was a defining presence of late, a stone upon her shoulders.

As if she sensed Isabella's despair, the Belle reached out with a black-gloved hand and gently grasped her arm. "You may not believe it, but not all men are rakes. Some are... good ."

The word tiptoed through the mist, filled with its own melancholy.

Isabella started to ask: What happened to you to make you write this column?

But the Belle disappeared into the night before she could.