



The Blackguard's Beauty (Wanton Wastrels #4)

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Category: Historical

Description: Fleur Davies would do anything to protect the last of her family—her twin brother, Flavian. From fighting a duel in secret, to daring to put her virtue up for auction with the intent to clear a gambling debt, she told herself she was prepared to do whatever was necessary to ensure their survival. However, when she finds herself at the mercy of an intimidating man like Mr. Porter, it isn't fear that courses through her. There is something about those glittering silver eyes that she can't quite ignore...

Drake has lived a life that would make most people cringe. He had been called the Devil with due cause. He never hesitates when it comes to getting what he wants. His past is littered with criminal activity, but he decides to put all that behind him. When he encounters Fleur and her errant brother, he is intrigued. But when she sends him on a merry chase, he finds that he is inexplicably drawn to the raven-haired beauty. For the first time in his life, Drake wants more than revenge.

When they suddenly find themselves at the mercy of the London underground, Drake and Fleur have to become unlikely allies to save her brother's life. But will this fiery attraction be the end of them all?

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CHAPTER 1

Greenwich, England

September 1825

The sharp sound of two rapiers colliding rang out through the early morning mist. A shrouded figure dressed entirely in black faced off with a sailor who had decided to pick a fight with the wrong man.

Drake stood in the shadows of a nearby oak as he watched the interaction take place. He had long heard of the prowess that Flavian Davies possessed on the dueling field. This morning he'd decided to find out for himself.

He had to admit that his technique was practically flawless. It was clear his opponent was outmatched. He just didn't seem to know it yet.

The odd thing that struck Drake was the fact young Davies never fought without his concealing attire. From head to toe, he was like the grim reaper moving through the cloudy haze covering the field. But instead of a scythe, he acquired souls by the nick of his steel blade. Except that was another curiosity. He never challenged anyone to a duel. He was always the recipient of someone's ire for one reason or another. And he never once took a life. The most he did was draw first blood until the seconds standing by called the match. Generally, it was Davies who was the victor.

Stop playing with him and end this debacle. Drake wanted to shout his annoyance, but neither did he want to distract either opponent. He held no loyalty to either of

them, but he held the belief that any duel should be fair. He had dealt with too many crooks and thieves over the course of his three and thirty years to appreciate honesty.

Years before, he hadn't been so forgiving, eager to gain what he was due and be damned with the consequences of his actions. It wasn't until he'd spent some time on the sea that he'd stopped to wonder if the life he'd been living thus far had been worth it. Yes, he'd had power, wealth, and the reputation to back up his actions. And yet—something had been missing.

He had traveled extensively, living an unburdened life most dreamed of, and he was still restless, unsatisfied.

Perhaps that was why he had gotten up before dawn and made his way to this abandoned stretch of land to observe a match that had nothing to do with him. Curiosity was the single thing that had propelled him to come here. He refused to think of it as desperation for a life that had no meaning.

His brow furrowed when the sailor fell to the ground and Davies poised his weapon directly in line with the man's throat, as if this was the one time he might break his rule and end a miserable existence.

“Leave today or next time I might not be so generous.”

The raspy voice rang out clearly as Davies tossed his weapon away but something caused Drake to frown. There was something... off about the tenor. He had heard Davies talk before and it certainly wasn't with the same inflection. He could be speaking out of theatrics, which would make sense considering the circumstances. Or there could be another reason.

Intrigued despite himself, and likely because he had nothing better to do, Drake decided that the matter might be worth further investigation. It had been some time

that he'd been able to solve a mystery and he had the time and the efforts in which to accomplish most anything. If he wanted to learn a scandal within the royal household, it would be no issue for him to find enough fodder to do so. Then again, Prince George IV had no trouble offering enough outrageous behavior for the gossips to use against him.

As the duel reached its conclusion and the opponent limped from the field in defeat, Drake's focus was on the couple heading in the opposite direction. The furrow between his brows deepened because it looked as though Davies was having a heated discussion with his second. It struck him as odd because although there were times of discord in high tension times like this, Drake found it curious that there was anything wrong with the way the tide had turned. Unless, of course, Davies wanted to end this particular life and was instructed not to do so.

Drake wondered what had caused the duel in the first place and decided that the best place to try to uncover the mystery surrounding Flavian Davies, he needed to go to the Coach and Horses pub where he'd first learned of this morning's entertainment. Without anything else to occupy his time, Drake adjusted the cap on his head and lit a cheroot as he strolled away.

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As soon as they were safely ensconced inside the dark carriage, Fleur Davies ripped off the hood of her costume. Her hands were shaking but it had nothing to do with the fact she could have easily lost her life or a limb. She was furious at the man sitting across from her. Flavian was her twin brother, the last of the family she had left, and yet there were times she wanted to run him through with the sword everyone thought he wielded in these ridiculous duels.

"This is the last time, Flav! Do you hear me? I'm not cleaning up after you anymore. I shouldn't have to put my life on the line because you find this all a lark."

He removed his hood and tossed it to the side. Although Fleur shared certain characteristics with Flavian—the height and slim build, which made it possible for Fleur to convince everyone that she was her brother—their eyes were the marked difference. She had green like their late mother, while Flavian’s were brown like their sire.

Unfortunately, that wasn’t where the similarities ended between her brother and their late father. Both liked their drink and they enjoyed the company of women. Syphilis had put their father in his grave, and while Fleur wasn’t privy to her brother suffering the same illness, he was well on his way to leaving this earth sooner rather than later. Fleur never knew if it was their mother’s death that had caused their father to spiral into such a dark existence, but she wasn’t about to see her brother meet the same end. She would fight with her every last breath to ensure he didn’t. He was all she had left in the world.

The problem was that while she was working at the Greenwich Hospital School teaching Latin to the orphans of maritime soldiers, Flavian had plenty of time to get himself into mischief. At four and twenty, he was younger by six minutes, and Fleur was tired of feeling as though she was the elder sister by years when it was a matter of chance that she had been born first.

“I’m sorry,” Flavian grumbled. “I told you it was a misunderstanding.”

“Yes. Aren’t they all?” she snapped. After facing her toughest opponent to date, she wasn’t in the mood to humor Flavian at the moment. She was still trying to shake off the misgivings that had taken hold of her the moment she’d arrived at the field that morning.

She had the strangest sensation that she had been watched, and yet, she hadn’t noticed anyone else around.

Normally, Fleur didn't dare brush back the curtain of the carriage, not wanting to take any chances that she would be seen but something compelled her to glance out. The moment she did her breath caught on a gasp.

“What is it?”

She ignored her brother's query as her focus fixated on the man standing next to a nearby tree. She saw him grind out a cheroot beneath his heel, the last of the smoke expelling from his mouth. He wore a cap pulled down low over his forehead, but not so far as to conceal prominent cheekbones and a strong jawline. He exuded mystery and danger and she felt a shiver of unease trail up her spine. The worst part was the piercing manner of his stare as he looked at their passing vehicle. It caused her to quickly let the curtain fall back into place.

“What's wrong, Fleur?”

Her brother's insistence made her look at him in annoyance. Letting out a heavy sigh she said, “Nothing that concerns you. Just promise me that you will do your best to remain hidden for the rest of the day while I'm at the orphanage. Do not cause any more trouble for me than you already have.”

With that, the interior fell silent. She knew that Flavian was brooding, and while she might have been harsh, she didn't care. He had to learn to curb his excesses or she would be forced to let him accept the consequences of his own actions. She had covered for him for months and the notoriety they were starting to gain was not something she was comfortable with. Flavian, on the other hand, was eager to please the public and when they started to place wagers on who would be the victor in his next match, he was happy to comply because part of the proceeds ended up in his pockets.

Fleur had never wanted to take Flavian's place on the field, but she knew that he

wasn't any good with a sword, while she had learned to fence, among other things, after their father had passed. The only thing her brother did was lift a bottle to his lips.

She didn't want to become bitter toward her twin. They had always been close because they knew they only had each other to rely on, but she was tired of trying to struggle to make ends meet when the frustrations became too much to bear. They had made their way from Birmingham to Greenwich because Fleur hoped the smaller village and the change of scenery would help to curb her brother's excesses. Thus far it had not. She was starting to wonder if it might take a serious injury for him to see the deadly game that they were embarking upon.

The carriage pulled up into the inn yard of the Coach and Horses. There were a handful of people who knew the true identity of the figure behind the dark shroud. The innkeeper, Joseph Evans, the stablemaster, Daniel, and George, their coachman. If it wasn't for the consideration of these three men, Fleur wasn't sure how she might survive the scandal that would ensue if the truth were ever uncovered. It would surely ruin her reputation and most certainly that of Flavian. She couldn't comprehend the level of his despondency should he be branded a coward who allowed his sister to fight his battles.

Once the carriage stopped, Fleur put back on her concealing hood and then jumped to the ground. She was eager to don her gown once more and act as though she hadn't just deceived her opponent and his second, but the rest of the pub who were eager to learn the outcome of the morning. She gritted her teeth, despising their enjoyment and the slight sense of pride that shot through her when they praised Flavian when it was her prowess that they were commending without knowing the truth.

A secret back room in the stables was where Fleur and Flavian kept their costumes. As she removed her hood and flung it into the trunk, she prayed that she wouldn't have to wear it again anytime soon. Preferably never again, but she knew that

miracles didn't happen overnight.

Nevertheless, as Flavian joined her and tossed his hood into the trunk next to hers, he looked contrite. But then, he generally did each time. His guilt lasted long enough for him to get in trouble again. "I promise I won't let my temper get the better of me again."

Fleur's mouth twisted bitterly. "I've heard those excuses before, so forgive me if I can't put much faith into them now."

Flavian hung his head as he turned and shuffled over to the door leading back into the stables where he would wait for her to change.

Fleur told herself not to allow her heart to be made heavy by his actions. It wasn't anything she hadn't seen before, and yet, his vulnerability tugged at her heart. If he could find a proper lady to care for him and love him as she'd done all these years they'd been on their own, Fleur knew that was the only way she might hope to have a chance at a normal life without all of this intrigue.

She set those thoughts aside and put on her gown. The light blue cotton was starting to show signs of wear, her undergarments and petticoats were thin and patched several times. At least her corset and small bustle were still in good order. Nevertheless, it wasn't as though she had a wealth of funds at their disposal to buy new garments. She was given a decent wage for her work at the orphanage but it was her brother's spendthrift habits on women and drink that kept them at poverty level. Thankfully, their modest cottage was provided by Joseph Evans at a rent that she could actually afford to pay.

Considering the dire straits, Fleur considered taking a second position as a serving maid at the pub but the idea of listening to the constant innuendo and allowing the rowdy gentlemen customers to fondle her at will did not settle well with her. She had

always tried to live a proper life, perhaps to compensate for the wild oats that her brother thought it so necessary to sow.

Fleur was still winding her hair up into a knot, pinning it on her head when she left the stable room and gave her brother a stern warning. “Do try to curb your excesses today, Flavian. I shall see you this evening.”

With that, she headed toward the school.

* * *

Drake was sitting at the bar nursing an ale in the Coach and Horses when his quarry walked in from a back entrance. Davies exchanged a few words with the innkeeper, Mr. Evans, and then he walked over to a table and slouched down into the chair. A drink was set before him, but he reluctantly waved away the offer.

Drake found this curious behavior for someone who had just won a duel; he’d have thought Davies’ victory would have had him riding high.

Grabbing his tankard, he walked over to the table and took a seat across from Davies without being asked to join. The man’s brow instantly furrowed and he opened his mouth just as Drake withdrew a deck of cards from his pocket and asked smoothly, “Are you a gambling man, Mr. Davies?”

The frown deepened. “How did you know?—?”

Drake shuffled the deck with a slight upturn of his lips. “I know a great many things. I used to live a life that demanded it. Most of the time my knowledge was dependent on life or death.”

His companion crossed his arms and gave him a hard look. At least, Drake was sure

that was what was intended, but he wasn't intimidated by the younger man. In fact, Drake had yet to come across an opponent that struck true fear into his chest. He'd lived the life of many men by the time he was twenty-one and never expected to make it that far. "I wish to be left alone."

As he spoke the words, Drake could see the sweat starting to bead on Davies' brow, his focus intent on the deck that Drake held. "I don't think so." He signaled the serving wench and she sauntered over with a seductive light in her eyes. Drake was not interested in what she had to offer at the moment. "A drink for my new friend, if you please. Put it on my tab." Davies started to halt the maid's progress, but Drake added, "Surely you are thirsty after your efforts on the field this morning."

Immediately the boy tensed. "What would you know of it?" He glanced down at his buff trousers and white shirt, worn blue waistcoat and jacket as if he were still wearing the black shroud from this morning.

"I'm not passing judgment on your actions," Drake said with a shrug. "As I said, I was once like you." The maid returned and set a tankard of ale in front of Davies before she walked away, but not without bending forward and offering Drake a glimpse of the shadowed valley of her breasts.

Again, he ignored her in favor of the opponent before him. If Davies was intent on causing havoc with everyone he met, he had yet to make Drake's acquaintance.

"Who are you?"

Drake snorted. He considered not answering, but since he doubted the pup knew his name, nor the reputation that proceeded it, he answered truthfully. "You can call me, Mr. Porter." He held up the deck. "Would you care to deal, Flavian?"

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CHAPTER 2

By the end of the long day, Fleur was eager to sit down and rub her tired feet and get something to eat. She hoped that her brother'd had the kindness to fix supper with what little rations that they had to their name. But cabbage stew would be better than nothing at this point. Her stomach was rumbling with hunger.

The Coach and Horses was on the way home and although she wanted to believe the best of Flavian, as she walked by the pub and heard the commotion going on within, her heart sank. There were very few times that the pub got that rowdy. There was either a fight or a high stakes match taking place. Knowing her brother's weakness for cards as well as everything else, she feared that Flavian had already returned to his usual vices. She might have saved her breath this morning because it never seemed to do any good.

Anger energizing her, Fleur stomped toward the establishment and pushed open the door.

At first, she wasn't able to see anything. The crowd was on their feet making it impossible to see what was going on. But it was obviously something of import, for another round of cheers went about the pub and money was being exchanged among the assemblage. It made her furious because she was more convinced than ever that Flavian was at the heart of this debacle.

When she managed to catch a glimpse of the innkeeper through the crowd, the despondency she saw on his face confirmed what she had prayed not to be true.

Pushing her way forward, through the throng of eager onlookers, she stopped when she saw her brother lay down a hand of cards that many would think was a good hand when playing Three Card Brag. But when her mind whirled with what he might have been using for blunt—and how much—she placed a hand on her stomach.

“It’s your play, Mr. Porter.”

The smug sound of Flavian’s voice didn’t bother her nearly as much as the identity of his opponent. With the hat pulled down low and a slow swirl of smoke coming from the cheroot between his fingers, Fleur recognized him as the same man who had been at the duel that morning. She didn’t know who he was and neither did she care. She just knew she had to get her ignorant brother away from him before he did any more damage.

She started to move forward once more, but the collective gasp that went around the crowd as Mr. Porter laid down his cards did not sound positive for Flavian—or her. “A running flush is very good, Mr. Davies, but I regret that a prial trumps your hand.”

A puff of smoke emphasized his words and accentuated the look of shock on her brother’s face. She knew right then that he had done something unthinkable. Something possibly unforgiveable.

She pushed a random stranger out of her way and stood over Flavian. She saw the empty tankards lined up along the opposite edge of the table and realized that it was worse than she’d imagined because he was in his cups. That was when he made the most dreadful errors in judgment that she generally had to pay for.

She reached down and grabbed his jacket and yanked hard. He stumbled out of his seat but managed to retain his footing as she hissed, “We’re going home. Now .”

Flavian appeared to still be in shock over his loss, and she would learn what she

would have to atone for later. Right now, she just wanted out of this miserable place. Shoving him toward the door, she made it a handful of steps before a deep voice behind her asked evenly, “I didn’t realize there was a Mrs. Davies.”

Fleur didn’t bother to turn around and look at the man. She knew it was the one who had challenged her brother and she hated him for it. “I’m his sister, sir. And I would kindly ask you to leave us alone before you do any more damage.”

Without saying anything else, she managed to get Flavian outside before the man spoke up again, having followed them out the door. “I’m afraid it’s too late for that, Miss Davies.”

Again, Fleur’s stomach twisted into a knot of fear. She didn’t lessen her pace as she gritted her teeth and tossed over her shoulder. “You took advantage of my brother. That is hardly the act of a gentleman.”

“I never said I was one.”

Her breath started to come in short pants. Either from anger or panic, she wasn’t yet sure why as of yet. “Whatever it is we can discuss at another time, when my brother has had time to sober from all the drink you plied him with.”

“I hope you aren’t trying to infer that I did anything without Mr. Davies consent. I can assure you it was a fair game and there were plenty of witnesses to attest to that fact.”

Fleur was starting to lose patience but since they were nearly at the cottage, she kept her silence until she was able to open the door. “I will be inside in a moment,” she snapped at Flavian, who walked over the threshold with the same sort of blank look on his face. She slammed the door behind him and finally turned to face her adversary.

The breath abruptly left her lungs.

This man wasn't just a nuisance. He was the blackguard of all blackguards, the devil's right hand. Beneath the cap that he wore low over his forehead were a pair of intense silver eyes that penetrated her without a single touch. He intruded upon her very soul without trying because he was a man born with hell running through his veins. Never before had she met a man like him, and she could only pray that she never did again.

However, since she needed to stay strong against him, she crossed her arms and squared off with him as an equal. But if he challenged her to a duel, something told her she wouldn't win that fight. "What does he owe you?"

He had tossed aside his cheroot somewhere along the way, but his height and the strong line of his jaw and cheekbones were enough to cause her heart to jump into her throat with awareness of this virile figure standing before her in the waning light of day. He might have been handsome except for the fact he was a demon in the guise of a simple human. She dreaded to think what sort of menacing man he might be in the darkness.

"More than you can hope to ever pay," he returned, his words dripping with a mix of sarcasm and satisfaction, as if he enjoyed having people at his mercy. She had no doubt it was true and she didn't relish being his next conquest.

She closed her eyes momentarily and exhaled a heavy breath. "Whatever it is, I will make it right."

His gaze flicked up and down, and then his lips stretched into what could only be considered a smile, although it was without any sort of warmth or affection. It was calculating, like he was working out a solution in his mind that would only benefit him. "It is not your debt to pay."

“Perhaps not,” she concurred. “But I have taken care of my brother for more than five years. He is all the family I have and I won’t let anyone take him from me.” She dared to step closer to him. “Name your price, Mr. Porter.”

* * *

Drake wasn’t surprised by anyone. Ever. For someone who had grown up in the least welcome circumstances, who had fought and clawed his way to the surface or face death, he had learned a lot about people and what they were willing to withstand for survival.

He had yet to find anyone that knew what that feeling was like but he felt a slight connection to Miss Davies. He’d had no idea that Flavian had a sister but he was more intrigued that he would admit. “How old are you?”

“Four and twenty. Six minutes older than my brother.”

He lifted a curious brow. “You’re twins.”

He didn’t phrase it as a question but she answered him nonetheless. “Yes. Does that make a difference?”

He wanted to laugh at the mocking lilt to her voice but he hadn’t dared to try in so long he wondered if he still had the ability. Instead, he narrowed his gaze sharply. “It matters not to me if you are siblings, cousins, or related at all. The only thing I want is what is owed to me.”

“Again, I ask, how much does he owe you?” She clenched her jaw mutinously and with the way her green eyes flashed and the waning light hit her black hair, Drake found himself temporarily transfixed by her sensual allure.

He quickly pushed any interest aside as his exploits were dedicated to the ladies of the brothels, women who wanted the same things he did, pleasure and money.

“Six hundred pounds.”

He had to applaud the lady for not falling over in a dead faint at the sound of the small fortune. It was a pittance to Drake these days but to someone in poor condition like the Davies’ twins, it was easily a year’s wages.

“I see.” She seemed to consider her options but he couldn’t imagine she would find any solution that would benefit them both. “Are you staying at the Coach and Horses, Mr. Porter?”

“I had not yet secured lodgings for the night. I didn’t think I would be doing much more than passing through.”

“It’s a shame you didn’t follow through with your original intent,” she noted primly. “If you give me your direction, I will call on you tomorrow to discuss this matter at length. I will need to speak with my brother when he is properly coherent.”

Drake wondered what she might be thinking in that lovely head of hers but he decided to humor her because he didn’t have anything better to do. “Very well. You can find me there in the morning. Nine o’clock?”

“That suits me.”

With that, she turned and entered the cottage, leaving him standing alone.

Drake turned on his heel and headed back for the heart of the village. Miss Davies had given him something to ponder for the evening. Himself.

He regretted that he didn't catch her name but it wouldn't be a large hurdle to overcome. He was confident that he could gain the information from the innkeeper. Although Mr. Evans had appeared to be friendly with the Davies' siblings, he hadn't done much to stop the gambling match. No doubt the extra income he'd earned from the eager patrons had swayed his conscience to allow it to continue.

Whistling a jaunty tune to himself, Drake decided that he wouldn't mind getting to know Miss Davies a bit more. When he considered the curves that were lurking just beneath the worn clothes and those green eyes that he pictured darkening with passion, he almost smiled.

* * *

"Get your things. We're going to London."

Flavian looked at her with a puzzled expression. The drink was still working on him. "What are you rambling on about?"

Fleur lost what was left of her patience. She walked over to her twin and poked him roughly in the chest with each point she made. "First, you directly go against my plea to cease and desist your excesses. Second, I don't have the money to recoup your losses, so we are going to have to flee. Third, you might have just made one of the worst enemies we could possibly imagine."

Thinking of those glittering silver eyes now made Fleur want to hide beneath the bed.

Flavian blinked. "How much did I lose?"

"Six hundred bloody pounds!" she hissed. She didn't wait for that to sink in before she stomped into her room and started gathering as many of her personal effects as she could. Her brother followed her and as she tossed things onto the bed, she

continued to rant about his behavior. “You see, unless you have managed to find a way to marry a rich heiress, there is nothing else to be done. We had a good life here, Flavian. I liked teaching at the orphanage. But, as usual, you have made it impossible for us to enjoy a simple existence. If I hope to gain any funds to keep us afloat then we are going to have to make some drastic changes. If you won’t do it then it appears it is up to me.”

He snorted, as if she was being nonsensical. “That’s impossible. I don’t have six hundred pounds.”

Fleur’s teeth gnashed together. “You didn’t listen to a word I just said, did you? I am going to have to do the one thing I vowed never to do because of your inability to restrain yourself.”

He crossed his arms and went to lean against the doorjamb. He nearly missed and stumbled to regain his footing before he let his arms go lax at his sides. “I find that particularly insulting?—”

“Good!” she nearly shouted. Stuffing her things into the valise, she slammed it shut and faced off with him once more. “I have reached my limit of tolerance with your bad habits. I love you as my brother but I am tired of taking care of your mistakes. If you want to go with me or not it’s your choice. But I am not going to stay here and try to explain how I might come up with enough money to pay off this man. I have been a fool to imagine I could live a proper life until this point. I can see now it was only a dream.”

She brushed past Flavian and headed for the door. She knew that she could secure a horse from the pub but she would have to be stealthy about it. The way her luck was going at the moment Mr. Porter was likely to show up unexpectedly.

“Fleur, wait.”

Her brother grasped her arm and she stopped with a frustrated exhale. She turned to him and saw that some of the earlier alcoholic glaze had dissipated from his brown eyes. She was thankful for that at least. Perhaps he might see reason after all. “I’ll grab my things.”

She considered leaving without waiting for him but she had never been able to deny him anything. The responsibility that continued to flow through her veins was a true hindrance.

He disappeared into his room and then returned a short time later carrying a bag. “I’m ready.” She nodded sharply, intent on putting as much distance between them and Mr. Porter, but her brother’s next words made her pause. “I’m sorry. About everything.”

Fleur wanted to believe him. She really did. But she’d heard the contrite note to his voice before. And expected to hear it again. Unfortunately, it was too late for apologies as the damage she’d always worried about had finally occurred. “Let’s not talk of it anymore. Time is not on our side.”

Together they quickly made their way to the stable yard of the Coach and Horses where she encountered Daniel. He frowned when he saw them. Before he could speak, Fleur said, “We need two horses made ready as soon as you can make them able.” She glanced at Flavian. “We need to get to London tonight.”

With a heavy sigh, the stablemaster nodded. “I see.”

Fleur followed him inside the stable as he got to work. Flavian walked over to the other side and sat down on a bale of hay to wait. “I will send the horses back as soon as I’m able,” she promised.

Daniel shook his head as he set the sidesaddle on the docile mare. “Are you sure

there's no other option for you?"

She wished she could say yes. "Not after what happened this afternoon."

He paused in his task. "I would have stopped him if I'd known what was happening."

"I know you would have," she whispered, emotion starting to clog her throat. "But it's done now. There is no use wishing for a different outcome." She glanced toward the pub and shivered. "Something tells me Mr. Porter is not the sort of man to absolve such a debt, so this is the path I must traverse. What I make at the orphanage will not gain me the sort of funds I could earn in London."

As Daniel ensured the mare was ready, he walked over to a gelding and started to make him ready for the journey. "I fear you are the only one who has drawn the losing hand this round."

Fleur tried not to allow his words to affect her but he was right. "I love my brother." It was a weak explanation but it was all she had to offer. "He is my only family. I can't let something happen to him if I might find a way to prevent it."

"It still isn't right," Daniel said firmly as he led both horses by their bridles.

Flavian walked over and kept his head down in shame as he mounted, but Fleur made sure to embrace the man who had become a friend to her. "You can do what you will with our fencing attire. I won't be needing it after tonight."

With Daniel's assistance, she got into the saddle. With one last watery glance at the man and the town of Greenwich, Fleur headed out into the darkness with her brother right beside her.

* * *

Mr. Porter glanced at his pocket watch. It read precisely nine o'clock and Miss Davies had yet to appear for their appointed meeting.

He sipped on the black coffee and told himself that she was running late. And yet, the rational side of thought told him that she wasn't in the habit of tardiness. The hard truth was that she wasn't coming. She had lied when he had expected better of her. She had seemed the honorable sort of woman but he should have known there wasn't such a thing as a woman who kept her promises. He'd come across too many of them to believe any of the venom that they spewed out of their mouths.

Setting his cap on his head, he flipped a coin onto the table for his drink and headed out to the stable yard. He considered going directly to the woman's house and confronting her there. But again, his instincts were telling him that would be a fool's errand.

He walked into the stables and spied a young dark-haired man brushing down a rather impressive black Destrier stallion. "Very nice lines," Drake noted.

The man glanced up and offered a nod. "He is one of the best we've housed here for some time."

"Indeed." Drake didn't bother to point out that the fine horseflesh was his. He looked about the stable and then moved a bit closer. "It seems to me that there is not very many horses housed here at all. It seemed more yesterday."

Drake watched him carefully and saw the way he lowered his head as if to concentrate on his task rather than evade the query with a blatant untruth. "I can't say. The pub has many customers that pass through. I just take care of what is here." He set the brush aside. "If you don't mind, I need to speak with the blacksmith about?—"

In a swift movement, Drake had his dagger poised at the man's throat. "Actually, I do mind." The Adam's apple bobbed beneath his blade and the steel nicked the man's throat. A shame. He didn't intend to cause him any harm. Or not much so long as he told him what he wanted to know. "What is your name?"

The stable master didn't move. "Daniel."

Drake lifted a brow. "No last name?" When Daniel remained stubbornly silent, he gave a mocking snort. "I suppose it doesn't signify." He looked him directly in the eye. "I don't suppose you are familiar with Flavian Davies and his enchanting sister, are you?"

The opposing gaze flicked with recognition. "It's a modest village. Most of us are known to one another."

Drake wasn't sure if he was intending to cast him in a dark shadow as an outsider but he understood stubbornness when faced with it. He flashed his gaze. "I understand you might consider the siblings your friends but Mr. Davies has absconded with something of mine. I assume you are aware of the game that took place yesterday?"

The man lifted a brow as if to question what the point of this inquisition was.

Although annoying, Drake had to admire his fortitude. However, it wouldn't last long. Over the years Drake had developed a talent for gaining information. Setting his face closer to the stable master, he said low and evenly, "I ask because I believe you know what has happened to my quarry and I expect you to tell me where they went."

Again, the man was silent, but Drake could see the flick of uncertainty that passed through his gaze. It was enough for him to move the dagger down to the center of his trousers and press the tip against a rather sensitive area. "Now if you please."

With a gasp, Daniel closed his eyes, but thankfully his mouth started to work. “London. They went to London,” he spat through clenched teeth.

Drake pressed a bit harder causing Daniel to wince. “Where in London?”

He inhaled sharply, a curse following. Drake wasn’t sure if it was directed at him—or to the threat to his nether regions. “Chelsea.”

With narrowed eyes, Drake asked, “For what purpose?”

“To speak with a friend to ease her situation.” He glared back at Drake, his defiance finally making an appearance. “To find a way to pay you .”

Drake’s mouth twisted as he muttered in a low tone, “Thank you, Daniel. You have been of great assistance.” Bringing up the dagger, he flipped it around and slammed the handle against the stable master’s temple. He instantly crumpled to the ground. Although he had to give the man a regrettable headache, he couldn’t allow him to alert the authorities either. It had been a firm rule that Drake had set down for himself long ago.

He hadn’t intended to return to London so soon but it appeared he had little choice in the matter. He glanced about the stable deciding he would inspect things before he took his leave of Greenwich. If Daniel was as friendly with the Davies’ twins as he believed, then there could be something here that might be of use.

It didn’t take him long to find a door that looked interesting. He pushed it open and saw a small room on the other side with a single trunk. Curious, Drake walked over and lifted the lid, surprised to find that it wasn’t locked. At first, he thought it was empty but then he realized it was just the dark clothing inside that made it appear so at first glance. He lifted the dark material and rubbed it between his thumb and forefinger with a thoughtful consideration. They appeared to be the garments that had

been worn during the early morning duel the day before but although it hadn't made sense to Drake that both Davies and his second might have worn the concealing shrouds, now an intriguing idea occurred to him. If Flavian's sister was truly the one in charge of her brother, as her actions at the pub might indicate when she ordered him home, could it be that she was the true talent behind the mask of anonymity as well?

Drake almost found himself chuckling at the idea that such a slip of a woman might manage to deceive so many people—including himself.

Immediately, any humor vanished. He walked over to the Destrier and headed for the Davies cottage he'd glimpsed the night before. He would see what he could uncover there and then he was bound for London.

CHAPTER 3

The first time Fleur had met Harriette Wilson it was purely by chance. She had come to London to take care of an unrelated matter concerning Flavian and had bumped into the courtesan quite literally in the middle of the street. Fleur had not known the sort of power that the lady had wielded but she must have made an impression in spite of her prolific apologies because Harriette had invited her to tea at her residence in Chelsea.

It was there that Harriette had confided to a complete stranger her intention to publish a series of memoirs about her life and name the men responsible for her current predicament. She did not seem pleased that she was not gaining the proper support in her advanced years as she'd hoped.

"Wellington dared to tell me to publish and be damned," she'd said nonchalantly. "I decided to take that as a personal challenge."

Fleur had been awestruck by the lady and the whirlwind life she had lived continuously at the mercy of men and their pleasure. Until her circumstances had become dire, she had managed to make a name for herself and gain the benefit of a wealthy benefactor. However, not everything lasted forever and the sacrifices due to her occupation had come with a price.

It was Fleur's intention to appeal to the lady and attempt to find one gentleman who might ease her current situation—discreetly, of course—so that she might retain some semblance of a reputation and put her and Flavian back on the right track to respectability. No doubt she would have to leave London and never return if she went

to such drastic lengths, but Fleur told herself that it would be worth it. There was no point holding on to her virginity any longer if it could be sold to the highest bidder and save her and Flavian from poverty, or worse yet, Newgate. She might be furious with her brother because of his shortcomings but she couldn't stay angry at him. It was impossible because she'd told her parents that she would look after him when they were gone and she intended to fulfill that promise to the best of her ability.

It was nearly two in the morning by the time they arrived at the familiar residence in Chelsea. Fleur prayed that Harriette would remember her and offer her a place to stay for the night. It had been a gamble to rely on the charity of a woman she'd spent an afternoon with some time ago but Fleur had always kept her in the back of her mind if she'd needed someplace to go to for help. She felt that the woman would take pity on the woes of another trying to make her way with little else to recommend her but her sex.

"Stay here," she ordered Flavian as she dismounted and tied the mare to the fence surrounding the neat townhouse. It might not be in the most affluent area of Mayfair, but the whitewashed buildings in their tidy rows was a far cry from anywhere that Fleur and her brother had ever called home. Although Harriette might have believed herself to be near destitution, Fleur doubted that she ever had to worry about her next meal.

Or if some intimidating man might come to collect his due like the grim reaper himself.

It was the image of Mr. Porter's sleek smirk that had her climbing the front steps and grasping the door knocker and setting it firmly against the wood. It took another try before she could hear footsteps coming from within. A tired butler answered the door with a particularly cross look on his face. He took one look at Fleur's faded gown and snapped, "We don't take vagrants here." He would have shut the door in her face if Fleur hadn't slapped her hand resolutely against it.

“Miss Wilson is known to me. Tell her that Miss Fleur Davies is here to speak with her with the utmost urgency.” When he didn’t seem fazed, she added in a softer tone, “Please.”

He grumbled something beneath his breath but turned and headed for the stairs without asking her if she would like to wait in the foyer. Since he left the door open in his wake, Fleur took that as her own personal invitation so she stood inside and waited. She was already attempting to think where she might go next if the lady turned her away when she spied movement on the upper landing.

The butler did not reappear as Harriette descended the stairs in a flowing gown of white. She looked like an angel descending from the heavens but as she drew closer it was the hard lines around her mouth and the cynical tilt to her dark head that proved she was anything but celestial.

“When I was awakened from my slumber and told that you were here I daresay you could have knocked me over with a feather from surprise.” She smiled in a charming manner that Fleur was sure had caused the downfall of all those mentioned in her memoirs.

“I apologize for the late hour?—”

Harriette waved a delicate hand. “Not to worry, my dear. I have grown accustomed to being disturbed at all hours of the night. Many of which I accepted graciously.”

She smiled in a seductive manner, and heat bloomed in Fleur’s cheeks. Nevertheless, she attempted to explain her reasons for showing up unannounced. “I admit that I have come here hoping for assistance that you might be able to provide. My brother, Flavian and I?—”

“Your brother?” her brows lifted with interest.

“Yes,” Fleur confirmed. “My twin brother. He is outside?—”

“Oh, that cannot be borne.” She swept forward and opened the door. “You, on the horse. Come inside.”

She waved Flavian inside and as she returned to Fleur, she knew her time was limited if she wanted to discuss her opportunity with the lady. Afraid she would be interrupted again, Fleur boldly announced, “I wish for your help in finding a wealthy benefactor.”

Instantly, a carefully manicured brow lifted. “You wish to become a courtesan?” Her knowing gaze traveled down Fleur’s body then back up. “You are surely an innocent.”

“Currently, yes,” she concurred. “But don’t gentleman pay well for a... virgin?”

The lady was completely focused now. “Indeed, they can.”

Fleur dared to further blurt out, “My brother got himself into trouble over a gambling debt. We were forced to flee Greenwich this very evening.”

“How much does he owe?”

Fleur hated to repeat the sum. It caused a sick feeling in her stomach each time she did so. “Six hundred pounds.”

The second brow joined the first. “My. A hefty sum. No wonder you are willing to barter your innocence.”

“I find no other option,” Fleur said firmly.

“No,” Harriette returned with a solemnness she’d never seen from the woman before, and likely would not see after. “Most of us usually don’t.”

As Flavian entered the foyer, the conversation halted. Although Harriette leaned over to speak softly, “I will see what I can do to ease your circumstances.” Fleur was filled with a mixture of relief and abhorrence. She was grateful for Harriette’s assistance but she was not looking forward to the distasteful task ahead of her.

But unfortunately, it must be done.

As Harriette walked over and cooed over Flavian, Fleur forced a smile to her face as she watched her brother absorb the attention.

And prayed for her fate.

* * *

Drake lit a cheroot and exhaled a long cloud of white smoke as he leaned against the lamp post that afternoon, patiently waiting for his quarry to appear.

He’d arrived in London in the early hours of the morning and went to one of his many residences throughout the city. Considering the sort of illustrious life he’d led, he had felt it necessary to acquire several secret locations. Luckily for him, one of those was a townhouse in Chelsea, not far from where he hoped to come across Miss Davies.

After a few queries in some of the servant’s ears who loved to gossip, he’d quickly learned that Harriette Wilson had received a couple of late-night visitors just a few hours earlier. Curious as to why Miss Davies and her brother might choose to turn to a notorious courtesan for assistance, Drake figured that she had her reasons and that they would be revealed in due time.

All he had to do was wait.

After exhaling another long drag from his cheroot, Drake was pleased to find that he didn't have long to cool his heels before a carriage stopped in the street. Harriette was the first to disembark and as she turned to smile at someone behind her, Drake narrowed his eyes when he recognized the familiar figure of Miss Davies.

As the coach was unloaded with several boxes, he realized that they had spent the day shopping. A rather curious way for a courtesan and a poor woman to spend the day—unless it was for a purpose. One that might gain back the blunt that had been spent.

Drake considered the prospect as they disappeared into the house and the door shut behind them.

If Flavian was any sort of man, he wouldn't allow his sister to barter her body for coin but considering he was the reason she might have been forced to sell her personal wares, Drake wasn't hopeful that he would put a stop to anything.

Grinding the last of the cheroot beneath his heel, Drake headed for Harriette's residence but instead of walking up the steps to the front entrance, he walked around back to the servant's entrance. He rapped lightly on the door that opened into the kitchens. A young woman was standing there expectantly. One of the maids he would imagine.

Adopting his most charismatic demeanor, Drake removed his cap and offered a slight bow. Her cheeks immediately turned a delicate shade of pink. "Good day, miss," he said in a caressing tone. "I was hoping that you might help me locate a friend. I was told she was staying here."

She smiled broadly from the attention. "Who migh' that be, guvn'r?"

“Miss Fleur Davies.”

Recognition instantly lit her eyes. “Oh, yes. She’s ’ere. Shall I grab ’er for you?”

He shook his head. “That won’t be necessary.” He leaned forward as if imparting a secret. “You see, we didn’t part on the best of terms.” He shrugged. “But I’m a helpless suitor who refuses to give up when I’ve found a true prize.”

“Aww. That’s awful sweet o’ you.” She leaned forward in return, lowering her voice slightly. “But you migh’ be too late to win ’er hand. She’s goin’ on auction this very evening.”

He lifted a brow as if he didn’t know to what she referred. “Auction?”

She nodded in confirmation. “Miss Wilson is taking ’er to a secret gentleman’s club so that ’er... wares migh’ be sold to the ’ighest bidder. If you know wha’ I mean.”

He sighed heavily, as if terribly disappointed. “I fear I might have lost my chance to win her hand then.”

“Not if you ’ave the blunt.”

He inclined his head and donned his cap once more. He handed her a coin which caused her eyes to light up even further. “Thank you. You have been most helpful. For your discretion. I wouldn’t want to upset Miss Davies when she is about to embark on an enchanting evening.”

As Drake walked away, he had the strangest feeling in his gut. Normally that would be instinct warning him that danger was ahead. At the moment, it was just... unsettling. He wanted to tell himself to forget about Miss Davies and her errant brother. It wasn’t as though he needed the money that was due to him from Flavian. If

he followed through with trying to collect the debt, it would be more about teaching the young pup a lesson in responsibility and not letting his sister fight his battles for him all the time.

He returned to his townhouse and headed for the modest study. He employed no servants because there was no need. He had a scarce amount of furniture and he had known how to use a stove since he was in short pants. He had always wanted to make sure that he wasn't tied down to anywhere particular, which is why he had lodgings scattered all over the city and as far away as Scotland.

The same had always held true for the women he'd bedded. Temporary. No entanglements. Mutual gratification.

As he sat down behind his desk, he took a key from the inside of his jacket pocket and unlocked the top drawer. That wasn't where he kept his special ledger. It was in a false bottom beneath the desk, which he opened using a special combination. The compartment fell open and he retrieved the documentation that kept track of all of his monetary investments. From various business investments to every single ha'penny that he held, it was all written down here.

He opened it and wrote down a few more expenditures that had transpired since his last visit to London. It was a small pittance compared to the overall value of his properties.

However, if he intended to purchase Miss Davies, it would put a slight dent in his coffers but nothing he was concerned with. No doubt he would be going up against noblemen who had no qualms about spending their inheritance on such a prize but he had amassed a fortune over the years. Money was no longer an object for him.

He sat back in his chair and lit another cheroot. He glanced at the pristine white ceiling that had likely belonged to one duke or another at one time, but which now

belonged to him—a bastard son of a whore.

The irony almost made him smile.

He might actually accomplish the act when he left the club that evening with Miss Davies on his arm.

And in his bed.

* * *

The nerves fluttering inside of Fleur's stomach were almost painful. Butterflies? They were more like chisels eager to slowly grind at her midsection.

She was not looking forward to this evening's festivities. She thought she might have had more time to prepare herself for the loss of her virtue but Harriette had assured her that word would spread like wildfire that afternoon. There was no need to wait.

She did look through the few gowns that Fleur had brought with her and shook her head disparagingly. "These will never catch any man's eye." After threading her arm through hers, Harriette said, "We are going shopping."

Fleur never dreamed that Harriette would take her to the modiste, the perfumery and the market where they gained several items that Harriette claimed to enhance the "complexion." She purchased new silk undergarments to go with a brand-new gown that she believed might attract the highest bid from a prospective "buyer." Fleur had cringed at the image of being auctioned off to a licentious man of indeterminate age but she reminded herself it was part of the show and she had no choice but to trust Harriette's judgment.

That night, as the lady was helping to apply the rouge and various accoutrements to

Fleur's face to "enhance the beauty of her natural features," Flavian walked into the room. At first, Fleur thought he might be horrified by the picture she presented but he only observed the handiwork by the courtesan until she finally stood back and said, "That should do it." She waved a hand toward the full-length mirror. "Take a look."

Fleur glanced in the mirror and her breath caught in shock.

Under different circumstances she might have been convinced that she looked presentable in the full black skirts and the lace trimmed chemise beneath. The silver and black corset was something she wouldn't have chosen for herself but it complimented her dark hair that was left to flow in loose waves about her shoulders.

But it was her face that broke any illusion that she was headed to a ball or some other society event that would be appropriate.

She brought her hand up to touch her lips that had false color applied to them, the same for her cheeks. Her eyes were rimmed with dark enhancements. She could feel the butterflies return with a vengeance and for a moment, she prayed that there was a miracle that would keep this evening from transpiring.

With a deep breath, she turned and waited for her brother's reaction. There was a pause and then the only thing he said was, "You look... different."

"She looks like a remarkable achievement for any lucky man," Harriette interjected.

Flavian was still wearing his simple garments. There had been no excursion to enhance his appearance. But there had been no need. He wasn't about to lose all of his respectability in one night.

"Might I have a word with my brother in private?"

Harriette glanced between the siblings and some of her joviality slipped. She had been enthusiastic about Fleur's "come out," but when she felt the somber atmosphere that had taken over the room, she quietly excused herself.

When she was gone, Fleur crossed her arms and looked at her twin. "I never thought I would be giving up this much when I promised our parents I would look after you."

Rather than appear chagrined, Flavian frowned. "What do you want me to say, Fleur? Shall I congratulate you for becoming a martyr on my behalf?" He walked to the window, turning his back to her. "Do you think I enjoy being a failure in every aspect of my life?"

As always, the anger left Fleur in the face of his upset. "You aren't a failure?—"

"Aren't I?" He spun back around with his fists clenched. "I feel the condemnation in your eyes every time I do something wrong. Like I'm a child that must be chided. I am four and twenty, the same as you, but you don't treat me as an equal."

She didn't care for his tone. It made her retaliate with an argument of her own. "Perhaps I might do so if you would bother to stop all of the gambling and drinking and carousing and do something productive with your time. Find a respectable occupation?—"

"Like what? Toiling in a mine where I might not live to see daylight? Wishing I was dead rather than buried in some horrid profession that will slowly snuff the very life from me?" He shook his head. "You might be stronger than me, willing to give up your existence to survive but I would rather not."

He started to head for the door but Fleur stopped him with a hand on his arm. His entire stance was stiff but he hesitated. "I didn't know you felt this strongly—" She swallowed hard. "But sometimes we have to do the things we must to live to face a

new day.”

His dark eyes were sharp, cutting as his words when he said, “What if I don’t care to see tomorrow?”

Her eyes instantly welled with tears. “Please don’t say that. You can’t leave me alone. I am doing all of this for us. For you .”

He jerked his arm away from her. “Then you are doing it for the wrong reasons. Some people just aren’t worth redemption.”

He slammed the door on his departure.

CHAPTER 4

Drake stood at the edge of the eager gathering at the exclusive gentleman's club and did what he did best.

Waited.

He told himself he wasn't just as anxious about seeing the transformation of Miss Davies for this evening's auction but he had to assume that Harriette had spared no expense on her project courtesan. Miss Davies' success could reflect poorly, or give Harriette the recognition she had been seeking after her shocking memoirs were published where she pointed fingers at certain prominent men of the ton. Her threats had not reflected well on Harriette and she likely hoped this night would put her back on the pedestal she'd been struggling to find purchase.

Drake didn't care about that. His focus was on his quarry and how much this little extravagance would cost him. Whatever the amount, it would be worth every pound because it would prove that, for all her efforts, Miss Davies couldn't be rid of him that easily.

He'd nearly met his fate at the hands of a woman. He vowed he would never suffer the same again.

The double doors that led to a private antechamber opened and Harriette Wilson strode into the assemblage as if she was still on top of the world. She held her head high and her faded brown hair was piled on her head in an elegant chignon, curls falling seductively to frame her face and slender neck. She wore a deep red gown

threaded with gold and there was a small tiara perched upon her head, as if reminding everyone she was still in charge of the illicit romantic circle.

However, it was the lady in stark black and white that moved gracefully behind Harriette that Drake focused on. He had recalled her beauty before but it was nothing compared to the vixen that walked a short distance away. She had yet to spot him in the crowd. In truth, she did her best to not allow her green eyes to glance about her. Instead, she kept her attention on the woman's back who led her into the hungry lion's den.

"I bet she is a wildcat in the sheets," Drake heard one man remark with a smirk.

"I wonder about her breasts. Do they taste as tempting as they look?" Another chuckle from a second man.

"I'm curious how much this treasure is going to cost me. And how long she intends to play the coy innocent when I tie her up."

Drake curled his fist, eager to plant it in the last man's face. He slowly relaxed his grip and wondered why their ignorant banter should bother him at all. It wasn't as though he had any sort of devotion to the lady where he might have to defend her honor. The truth was, he was there for the same thing these other men were, except he just didn't voice his opinions so openly.

As Harriette led Miss Davies to a raised dais at the edge of the room that was generally reserved for musicians, she presented her protégé with an elegant wave of her hand. "Good evening, gentleman. I do thank you for coming to this grand affair."

There was a round of masculine applause throughout the assemblage and a few shouts. Drake did nothing but observe the proceedings.

“This enchanting woman has decided to grace us all with her presence by giving you the opportunity to relieve her of the burden of her innocence.”

Another round of raucous laughter embedded with whistling.

He glanced at Miss Davies to see what she thought of all the praise but her expression never changed. She neither smiled nor looked abhorrent. She was just... there.

Or numb.

“We will take nothing less than the highest bid this evening, as that is what this curious kitten deserves,” Harriette announced. “Who will start the bidding?”

“Fifty pounds!”

As laughter erupted from the crowd, Harriette admonished, “Shame on you! What sort of gift do you think you are purchasing? You are not breaking in a filly, but taking a woman’s virginity. You shall be the first man to teach this beautiful woman the carnal arts. Let’s try a bit harder for a better price.”

“One hundred pounds!”

She shook her head again. “Better, but still not where we should be. Do I hear two hundred?”

“Two hundred!”

Drake watched as the bidding finally got serious. While there was still laughter each time Harriette addressed the crowd, he could tell that the auction was starting to become serious.

The bets were starting to become larger and more determined, some starting to bid against one another. Still, he did nothing. It wasn't yet the right moment.

After thirty minutes and the bids had finally started to slack slightly, Harriette attempted to get more blunt. When it was apparent that none was forthcoming, most looking at each other to see who would take the prize.

"Is twelve hundred pounds the final bid?" Harriette cajoled.

A murmured grumbling went throughout the room, as most of the opponents gave up their hand and removed themselves from the auction. But there was one man, the first one Drake had suffered his nonsense that spoke up clearly, "Two thousand pounds."

Drake saw some of the blood recede from Miss Davies' face when her gaze lit on the older man with the cruel smile. He could imagine what sort of night he had in mind for her. It was certainly not going to be pleasant.

"A very nice donation," Harriette cooed. "Shall that be all? Once, twice?"

"Five thousand pounds."

As the crowd parted to reveal Drake to the two women on stage, he saw more than a pale face from Miss Davies. He recognized true fear.

* * *

Run . Fleur's every instinct was telling her to get as far away as possible from this man. Mr. Porter. She had escaped him once in Greenwich—or so she'd believed. But here he stood, prepared to demand more than six hundred pounds. Now, he could very well be the one to take her virtue.

She swallowed, although her throat was as dry as dust. She leaned toward Harriette and whispered in her ear. “That is the man I told you about, the one my brother owes a gambling debt.”

“Is that so?” Harriette lifted a delicate brow and slid her glance to the man in question. “In that case, you should prepare yourself to do a lot of groveling because he has just won your maidenhead.”

Fleur was about to protest when the lady raised her arm and shouted, “Sold to the highest bidder!”

A round of weak applause went about the crowd as the disgruntled contestants moved on without anything to show for their efforts. Mr. Porter, however, remained exactly where he was, as if expecting her to come to him.

It was the worst humiliation that Fleur might have suffered. But she supposed she deserved it for trying to deceive him. Clenching her hands at her sides, she stepped down from the dais and strode toward her fate. She shivered when she met those hard silver eyes again. She feared that he would not be a kind man and she worried that she was about to experience the worst night of her life.

For a moment, he didn’t speak, just looked at her with that piercing gaze. She noticed that he still wore the same worn cap, but his clothes were just as fashionably tailored as they had been in Greenwich when they’d first met.

She hated that he was making her stand there like a fool but she refused to be the one to break the silence. He had spent the money to have her. She might have to offer him her body but that didn’t mean she had to offer him anything else.

“Miss Davies.”

His smooth voice slid over her skin just as it had before. It was like a snake that coiled around her neck intending to choke her but altered course at the last moment and crawled down her spine instead. “Mr. Porter,” she returned evenly.

His lips twitched, as if he were trying to smile but had forgotten the act along the way.

“Shall we depart?” she suggested. She wanted to get this over with as soon as possible.

“Not without the requisite payment first,” Harriette said as she glided up behind her. She held out her hand expectantly to Mr. Porter.

He reached into his vest and withdrew a bundle of pound notes that caused Fleur to stare in shock. She had entertained the idea that he didn’t have the proper funds to abscond with her but it appeared she was quite wrong. He counted out the correct sum and handed the money over to Harriette.

“Thank you,” she purred. “This will cover the costs incurred with interest.”

Fleur looked sharply at the woman. “You don’t mean to keep all of it? How shall Flavian and I survive?”

She trailed a finger lightly down Fleur’s cheek. “Don’t worry about your brother. He is welcome to stay with me however long he wishes to do so, as long as he remembers he is beholden to my charity.” Fleur didn’t have to interpret what that statement meant. As Harriette flicked a glance at Mr. Porter she added, “It seems to me you are doing well with your new benefactor, so we have all gained what we wanted.”

She turned to leave and Fleur said in one last desperate attempt, “I thought you were

my friend.”

The courtesan tilted her head to the side and offered her an empathetic smile. “Of course, we are friends. But I am a business woman first and you have just offered me the chance to live comfortably for some time.”

Fleur couldn’t move. She couldn’t breathe.

She didn’t understand how she could have been so naïve to believe that a woman who didn’t think twice about calling out all her illicit lovers would treat her any different. She thought she might have called to her sympathies as a woman in similar dire circumstances not knowing that she would be betrayed in such a harsh manner.

Tears welled in her eyes but she couldn’t let them fall. She wouldn’t show this man at her side any more weakness to use against her. She had failed by allowing him to see as much as he had.

“Let’s get out of here.”

For once, Fleur was in agreement with him. She didn’t want to be around these prying eyes any longer. She wanted to sit in silence and allow the heavy weight of this night to wash over her. Just as she had given away her body to survive, her brother would be forced to do the same or find himself cast into the street by Harriette. This was a gamble she had embarked on and lost miserably. For both of them.

I’m sorry, Flavian. She sent up a prayer that she hoped he might be able to hear because God only knew when they would see each other again. She supposed it depended on whether or not Mr. Porter had any sort of heart left in that cold cavernous chest.

* * *

After hailing down a hackney, because a personal carriage had never appealed to him, Drake assisted Miss Davies inside. He instructed the driver where to go and it wasn't the address in Chelsea. Something told him she would only be terribly distracted by Harriette and her brother if they returned there. As distressed as she was, he didn't want to add to her upset.

Ironically enough, he'd set out on this quest with the intent to make her pay for escaping. He wanted retribution and he had decided that seducing her was the sweetest revenge. But now that she was there, sitting across from him with a forlorn look on her face, some of his satisfaction dimmed. Not only that, but it wasn't the most romantic of circumstances. He would have preferred that she tossed her head defiantly and hurled obscenities at his head. That he could work with. He enjoyed spirited women and while he had no doubt that Miss Davies was the same, this marked sadness was not something he was comfortable entertaining.

He withdrew a cheroot from its silver holder. "Mind if I smoke?"

She glanced at him and for an instant, he could see a flash of mockery in those green depths. "You're asking my permission?"

He shrugged and lit the tip. "Not really. I was just attempting to be considerate."

"Really?" She crossed her arms. "No doubt that is a novel experience for you."

Ah, so the kitten was wanting to sharpen her claws. He exhaled slowly. "Not really. I can be perfectly honorable." He smiled tightly. "Or not. That choice will be up to you."

"Or what?" she challenged. "I'm prepared for you to force yourself on me. Is that not

enough?”

Drake could feel himself bristle at that. “I may be a worthless bastard but I have never resorted to rape to get what I want.”

Some of the tension eased from her shoulders. “I’m glad to hear it.”

He snorted. “I know you mean to look upon me in the worst possible manner but if you would retract your claws for a brief time, you might find that I can be a generous lover.”

“I am well aware of your type of generosity ,” she snapped. “Harriette has it all in her purse.”

He tilted his head to the side. She certainly had more pluck than he had imagined. He had caught a glimpse of it in Greenwich during their brief encounter but now he could see that she wasn’t the type of flower to wilt under adversity. To put his theory to the test he asked, “Tell me, Miss Davies, can you fence?”

She blinked, appearing confused by the abrupt question, but then she looked uncomfortable. She couldn’t quite look him directly in the eyes. “Why do you ask? Does it matter for what shall transpire tonight?”

He wanted to chuckle but another snort was all he could manage. “Not in the manner in which you might refer. However, I have an... issue that could require your assistance.”

She blinked again, obviously puzzled by his choice of words. “You purchased my favors not for the bedchamber but for physical use?”

“Oh, make no mistake,” he said through another thin cloud of smoke. “When we

make it to a bed it will be physical. But first, there is something I need to take care of.”

She glanced down at her dress. “I hope that you have something else for me to wear. If you intend to take me somewhere unsavory, then I might be noticed.”

“I have your shroud.”

Some of the blood faded away from her face again. “What?”

“The item you had secured in the trunk at the stables at Greenwich.” He threw the last of his cheroot on the floor of the carriage and ground it out beneath his bootheel.

“How did you?—”

He leaned back, allowing himself to be further enveloped by the nighttime shadows around him. “You will soon understand that I learn all that I wish to know. I found you, didn’t I?”

“Yes,” she whispered, and he could tell that she was finally starting to put all the pieces together. “I know you’re doing this because of what I did. But you have to believe that I intended to follow through with this fa?ade tonight in order to give you the money you were owed by my brother. I would have come back to Greenwich.”

“Is that so?” he murmured. “While I would like to believe you, Miss Davies, you will have to forgive my reticence. But you should be relieved to know that I have forgiven your brother’s debt to me. Yours , however, may take a bit longer to clear.”

CHAPTER 5

The chills had stopped traveling through Fleur's body around Mr. Porter. Instead, it was replaced with a breathless awareness that choked her as effectively as if he had his hands around her neck and was squeezing the very life out of her. She had the feeling she was his indentured servant until the end of time. When she was young, she had entertained dreams of a dashing hero sweeping her into his arms and carrying her to his castle. Not once did the visage of a dark villain leading her into the bowels of the underground pop into her mind. But that was exactly what was happening now.

She wondered if this was what hell was like. While Mr. Porter might not be a demon in the Biblical sense, he was a man who would go to any lengths to get what he wanted. At the moment, he appeared to want her.

Rather than allow his presence to completely cause a downward spiral, she tried to focus on his features, to find something redeeming.

He was particularly handsome with his pronounced cheekbones and the defined jawline with the dark stubble that always seemed present. She recalled the first time she'd seen him and that was one of the first things she'd noticed, other than those piercing silver eyes. She had hoped that there might be a spark of warmth or empathy inside but as yet she had found nothing but a calculated calm.

If she was helping him to fight... whatever it was he wanted her to use her fencing skills for, at least it would be better than being subjected to that same cold glare when she was naked and vulnerable in front of him. She was surprised he might trust her with a sword not to "accidentally" use it on him. But perhaps he was that confident in

his awareness that he could fend off an impending attack.

The conversation grew stilted from that point on and Fleur was thankful for the reprieve. She wasn't sure what to say to this man. Oddly enough, he appeared the same. Or perhaps he just preferred the silence as well.

The hackney finally stopped, depositing them in a street that Fleur had hoped to never occupy. A dirty unkempt dog walked by as she disembarked. Two men dressed in shabby clothes were speaking across the street. At first glance it appeared that they ignored the two occupants that stepped to the ground but when one of the men turned his head and looked directly at her with a wink, she knew better than to trust her surroundings.

"Where are we?" she whispered to her companion as she sidled closer to him. Something told her that he was safer to be around than anyone else that might come crawling out of their drunken holes.

"Whitechapel." Nothing but a clipped reply and no further explanation.

"Why are we here?" she prodded. "And how long do we intend to remain?"

He let them inside a ramshackle building that looked as though it had seen better days. Inside was one of the smallest rooms she had ever beheld. If she thought the cottage she had shared with her brother in Greenwich was small, this was miniscule in comparison. "Why?" He finally answered her question. "Don't you like it here?"

She glared at him. If that was his attempt at a joke it wasn't very humorous. "Not particularly."

"A pity as that is where I have your shroud." He walked over to a chair where the item had been tossed haphazardly. He picked it up and returned to hand it to her. "I

would change out of that lovely gown before someone assumes that you are a whore.”

She snatched the garment and held it close to her like a shield. “We both know I am nothing of the sort, so I would kindly ask you to keep your opinions to yourself.” She glanced around the solitary room. “Where am I supposed to change?”

He walked over and sat down in the chair. Lighting up another cheroot, he waved a hand where she stood. “That works for me.”

Fleur wanted to tell him to make sure he kept his head turned as she started to remove her clothing but he didn’t seem to pay her any attention. He continued to puff on his cheroot and stare out the single window that had enough grime on it that he surely couldn’t see a single thing beyond it.

Taking a deep breath, Fleur started to unlace her corset. It tied in the back and was a bit difficult to maneuver at first but she would rather die than ask for Mr. Porter’s assistance. As she finally got the laces to cooperate with her fumbling fingers, she glanced about and tried to picture herself staying there overlong. Surely if the man had five thousand pounds to impart without batting an eyelash, then he had to have better lodgings elsewhere. While she didn’t expect Mayfair, it would be nice to be somewhere that she didn’t have to worry about rats running rampant around her feet. She had yet to see any of the foul creatures but she wasn’t about to discount their existence.

When she reached the end of her corset, she took it off with a relieved sigh. Next were her skirts. She stepped out of the many layers until she stood in her chemise, stockings, and slippers. She would have loved to have a pair of boots right about now, especially if Mr. Porter intended for them to traipse about such a disreputable area. But she supposed she had to utilize what she had.

She jumped when a pair of men's black boots slammed into the floor behind her. She spun around, the shroud still clutched to her chest, as she faced Mr. Porter. She didn't know how long he'd been standing there observing her struggles and neither did she care to find out.

She recognized her shoes and said, "You thought of everything, didn't you?"

"I never go anywhere unprepared."

With that, he turned his back to her, so she quickly donned the shroud and the shoes. Once she was finished, she announced, "I'm done. Now what?"

He headed for the door. After he opened it, he said, "Follow me."

* * *

Drake wanted to tell her that this was nothing more than a test to see how far he could push her to do his bidding but the truth was he did have something that needed taken care of this night. He generally preferred to work alone but considering Miss Davies was skillful with a sword and it wouldn't be amiss if he had someone to watch his back with this particular gang, then her presence was rather perfectly timed.

He'd first heard about the issues arising that afternoon. One of his contacts had sent him an encrypted message that told him of the turmoil that was about to take place at an illicit boxing match. Amos Jones had requested his help and Drake had been more than willing to provide it. There weren't many people who Drake owed any sort of loyalty—except one man. Amos had saved him when he'd been left for dead. Because of that, he had always been available when Amos had called on him. He doubted that Jones was his true last name but one he'd adopted over the years just as Drake had done.

They had met in the workhouse, both young men who were angry at the world and set on turning it upside down. They had certainly done that, amassing their fortunes from those that didn't deserve to live above ground and finding a way to steal their inheritances that hadn't truly been earned but wasted. Truly, Drake had considered it an honor to relieve such men of the burden of coin and they generally took care of the downward spiral on their own.

He'd never killed for sport, only when necessary, when his own life was in jeopardy. Some of the more notable gentlemen weren't so understanding when it came to being destitute. With Amos's assistance, they had found a way to cover up their good misdeeds.

However, Drake had vowed that he was done with the conspiracy and intrigue. He had enough money that he didn't have to take any job that didn't interest him. He could be more selective in his clients.

And where he spent his vast wealth.

Drake glanced at the shrouded figure beside him. He had asked her to wear the covering, not just for his protection, but for her own. London was riddled with gangs and men willing to slit Drake's throat for little more than a shilling. It was true he had Amos and other men he could depend on if needed but not everyone in the West End was a friend. It was best that her beauty was concealed. Some would be more than happy to relieve Drake of his newfound courtesan.

And they wouldn't be as considerate of their prize.

Drake was glad that Fleur remained silent as he led them on foot a few blocks, down alleys where human and animal vermin alike were just starting to come to life for the night. He could hear her slight breathing beside him and he wondered if she was shocked at the gruesome sights around them, or horrified by the living conditions of

so many. Men were relieving themselves against the brick and limestone buildings while harlots wearing loose fitting garments were luring their prey into darker alleyways where they would decide if the coupling was worth it, or if they should just slit their partner's throat right then and there. Children were not spared this life. Some wore shoes, others were barefoot, but innocent they were not. Pickpockets ran rampant through the streets.

Drake should have spared her the unpleasant scene around them but not only was time of the essence, there was no use coddling her from a life he was well suited. If they were to be together for an undetermined length of time, it was best she knew what sort of man she had unwittingly tied herself to in that gentleman's club. He was a realist. He wasn't the sort to offer flowery prose or long-stemmed roses.

This was his life. This is what he had called home for so many years.

She didn't say a word.

But he knew she would. It was inevitable.

When they reached the establishment Amos had directed him to in the message, he finally stopped and turned to her. "Stay by me and don't say or do anything without my signal."

"What is that?"

He set his mouth in a tight line. "You will know it."

She gave an obedient nod beneath the shroud and he walked toward the entrance. Before he was let inside, a man stopped him with a hand on his chest. "An' jus' where do ye think ye're goin'?"

* * *

Fleur's heart was beating so loud that she was surprised no one heard it. Her pulse was a steady beat in her ears and she feared that instead of her virtue this evening, she would be losing her life or, at the very least, a limb.

She had never been much for prayer but she sent one up now, just in case.

As her new benefactor faced off with the man at the door, it amazed her how calm and composed he could be while she was trying to keep from shaking in her boots. She would be thankful when they could leave this place and she hadn't yet stepped a foot inside.

"I have an appointment," Mr. Porter said in a velvety, even tone. Fleur had to admit that he had a voice that was both seductive and menacing. It was strange, and yet, inviting at the same time.

"Do ye now?" The man laughed and Fleur didn't miss the bulging muscles around his upper arms and neck. Nor the jagged scar that ran down the side of his face that he set even closer to his opponent. "I'm afraid it's gonna cost ye."

"I'm running a bit short this evening."

The man laughed richly and then his gaze flicked to her and he straightened slightly. "Who's tha' ye got wit' ye?"

"No one of consequence. As to that payment—" The second it took for the man's attention to slide to her, Mr. Porter had slid a dagger from inside his boot and held it against the man's throat. Fleur thought for sure that the man could have overpowered Mr. Porter since he almost doubled him in size but the stark terror in his gaze expressed his surprise. "We're going in now." He released the man with a gentle slide

of the blade down the scar on the side of his face. It was enough to draw a slight trickle of blood but no further harm than that. “You have a good night.”

The man collapsed against the side of the building, his eyes bulged out and his face a pasty white.

Once they were out of earshot, Fleur asked, “How did you know it would be so easy to convince him to stand down?”

He looked at her in a tolerant manner. “Once you have played this game long enough it starts to become familiar.” He grasped her hand and pulled her behind him and Fleur realized that the man she was with was not as dangerous as the others she would soon meet. She was glad that Mr. Porter was her escort if she had to become a patron of such a place.

The surroundings were similar to any other pub that Fleur had frequented around England with one marked difference. She walked over dried blood stains on the floor. The kind that had seeped into the wood and would never come clean again. Drink flowed heavily and the raucous carousing was almost deafening. From gaming to whores, it was the sort of den of iniquity that put the gentleman’s club she’d been subjected to shame. That had been a place to practice money and power.

This was a place to practice all the rest.

Fleur noticed that Drake kept his baker boy cap down low, almost over his brow. She wondered if he was trying to conceal his identity and why that might be. No doubt he’d had trouble here in the past as it didn’t seem to encourage newcomers.

That point was proven a moment later when someone grabbed her arm a bit roughly. “Whot’s wit’ th’ disguise?”

“They are with me.” It was all Mr. Porter offered for an explanation as he clamped his hand around the offender’s wrist. She had a moment of panic thinking that they might start a brawl in front of her but the man must have decided she wasn’t worth the effort and released her.

Again, Mr. Porter grasped her hand as he led her toward the rear of the establishment. She thought they might be leaving but then he pushed back a wall to reveal a set of stairs that led down to another section of the pub that was even louder than above. She swallowed down her rising fear as the shouts and screams reached her ears and caused them to ring.

When they reached the ground floor, Fleur realized what all the excitement was about. There was a pit set up in the middle of the commotion and two men faced off with nothing on but a pair of ragged trousers. Sweat dripped from the hair that was plastered to their head and mixed with the rivulets of blood that ran down their bare chests.

Both men’s bare knuckles were mangled as well as their faces. It was obvious they had engaged in a battle. And as one of them drew back and made contact, Fleur had to look away but she couldn’t escape the sickening crunch that followed.

“Why are we here?” She spoke urgently to Mr. Porter but he either didn’t hear her or he ignored her as he continued to glance about the crowd, as if looking for someone.

He finally led her to a corner of the room that was deserted. At least, as much as it could be with a high stakes boxing match taking place. A dark-skinned man approached them and Fleur’s eyes widened behind her shroud. He was muscular and wearing a patch over one eye, his persona just as intimidating as the rest of him. But it was the single eye that was revealed that caused her to become speechless. It was bright blue.

“Drake.” He clapped Mr. Porter on the shoulder in a friendly fashion, for which she was grateful. However, it was the name he uttered that caught her attention. Was that Mr. Porter’s given name?

Drake . She sounded it out in her mind and tried to decide if it suited him.

“Amos.”

She tilted her head slightly to the side, attempting to picture the other man in the same fashion.

They bent their heads together and spoke too quietly for her to hear so Fleur decided that she would inspect the rest of the room.

Finally, their conversation appeared to conclude. At the same time, a great roar of applause and equal amount of upset, came from the direction of the pit and the fight that had recently concluded.

To her surprise, Mr. Porter handed her his dagger. “In case things don’t go the way they should.”

After that, he began to remove his jacket and shirt and she realized what he was about to do. Before he could remove the fine lawn shirt, she grasped his arm. “Please tell me you aren’t going in that... that...”

“Pit?” he finished for her since she seemed incapable of uttering the word. “I am.”

“Why?”

“I have my reasons.”

She exhaled sharply. “That you want to limp out of here? I’m not sure I approve.”

He snorted. “You don’t have a choice. You are beholden to me. It’s not the other way around.”

“But what if?—”

He reached out and grasped her chin through the shroud. Even through the concealing fabric, she was able to see clearly and his eyes were like twin daggers shining out of his face. “If that occurs, Amos will lead you to safety. From there you can return to your brother. But I can assure you that won’t be necessary. This is not my first fight in the pit.”

Fleur released her grip out of shock more than anything else. “You have?”

Instead of replying, he removed his shirt and handed it to Amos.

That’s when she saw the scars.

CHAPTER 6

Drake had never apologized for the life he'd lived. It had been harsh but it had not been without the benefits of learning how the world truly worked. It wasn't some fairy tale unless it involved titled peers. Even then, it was damned hard. There was so much expectation put on those that lived in their gilded palaces to carry on the line while keeping the coffers full. Many noblemen he knew were inclined to drink and gamble to sustain the pressure they were put under to be perfect. Although Drake didn't have to suffer begetting an heir in a loveless marriage.

He fought for one reason alone.

To survive.

There were many times he'd lost himself in the bottom of a bottle, trying to forget his circumstances.

As he looked at the sympathy on Miss Davies' face, he hated the map of hardship on his body and decided that once this match was over, he could deal with a strong Scotch. The raised disfigurements on his arms and torso told the sorrowful tale of a man who had escaped death from a sharp blade too many times to count.

Oddly enough, his face had escaped too much trauma. His nose had only been broken once and had healed rather evenly. His hands, however, bore the violence that he'd endured over the years.

After stripping down to nothing but his trousers, he handed the discarded articles to

Amos and then he headed for the pit without another glance back at Miss Davies. He didn't want to see her pitying expression when she saw his back. The crisscrossed scars were always good to remind him of his true place in this world, of what he was. A killer, a criminal.

A fighter.

He didn't have to push his way through the crowd. They patted him on the back as he passed with encouraging shouts. It wasn't his first time here and no doubt, it wouldn't be the last. He was destined for this sort of existence even though he tried to live better. His past was difficult to ignore when it kept showing up on his doorstep with such pristine determination.

He jumped down into the pit and moved his neck in a circle, attempting to rid himself of the tension that was starting to tighten his muscles. He had never blinked about entering into a bareknuckle match before but knowing that Miss Davies was looking on made the tendons in his shoulders and back tense with awareness. He had hoped to be spending his evening exerting himself in a different manner but he supposed it was all for a good cause. Amos's son, Devon, was a young man with a hot temper but not quite enough stamina to back up his actions. He could be tough when the situation warranted it but in the case of fighting Bear, there were very few men who succeeded.

Drake had won a match against him but not without a couple of broken ribs and a finger to show for it. As he faced the dark-skinned man now, he had to wonder if he would be so lucky this time. Nevertheless, he wouldn't back down from any fight, even if it might kill him. Some had lost their lives in the pit and the only recompense they received was a disgruntled crowd who had placed their bets on the poor sod—and lost.

Standing tall and proud, Bear gave a broad smile when he saw who would be

standing in the place of Devon. Drake answered with a formal bow. “We meet again.”

“Indeed,” Drake returned smoothly, and then he ran toward the man.

In this battle there was no defining bell when the match was to commence. This was a game without rules and the violence was all too real.

As Drake ran his right shoulder into Bear’s torso at full speed, the only thing he managed to do was cause the giant of a man to stumble. He was easily a head taller than Drake and filled out enough for two men. And when the first blow came at his ribcage, he was prepared for the strike. The breath instantly escaped his lungs. As he tried to regain his full capacity for breathing, he countered with a stiff uppercut that sent Bear’s head backward. He added another left cuff to the side of his face.

Bear just smiled wider, blood staining his teeth as he came back at Drake with a devastating blow to his solar plexus—if it had made contact. Drake was familiar with his fighting style so he quickly dropped down, kicking out his leg against the other man’s thigh as he did so. The grunt of pain was not enough to stop Bear as he lunged for Drake. He put his huge arm around Drake’s neck and began to squeeze.

Spots danced before his eyes but rather than give in to lack of oxygen, he allowed his body to go completely limp, temporarily taking his attacker off guard. It was enough for him to loosen his grip while Drake slid to freedom. Jumping up, he kicked off of the edge of the pit and with a roundhouse, his shin made contact with the side of Bear’s temple.

Again, the man staggered, but he didn’t fall. It wasn’t going to be easy to fell a tree like Bear but as Drake allowed his smile to widen, he offered the man a wink as he threw out an elbow to his throat as the true battle began.

* * *

She couldn't watch. The noise inside the room was so loud that Fleur could hardly maintain her own thoughts. Or rather, the horror that was taking place.

It wasn't as though she particularly cared for Mr. Porter—Drake—but neither did she want to see anyone hurt. And faced off with such a burly man there was surely no way that he could win a match. It was like David facing off with Goliath. And unless Mr. Porter had a slingshot, then the odds were decidedly not in his favor.

It didn't help that Amos was looking on as if he hadn't just sent Mr. Porter to his demise and would sleep soundly knowing that he had his death on his conscience. Frustrated with it all, she moved toward him. "Aren't you going to do something about this?"

He ignored her completely. He didn't even glance over at her to acknowledge that she had been speaking.

With a huff, Fleur started to pace. She held the dagger in her grip and wondered who she might hit over the head with this to cause this insanity to cease. She despised violence of any sort and this was the worst kind—fighting for the pure sport of it.

Another roar erupted from the crowd and she felt sick to her stomach imaging what might be taking place in that miserable pit. No doubt it wasn't going well to the man she had come there with. The question was, dare she try to go ahead and make her escape now? But at the same moment the thought entered her mind, she had no idea where she might go. She had no family to turn to other than her brother and he was more or less being held hostage by Harriette.

Anger boiled up within her at the memory of the courtesan's betrayal. She had believed her to be a true confidante if not a friend and to be treated in such a manner

made her wonder if she could trust anyone—especially Mr. Porter.

Fleur supposed she should be thankful that she wasn't lying with the scoundrel. Instead, he was being pummeled to death in an illegal fighting pit beneath an illicit pub in the darkest part of the West End of London. She shook her head, wondering how she managed to get herself in such a situation.

And then she remembered. She hadn't done anything.

Flavian was the reason she was standing here in a concealing shroud, for fear that if anyone actually saw her, she would have to worry about more than Mr. Porter's lewd advances.

Strangely enough, although he had every right to her body since he'd paid a veritable fortune for it, Mr. Porter had been nothing but considerate thus far.

She cringed when she heard the sound of more cheers.

Yes, quite the gentleman...

She rolled her eyes and told herself that if Amos wasn't going to stop this nonsense, then she would be forced to do so.

She stomped toward the pit intending to throw the dagger at something or someone when she halted midstride. A break in the crowd showed the larger man lying on the ground while his sweat glistening opponent, with blood running down his chest, had his hand lifted into the air by a congratulatory onlooker.

Fleur would have been furious if not for the calm expression on Mr. Porter's face. He didn't look as though he'd just won a losing battle. Instead, he looked rather uninterested in all the well wishes as he climbed out of the pit and headed toward

Amos to retrieve his things.

As the larger man was lifted and carried away by no less than four sturdy men, Fleur watched with a mixture of horror—and fascination. She couldn't believe that he had been felled by a man like Mr. Porter. However, when she recalled the scars that had covered Mr. Porter's torso, she realized that he hadn't won every fight and he did so now because he had learned to win the hard way.

A hand touched her shoulder and she jerked back to the present. Her escort was standing before her with his shirt and shoes back on, although he held his jacket in his hand. "Time to go."

She nodded her head, not about to argue.

He took her hand as they made their way back up the steps to the first floor of the pub and if possible, it was rowdier than before. Men that she wouldn't want to see in the bright light of day were gambling, drinking as if the ale was made of water, while half-dressed whores graced many of their laps.

She closed her eyes momentarily, trying to blot out the scene from her mind. Although she liked to believe that she had lived a difficult life until that point, she realized that it was nothing more than what the man at her side had witnessed. She was shocked by the improper manner of these people when the pub in Greenwich had held better morals.

Fleur could feel her head starting to spin and as Mr. Porter led her out the back door of the pub, she wrenched her hand from his grasp and pulled the concealing shroud from her face. Leaning against the brick wall in the dismal alleyway, the dagger still clutched in her other hand, Fleur wretched. She would have felt bad if it wasn't for the other refuse that was present there as well.

After the worst had passed, she took great heaving gulps of air in an effort to calm herself. She didn't know she was shaking until she tried to wipe her mouth and her hand trembled.

A blurry, masculine hand came into view as the dagger was gently removed from her grasp. She was grateful that he didn't say anything, just allowed her the time to recover.

Fleur wanted nothing more but to tumble into bed somewhere, to sit in the silence of the darkness and forget that this day had ever taken place. She straightened and said firmly, "I'm ready."

Rather than speak, Mr. Porter grasped her hand. She found she was grateful for the warmth and the support as he led her along until they saw a passing hackney. He quickly waved it down and they climbed inside.

Fleur didn't ask questions as to why they weren't returning to his residence on foot, but neither did she care. She just wanted to go to sleep and then wake up and pretend that what had happened today was nothing more than a bad dream. She wanted to wake up, safe and sound, in her little cottage in Greenwich. She wanted to go back to the orphanage and teach Latin. And she wanted to see her brother. She had never missed him as much as she did in that moment. Since they were twins, she had always felt a strong attachment to him. She knew the feeling was mutual. At least, most of the time.

She had carried them through too many storms to count, and yet, she was afraid that she wouldn't be able to make it through this one. Already she was starting to feel as though she was drowning. She wished she'd never dared to come to London to rely on a woman's help she hardly knew. Her memoirs should have been enough for Fleur to know that no one was spared from Harriette's determination. While she might not have given her a reason to retaliate against her, she had given Harriette the means in

which to regain some of her luxurious life back.

For years, Fleur had been strong, taking the whole world onto her shoulders so that she might be able to fulfill her promise to her parents. Now she wondered if she hadn't made a mistake by trying to safeguard Flavian. She certainly hadn't done herself any favors.

Fleur jumped in surprise when a handkerchief was handed to her. She blinked. Until then, she hadn't realized a single tear had slid down her cheek. She hastily wiped it away and lifted her chin in defiance, refusing the offering. "Thank you, but I'm fine." She was upset with herself that she'd given in to a brief moment of vulnerability. No doubt Mr. Porter believed her to have a weak constitution, that she was unnerved by the fight. She hadn't liked it, certainly, but it was her life that had suddenly erupted in shambles that bothered her more than anything else.

He didn't seem concerned one way or another, just took the handkerchief and tucked it back into his jacket pocket. He had yet to put the garment back on and while they were sitting there, Fleur found her attention drawn to him. She hadn't allowed herself to appreciate his strong physique earlier but now she recalled that his arms and torso were quite defined. After such a fight, he didn't appear to have any lasting effects. He wasn't groaning in pain or breathing heavily. He was just calm and sitting there as though he didn't have a care in the world. But that is what concerned her the most.

This man not only knew the meaning of danger. He laid down next to it every night. It was his constant companion. "How do you do it?"

Those silver eyes slid to her. "What?"

Fleur hadn't really meant to speak aloud but now that the words hung in the air, she couldn't resist knowing the answer. "How do you live each day with such nonchalance when it is obvious that you have lived a harsh reality? Doesn't it bother

you?”

He hesitated, as if considering his reply, and then said evenly, “There is no point in bemoaning what is lost. The past is where it shall always be and nothing I can do will ever change that. I prefer to look ahead to the future instead of dwelling in a dark place that won’t become any brighter.”

She pondered his words for a time. “That is very insightful.”

He glanced out the window at the darkness beyond. His expression showed nothing of his innermost thoughts, although his jaw clenched visibly, proving that he wasn’t completely without emotion. “I have had many years to ponder about my existence and my purpose for being here.”

“Does there have to be a reason?” she asked, curious as to his answer.

His gaze shifted back to her and she shivered. Again, it wasn’t entirely to do with apprehension. “It seems pointless to endure all of this for nothing.”

He was cynical but Fleur wasn’t surprised. If she had grown up with the hardships he had faced, there was no doubt she would be the same. “I don’t agree that it’s for nothing. I believe it’s for the people we meet and the lives we touch along the way.”

“Oh?” he snorted. “And you think I shall touch your life in some magical way?”

She paused and then shook her head. “Perhaps I am the one who is meant to help you.”

* * *

It was one of the few times that Drake was speechless—on purpose. Generally, he

didn't have much to say and preferred the silence to mindless chatter.

But with one statement, Miss Davies had struck a chord in him that he'd thought dead and buried long ago—hope, faith in humanity. Both were qualities that he had never witnessed often. Then again, the places and people he'd normally frequented had no reason to cling to either. They considered it a success if they reached the morning without being six feet underground. There were many days when Drake was grateful for the same until he remembered death would probably be a blessing to such a miserable existence.

As he looked at the woman across from him, he wondered if she was right. There had been something that had drawn Drake to her from the first moment they met, and it wasn't about the coin her wastrel brother owed him. He'd seen a fire in her green eyes that he hadn't observed in a long time. Most of the people he met had a glazed look due to excessive drink or large amounts of opium. If not, then it was the look of destitution, the truth that there was nothing left in the world to live for any longer.

Every time Drake was faced with the identical empty glances, he knew he was starting to fall into the same sort of numb acceptance, that although he had finally obtained his wealth over the years, it was just coin. He had believed it would make him content, to feel his vindication against those who had wronged him but he'd been wrong. He might have all he'd ever wanted at long last, but it was a vapid victory. There was no outpouring of joy. Instead, there was the outpouring of drink as he consumed bottle after bottle of spirits, hoping to quiet the voices in his head that were always present, reminding him of his failings.

Miss Davies had changed all that. Finally, the voices had become silent and in their place was an enchanting feminine lilt and eyes that still held the true wealth he had been missing.

As he looked at her, he knew he would have spent everything he'd had just to have

her sit across from him, if only for one night. It was fascinating just feeling... something again, other than the dreadful void of emptiness that promised nothing.

He noticed her glance out the window at the passing scenery, the gas lamps of the West End starting to come into view. "Where are we going?" she asked.

"I thought you might like to spend the night somewhere a bit more pleasant."

She frowned at him. "Are you taking me back to Harriette?"

"She wouldn't have you should you decide to request it," he returned matter-of-fact. "It's my other residence."

"You have more than one?"

He reached into his vest and pulled out a cheroot, taking a moment to light it before answering. As he blew out a slight puff of smoke, he said, "I have several in London, as well as a few others in the countryside."

She looked him up and down curiously. "I see."

He smiled slowly. "I'm sure you do. And no doubt you are right about whatever conclusion you have arrived at in that pretty head of yours."

She shifted her gaze away and he realized that he hated confirming her fears and casting himself in such a poor light but it was best that she learn what sort of man she had unwittingly tied herself to for however long their association might last. If it was up to Drake, he wasn't willing to let her go anytime soon, not until this infatuation had waned.

As the carriage stopped in front of his townhouse in Chelsea, he waited for

recognition to strike and he could see the moment it did. Some of the blood receded from her face, “Isn’t this the same street that?”

“Indeed.” It was all he would offer by way of confirmation before he opened the door and led her inside. He shut the door behind them and lit a lantern near the entrance on the solitary table in the foyer.

She glanced around the cavernous expanse. “You aren’t much of a decorator.”

“No.” Again, he didn’t choose to elaborate as he led the way to the stairs and up to the second floor. “But I can promise you will sleep in comfort.”

He walked down the hall, his footsteps echoing all around them. Drake had never thought of the sound being eerie before but he wondered if it bothered his guest. He looked at her but she seemed to be taking note of her surroundings with an innocent curiosity.

He reached the master chamber and opened the door. Inside was a bed, wardrobe and washstand. A copper tub set in one corner near the fireplace. It was the most furniture he had in one place.

As he walked over to start a fire, she remained standing. Then again, other than the imposing four poster dominating the middle of the room there wasn’t anywhere else to sit. No doubt she did find that rather disconcerting.

“Have you never slept in here before?”

He hesitated in his task. He turned his head to the side but didn’t fully turn to face her. “What makes you say that?”

“The bed is made rather... perfectly.” There was a pause and he imagined that she

was running her hand slowly along the counterpane. It was not an unwelcome image. “I don’t see you as the sort who makes their bed every morning, especially when, as you say, you have so many other places to stay.”

He returned his attention to the coal and wood in the grate. “I employ a housekeeper to come and check on things once a week. She is responsible for the upkeep. But you are correct. In truth, I have never slept in that bed. When you are used to a crude cot in a workhouse you find such luxuries are unnecessary.”

“Then why have it at all?”

“Because I can.” He straightened and turned back to her. The fire was blossoming with life, the logs crackling now and then with purpose. He glanced at her shroud and then walked over and withdrew a white lawn shirt out of the wardrobe. He handed it to her. “So you can sleep in something clean.”

“Thank you.” She held the shirt to her chest as if it was a shield. “But what about you? Don’t you want to change?”

“I will after I bathe.”

She looked at the tub in the corner and back to him.

He was already heading out the door. “I have spare clothes and a washtub in the servant’s quarters as well.”

She blinked. “You are prepared for every eventuality, aren’t you?”

He took one step toward her. He wanted to inhale the fresh scent of her, so that he might dream of something sweet and pure this night. “I leave nothing to chance, Miss Davies.” He allowed his focus to travel slowly down and back up her form.

“Especially auctions.”

CHAPTER 7

Fleur jumped up when the door shut behind Mr. Porter. She wasn't certain what might happen this evening but neither did she have the courage to ask him what to expect before he left. All she knew was that she was tired of wearing this horrid shroud.

She ripped it off of her and tossed it into a corner, hoping it might rot. She donned the shirt that he'd lain out for her. Although it was a bit shorter than she would have liked, the hem coming to her knees, and the material too thin, leaving little to the imagination, she supposed that she ought to get used to showing off her body in such a way if she was, indeed, to become a courtesan.

However, considering she was still a virgin, she wasn't quite at the seduction phase of her new title just yet. She was still uncomfortable being naked in front of anything but a washtub, and although she had tried to discover self-pleasure, the effect was sadly lacking.

She walked over to the window and hugged herself. Although she couldn't see anything but the back meadows of the house, she imagined that she could see Harriette's residence. She wondered what her brother thought of her ill treatment, but then, Flavian probably didn't know what had happened. He might believe that his twin was perfectly content, not knowing that she'd been party to an illicit fight that evening, and that the man she might soon share a bed with was nothing but an enigma, a mystery she might never fully solve.

His house was empty of anything that might resemble something personal, but surely

there was a clue to how he truly was—if he could be someone that she might trust.

Fleur opened a few drawers, but found nothing. Then again, this didn't seem like anywhere he spent much of his time.

She walked over to the door and opened it cautiously. He hadn't told her that she couldn't explore, so she took that as permission to familiarize herself with her surroundings. Although it was late, there was certainly no way that she would be able to sleep when her mind was whirling.

She grabbed the candle he'd left. Apparently, he knew his way well enough that he hadn't needed it to find his way downstairs. Or else he had the keen sight of a wild animal.

Taking a deep breath, Fleur decided she would keep her curiosity on the upper floors. She didn't want to risk running into Mr. Porter and having to explain what she was doing, that she was hoping to find enough evidence to prove that he wasn't some sort of murderer.

With those intense, silver eyes, she could almost believe it might be true.

She certainly couldn't rest easy with that image flashing in her mind.

Fleur tried the door of the room opposite hers. It opened easily but unfortunately, there wasn't a single thing inside. Not a candlestick or bedwarmer to speak of. The ramshackle rooms that she'd been in earlier that evening had been rather sparse too. She wondered if this was how all of his residences appeared—empty, devoid of any sort of permanence.

She wanted to be terrified at the idea, but instead, she found herself overwhelmed by sadness. Mr. Porter must live a very lonely life if he didn't care about staying in one

place long enough to try to set down some roots.

The rest of the doors in the hallway revealed the same thing.

Nothing.

Except for one.

It was the last door at the end of the opposite hallway. Fleur anticipated it to be like the rest, and for the most part, it was just as cavernous as the others, but it was also the only room on that particular wing. For a moment, she paused as she surveyed the grand architecture. Hand painted walls and gilt edging rose up to a plaster ceiling with decorative medallions that held large and intimidating gold chandeliers. A row of windows took up one entire wall and Fleur knew this must have been a ballroom at one time. She could almost picture a scene where the swirled marble floor was filled with colorful swirling dresses and tailored suits from a decade gone by.

She reached out and trailed a hand down some of the trim, closing her eyes as she tried to go back in time and recreate the wonder that this house must have known at one time. Now, it just seemed neglected, sorrowful.

Or rather, it would have if it wasn't filled with several canvas paintings strewn along one wall. Some were partially covered with sheets as various brushes and palettes were tossed in a corner. With a thin layer of dust over everything, it was as if the owner didn't care if they returned to the partially finished landscapes or not. Some were just sketches of various parks and buildings about London, but others were from various cliffs. With the ocean spread out in the distance and waves crashing upon the rocks with the tide, Fleur knew these could be highly sought after works if they were completed.

She walked among the pieces for a time and then turned her attention to the single

canvas on the easel. This was the only thing that looked as though it might have been disturbed in recent weeks because it was free of dust and there were vivid colors peeking out from the corner of the covering.

Fleur reached out a hand and pulled the sheet away.

What she saw caused her to gasp.

It wasn't a landscape. It wasn't even a portrait. It was much more scandalous than that.

It was the image of a naked woman in the throes of passion. Her head was bent backward, saving the viewer from her identity. The man she was with had his hand on her breast and his backside was fully revealed. It was obvious that this was a painting about making love and Fleur found herself intrigued.

Her fingers trailed the curves of the artist's brush strokes, the defined muscles of the man's arms, and her breathing deepened when she imagined his hands moving over her body, sighing as the same brush that had drawn this illicit act gently trailed over her skin, coloring her body as red as the background of the art.

Fleur closed her eyes, thinking about how it would feel if she was the lady in the portrait. Her eyes opened and she felt a strange stab of jealousy. She suddenly had a strong desire to know who this woman was, if she was a courtesan, or perhaps someone important in Mr. Porter's life. He had surely painted this. Either that, or he had been generous and allowed someone to interfere on his solitude. Not likely.

Unless she was the artist behind all these works.

Fleur shook her head and quickly covered the offending portrait. It abruptly disturbed her, although she couldn't readily say why it had done so.

She certainly had no claim on Mr. Porter. In truth, she was conflicted on whether or not she should be his lover—or if she should try to flee this desolate dungeon of a house that he inhabited. He was like some dark creature of the night, forever cursed to walk through endless empty rooms and never know what it was like for his heart to be touched by love.

Fleur left the room and quickly made her way back to the chamber to either await the master's return—or to pace the expanse the rest of the night. Either way, she wouldn't be able to sleep a wink until the sun started to rise and she knew that she would be safe from the shadows of doubt that surrounded her, warning her that she might have very well subjected herself to something far worse than the demons of hell.

* * *

Downstairs, Drake leaned his head back against the edge of the copper tub that he'd filled with several trips back and forth from the cistern, and thought of the lady he'd left in his chamber. It had never seemed like his before, but with her in it, he suddenly wanted to lay claim to it. And Miss Davies.

He blew out a puff of smoke from his cheroot and tapped the ashes onto the floor beside him. He could always count on his housekeeper to clean up his messes, and other than ashes trailed all throughout the house, there wasn't much else for her to do. He couldn't even remember her name. He only employed her because she looked as though she could use the employment he could provide, and she seemed to be able to retain her gossip. It was a quality that many servants did not have, but considering his past, was quite necessary.

As his thoughts wandered back to Miss Davies, he wondered if she was already asleep or if it was going to be as long a night for her as it would be for him. He had never been comfortable in the dark. Perhaps it was residual trauma from his

childhood causing him to be afraid of cramped, dismal spaces, having roamed the streets in all manner of weather and situations. He had always preferred pouring rain so long as it was daytime to anything that caused his vision to falter. Without the ability to see, he didn't know who might be walking up behind him whether it be human, or one of the numerous rats that liked to roam the city.

He had practiced trying to acclimate himself to dim lighting. He seldom used anything more than a candle when he was alone, something that could easily be extinguished if he felt the hairs starting to stand up on the back of his neck. That instinct had saved his life more than once.

In the end, it was a woman who had nearly cost him everything.

After that, he'd vowed to himself that he would never put himself in the same situation again. Yet, ironically enough, he was allowing one to sleep under the same roof. But that didn't mean he trusted Miss Davies. He was starting to feel a touch of respect for her determination and steadfast demeanor at the pub but those qualities did not always create an ally. If she acted as Amos and saved his life, he would be more inclined to trust her. Until then, he trusted no one. Amos was given special consideration but Drake still kept his distance if he felt the situation warranted it.

Grinding his cheroot out on the floor, Drake decided he'd wasted enough time in the bath. He stood up, the rivulets of water flowing down his body, he dried off and wondered what Miss Davies would think if she could see more than just his arms and torso. His entire body was proof that he had lived a life that most would not care to duplicate. He had seen the horror on her face but at least it wasn't disgust. He wasn't sure it would be that easy to seduce her if she couldn't stand the sight of him.

However, while scars covered his body, he had always made an attempt at getting enough physical activity that his form more than made up for any faults.

He tucked the linen about his waist and started to head back upstairs. He did have a change of clothes, as he'd told Miss Davies, but he wondered what her reaction might be if he appeared with nearly nothing on instead.

He reached the bedchamber and saw the slight glow of light coming from the other side. He considered giving a light knock of warning before he entered but then that would ruin the surprise.

He boldly entered the room and glanced toward the bed, expecting her to be there. When it was empty, he glanced about the room and saw her silhouette standing by the window. She had opened the pane slightly and he saw her hair blowing gently on the breeze.

Upon his entrance, she turned to him and her hand crept toward her throat. She didn't say anything or demand that he leave. She just observed as he moved about the room.

He headed for the dresser and removed a pair of smallclothes. He held them up and then ripped the linen off of his hips, letting it fall to the ground. He stood there for a moment, his naked glory piercing the silence, and then he donned the garment.

“Are you hot?”

He saw her mouth fall open and then she seemed to come to her senses when a slight breeze from the open window appeared to wake her from her sudden trance. “Er... I was just needing some fresh air.”

He walked toward her and moved the window up a bit more. “Why stop there?”

Drake was glad to see that, although she tried not to make it obvious that she was inspecting him, her gaze kept dipping downward. “Are you going to bed?”

He saw her cheeks turn pink as soon as the words were out of her mouth. He almost smiled. But not quite. “Is that an invitation?” he murmured.

She lifted her chin. “It is what you paid for, isn’t it? To make me your whore?”

He frowned. “I don’t care for it to be noted in those terms. If I wanted a whore, I wouldn’t have to spend five thousand quid to obtain one.” He took her chin in his grasp so she was forced to look at him. “What I purchased was you . I didn’t like the idea that you would be sold to some man who wouldn’t appreciate your worth.”

“How can you judge my worth?” she questioned. “You hardly know me. And considering that I ran away from you in Greenwich I assumed what you really wanted was revenge, to punish me for my actions.”

“Revenge is not something I pay for.” He released her and leaned back against the wall next to the window. “And neither will I pay for the chance to take you to bed. You will come willingly, or not at all.”

* * *

At least he has some honor , Fleur thought. She couldn’t readily say that about all the men that had been at that dreadful auction. They were quite lewd with their remarks and considering the choices she’d had, she supposed that Mr. Porter wasn’t turning out to be as bad as she’d originally feared. While she wouldn’t go so far as to say she felt comfortable with him, she could admit that she didn’t worry he would hurt her. She was grateful that he promised he wouldn’t force her into his bed but she had no doubt he would try to convince her with his actions if not flowery prose.

As she inspected him, she realized that his scars didn’t look quite so frightful in the dim moonlight. And his dark hair was rather appealing. “I haven’t seen you without a hat until now,” she noted.

“I generally wear one all the time.”

“Are you that dedicated to fashion?” she attempted to tease.

“No.” he said somberly. “The hat serves a purpose with the razor blades sewn into the brim.”

“Oh. I see.” She thought about it further and added, “Does that really stop an attack from happening?”

His eyes glittered with unconcealed menace. “It does when you blind them with a quick slash across the eyes.”

Fleur put a hand to her stomach. She wondered if she might be sick. “That’s dreadful.”

Those silver eyes glittered. “So is facing someone who wants you dead.”

She tried to swallow the bile threatening to rise in her throat. “I suppose if you have no other choice...” She moved away from the window, mainly to put some distance between them. She felt like she couldn’t properly breathe around him. “Whatever happened to talking out problems?”

“That doesn’t work for everyone. The people I know prefer to act first.”

She hugged herself, vividly recalling the sick crunch of bone against bone in that pit. “Yes, so I gathered this evening.”

“That was sport, not a true attack.”

She turned to him in frustration. “But why engage in something that violent at all?

We are supposed to live in a proper society where rules are meant not to be broken and gentlemen tip their hats to ladies and?—”

He interrupted with a snort. “You are living in a fantasy world. Those things don’t exist.”

“They do,” she returned emphatically. “I have witnessed it myself?—”

He moved closer to her. “That may be but what you don’t see is what happens after the door closes. Men usher their mistresses in the back door while their wives are enjoying their own peccadillos across town. The glorious world that you have painted for yourself is nothing but a fa?ade for the licentious truths.”

Fleur lowered her head. She hated to hear him spew such venom but at the same time, she knew he spoke with candor. Mr. Porter wasn’t the type of man to be anything less than honest because there was nothing for him to lose if he did so. He didn’t have to lie. There was no profit in it. He’d already won her hand—and her body.

Taking a deep breath, Fleur decided that the time had come for this evening to reach its conclusion. She reached up and slid part of the white lawn shirt off of her shoulder. But when she reached for the other side to do the same, to allow the garment to slide to the floor and bare her fully to his gaze. He put a hand on her shoulder to pause her movements.

“Look at me, Fleur.”

It was the first time he’d used her given name.

Slowly, she lifted her gaze until it met his. She nearly gasped at the intensity she saw in his raw expression. Dare she believe that it was almost... empathetic?

But as soon as she thought she glimpsed an instant of human emotion, it was quickly snuffed out. The blackguard had returned. “Another night. I am quite exhausted this evening.”

She doubted that was the truth but she wasn’t about to question his motives, whatever they were. Then again, as she allowed her focus to travel over his broad, muscled chest, she wondered if perhaps he was suffering from the beating he’d received earlier. No doubt his opponent was doing much worse.

He removed his hand and she put the shirt sleeves back in place. “Of course. Whatever you wish, Mr. Porter. You are in charge of this affair.”

He smirked, part of his mouth lifting the slightest degree. “If that were true,” he murmured.

He headed for the door and she was confused. She knew that there were no other beds to be had. “Where are you going? There’s nowhere else to sleep.”

He paused and turned back to face her. “I can see it didn’t take you long to intrude on my personal space.”

She crossed her arms, refusing to be cowed. “You did bring me here. Surely you didn’t actually believe that I wouldn’t be curious about the man I’m with?”

He leaned against the door, crossing one bare ankle over the other as he lifted his arms and set them on either side of the frame. The imposing figure he made caused her head to spin in a disturbing—and alluring—way. “What do you wish to know? I have nothing to hide.”

She swallowed, realizing this was the moment she had waited for, a glimpse into his mysterious past. Instead, what fell out of her mouth wasn’t the words she had

intended to say. “Who is the couple in the painting?”

He stilled and he visibly tensed. “You’ve been in my studio.”

It wasn’t a question but more of an accusation, as if she’d done something unforgivable. “I was,” she admitted. “You are a very gifted artist—” Rather than accept the compliment with a smile or nod, his face turned grim. “But there is so much unfinished. I am sure if you completed them all and took them to a gallery?—”

“I will never allow it.”

She blinked at the pure animosity that came out of his lips. “Why not?”

He straightened, his hands falling to his sides, his feet braced apart on the floor. “Because of the woman you saw in the painting.” She wondered if he might elaborate or leave with that cryptic explanation. Clenching his jaw, Fleur was surprised when he added, “She was my lover. At one time I imagined foolishly that I was in love with her. The only piece I’ve ever finished was the one that reminds me of her, of the betrayal I suffered at her hands and how she left me to die. She was the first person to encourage me to continue painting. These days I would rather pick up a dagger than a paintbrush ever again.”

Although Fleur didn’t want to feel empathy for him, she couldn’t resist taking a step toward him. “It doesn’t have to be a bad memory. I would be happy to?—”

“No.”

With that, he turned and left the room, slamming the door behind him with an air of finality that reverberated around the expanse.

CHAPTER 8

Fleur slept little that night and something told her that Mr. Porter did not as well. He certainly hadn't seemed pleased when he'd left her bedchamber. She decided to apologize to him this morning for pushing too far. She understood that, while he might have looked upon painting as a calming pastime at one point, now it was nothing but a sordid recollection. Considering that he had treated her quite fairly until this point made her guilt rise to the surface. She was not an unkind person by nature and she had been unsettled all night worrying about their confrontation.

She rose and performed her morning ablutions and then combed her fingers through her hair the best that she could. Unfortunately, she remembered that a brush was not all that she was missing. The few things she'd taken to Harriette's townhouse were still there. She had nothing but the shirt Mr. Porter had loaned her to sleep in and the shroud she hoped never to lay eyes on again.

With little other choice, Fleur padded over to the door and headed down the stairs. In the early morning light of day, she still thought the structure seemed cold and barren, as if accusing her of her wrongdoings with each step that she took. She paused halfway down and clutched the banister for support. Taking a deep breath, she continued her descent.

She checked a few of the rooms on the lower level and didn't see any signs of Mr. Porter. It was as if he'd effectively disappeared.

Finally, she spied a door at the back of the house. The door was shut but when she dared to open it, she found her benefactor bent over a ledger and scribbling away.

There was little else in the study but the desk and his chair, empty and devoid of many furnishings or personal touches like everywhere else.

He stopped writing when she entered and glanced up. He had donned his cap once more. She also noted that he was fully dressed.

“Where did you sleep last night?” That hadn’t been the first thing she’d intended to say but it was the prominent thought in her mind.

He set down his pen near the inkwell and shut the ledger. Folding his hands on the top, he asked, “Why? Did you miss me?”

She didn’t miss the sardonic tone. Rather than engage, she asked, “Is there any of your... houses that you have made your own?”

“They are all mine.”

She waved a hand. “Never mind.” She looked down at her attire. “Is there anything else for me to wear?”

He frowned slightly. “Are you intending to go somewhere?”

She blinked, curious as to why he might pose that question. “Am I to be a prisoner here then?”

“I didn’t realize that we were entertaining. Or going to the opera.”

Again, there was that mocking tone. She didn’t like it.

Last night, she’d believed she might have actually had a civil conversation with him. She hoped that it might last, that they might have the chance to know each other

better, not this barely concealed animosity when she didn't know what she'd done to provoke him.

She crossed her arms. "I wasn't asking for that. But perhaps some common decency wouldn't be amiss. Or something to read? Something to just do . I am used to being busy. I was a teacher in Greenwich."

He snorted. "You wish for me to turn this house into a schoolroom?"

"No." She clenched her fists at her sides. "That's not what I'm saying. I merely don't want to stare at the wall all day."

"Then shut your eyes."

She gasped at the snide comment. Again, she was growing frustrated with her new situation. "I don't understand what you want from me. You paid quite handsomely but I don't see where there is any benefit for either of us."

He leaned back in the chair and folded his hands over his taut stomach. She despised the fact she noticed his physical attributes when she was furious with his cold detachment. If he intended to remain like this, she would have rather gone home with one of the other men. At least they would have used and discarded her, rather than lead her around on a string where she had to wonder when he would finally pounce.

"Would you prefer that I had my wicked way with you?"

She put a hand to her forehead. "No! I— you're so infuriating! Please forget that I mentioned anything." She headed for the door, helpless to try to make him understand any further. She would go back upstairs. Perhaps she could try painting. She already knew that she wasn't adept at it but it would be better than wasting away from boredom. It was bad enough that she didn't know how Flavian was faring.

She was in the hallway before he called her name. Fleur didn't want to acknowledge him. She wanted to keep walking, preferably out the door and back to some semblance of normalcy. But she was afraid that part of her life was gone forever. After the auction, she was a doomed woman, teetering on the edge of respectability with a man who didn't care for it at all.

She stopped but didn't turn to face him. She heard his footsteps approaching, slow and steady. She gritted her teeth, because she knew that she was at his mercy. If he told her to jump, she would have to do it. After last night, she was more or less his property until he released her from his care.

He moved so close that she could feel the heat emanating from him, but he didn't touch her. It was more disconcerting than if he'd actually spun her around and kissed her. "Would you be happy if I paraded you about high society in the best silks and jewels that money could buy?"

She sighed. "No, that's not what I want. I just want a... purpose for being here, or else what was the point of demeaning myself in such a fashion, other than to please you in seeing me humiliating myself like I did?"

"That didn't please me."

She almost shivered. She was angry at him, and yet, when the mocking tone was absent and replaced with the sensual baritone of his velvety voice, she wasn't sure it was any better for her peace of mind.

"You'll forgive me if I don't quite believe that." Fleur didn't want to be petty. But she couldn't resist a barb at his expense since he had tormented her this morning.

His hand gently touched her right shoulder. "I thought of nothing but you the moment you walked in that club," he murmured next to her ear. "I knew I would pay anything

to have you.”

This time she did shiver. “For revenge,” she guessed somewhat breathlessly.

His hand slid slowly down her arm and around her midsection. “For something else.” His hand trailed further downward until he reached the apex of her legs. She inhaled sharply when he inserted a finger inside her. “I wanted you from the first moment I saw you on that field.”

He toyed with her, moving his finger in and out, and then his thumb pressed against the sensitive part of her that was throbbing with anticipation. Her toes curled beneath her and she could tell her breathing had deepened. “You didn’t know... it was me.” She gasped when he started a rhythmic movement with his fingers that had her lower stomach burning with desire. She didn’t know it was possible to feel such wanton urges for someone she didn’t even like.

“I knew it wasn’t a man. The movements were too fluid. Too quick. That weapon could only be wielded by a feminine hand.”

“It fooled everyone... else.” She bit her lip as her eyes closed. There was something heavy swirling about inside of her, desperate to escape. She wanted to give in to the urge, to release herself to the need but something was holding her back.

The rhythm increased and suddenly, Fleur was beyond conscious thought. She didn’t want to talk anymore. She just wanted to... feel, to give in to the passions threatening to envelop her.

The impact swept over her like a blissful wave. Her legs trembled as she fell back against Mr. Porter, trusting him to carry her over the crest. Fleur had never experienced anything so incredible. It was as if she was transformed from the woman she was, unto the woman who stood in this cavernous foyer.

Afterward, like the tide going back out to sea, her body was languid, calm. Mr. Porter removed his hand and, making sure that she could stand on her own, took a step back away from her. She still didn't turn around but this time it was because she was starting to understand what had happened. It was her initiation to the carnal arts, and she had enjoyed it.

Shame washed over her, because surely, she should have been horrified by her actions. This wasn't someone that she loved, or who would ever be her husband. This was just a man who had paid to make her his whore. An expensive one, but a personal whore, nonetheless. It was what she had been expecting, and yet, now that she had been introduced to the game, she wished the circumstances were altered. She would have rather engaged in a mild flirtation until it expanded into something further. Instead, there were no flowers or poetry. It was lust.

She didn't wait for him to speak. Instead, she darted to the second floor and returned to the bedchamber. She closed the door and leaned against it with heaving breaths, as if she'd run around all of Chelsea, instead of just up the stairs.

* * *

Drake frowned when Fleur left. He had wanted to take things slow, to let her come to him, but she had looked so appealing in that shirt, he had wanted to rip it off of her and sink himself into her welcoming heat. Instead, he settled for pleasuring her. What he hadn't anticipated was her reaction. She fled as if he was the devil himself, convincing her to condemn herself to the fires of hell. He might have been called a demon by more than one person for his previous deeds years before but he was trying to change all that. He was in a comfortable place where he could almost imagine himself engaging in more than a single night's tryst.

While marriage was nowhere on the table, he had thought it would be nice to have a mistress for a month or so. It was another reason he had singled out Miss Davies, to

see if it was a situation that he could handle. He wasn't sure he could deal with anyone staying under the same roof for very long, especially when there were uncomfortable secrets that he didn't care to explain.

Like painting.

He was annoyed with himself that he hadn't thought to clear out the mess of his past before now. Of course, Fleur was a woman and a magnet for curiosity. It was in their nature to find the darkest part of someone's history and question them about it.

Drake realized that he might have overreacted to her query the night before but he was not used to trusting anyone. Ever. He had been betrayed by those closest to him. There were things that Amos still didn't know about him, and he preferred it that way. Giving someone too much knowledge about one's life, one's fears, opened one up to being hurt. After what Elina had done to him, he vowed it was the last woman who would make a cuckold out of him. For ten years he had kept that promise. Until he met Fleur, he hadn't been in danger of breaking it.

Now he was in danger of much more.

He returned to his study but instead of going back to his desk, he walked over to the window that looked out over the street. He could see the neat row of white-washed houses across from him, people walking along in their fine clothes, and carriages passing by. When he had purchased this house, he hadn't ever once stopped to look at the scene outside of his personal world. He was a man driven by survival while they were all enjoying the day, visiting friends or family while allowing laughter and happiness to shine upon the faces of men and women alike.

It had been years since Drake had ever been so carefree, if he had ever had such a moment of pure bliss. The only thing that had come close was when he'd touched Fleur and felt her pleasure radiate through him. He had gritted his teeth, desperate to

fight the urge to fill her completely, to make her his in truth.

But he had been truthful when he said she would have to come to him, or not at all. Until then, he would have to content himself with knowing he had shown her something sensual and wondrous in a world full of darkness and despair. She might have sold her virtue but he wasn't going to take advantage of that gift.

Unfortunately, while he wanted to put his past behind him, it managed to find a way to rear its ugly head at the most inconvenient of times. This morning he'd received a note beneath his front door with a simple demand.

Meet tonight at the Serpentine Bridge at eleven o'clock if you don't want to find yourself without your latest prize.

Drake had received several threats over his lifetime. Most of them were empty, because the demands had found nothing to use against him.

Until now.

He had read the single line with a sensation of ice traveling through his veins. He didn't want to allow them the power to draw him out into the open where he might engage in an ambush, but what other choice did he have? He had no doubt that some of his enemies wouldn't hesitate to use Miss Davies against him.

He supposed he could flee the city, take Miss Davies somewhere out of London, but he had never been the type to run from anyone. He was known for his stern character and he didn't plan on changing that anytime soon. It kept most of the men who wished him ill at arm's length, but apparently, some were foolish enough to attempt to raise his ire anyway. Drake also didn't think that she would leave her brother until she knew he could take care of himself.

That left the only option available to him. Meet this intruder into his affairs and dare to engage in another battle.

At this point, he feared that was the only constant in his life he would ever have.

But he didn't have to do it alone.

He'd penned a quick missive to Amos to ensure that, should something happen to him, Miss Davies would be taken to safety immediately. And at least he would have someone to stand by him if things became messy.

* * *

Fleur didn't leave the sanctity of the chamber until her stomach started to remind her that she needed to find some sort of sustenance to sustain her in this makeshift prison where she had been confined. She could hardly call it anything else when she wasn't allowed to leave the house properly dressed.

She prayed there was something to eat in the larder or she might find herself leaving regardless of her appearance—or Mr. Porter's approval.

Her stomach abruptly flipped as she thought of him. The interlude they had shared continued to replay over and over in her mind. The feelings he'd created within her had been nothing short of incredible, and yet, she had never imagined her body could be capable of such wondrous sensations. It was like nothing she'd ever experienced before. But it was the man himself that confused her. He was dangerous, and yet, virile and seductive in a mysterious way.

Forcing her thoughts back to the present, she dared to rummage about in the dresser for something other than a shirt, Fleur was relieved to see that there were some spare clothes there as well. With a satisfied smile, she donned a pair of trousers and a new

shirt. Both of which were too large, but she secured it all with a belt about her waist. It wasn't exactly a corset and a gown, but it was more than what she had been wearing. And it wouldn't be the first time she had worn trousers.

Pulling her hair back into a braid, she felt ready to tackle the rest of the day.

Heading down the back stairs, she found her way to the kitchen on the lowest level. She set her hands on her hips and surveyed the area around her. She spied a few pots and pans. It wasn't much but it would be enough. Once she knew what ingredients she had to work with, she might be able to salvage this day after all.

The larder was rather slim in the way of food but she was able to find some butter, eggs and a few dry ingredients. She could survive on eggs and scones. Thank goodness she knew how to cook, otherwise she would be forced to rely on Mr. Porter's charity. After their conversation this morning, she was glad to have found something to do, even if it was by her own will.

There was no apron to be found, so she shrugged and told herself she would have to be careful. She found a strip of linen to use to hold the warm handle of the pans as she moved them about on the iron racks in the brick oven, and as she made a place to roll out the scones on the counter, she realized it was the most convenient kitchen that she had ever worked in before and she was thankful for it.

She hummed a slight tune as she went about her task. Flour soon coated her hands as a strand of her hair fell into her line of vision. She tried to use her arm to appease the irritant but gave up and used her hand, swiping at her forehead.

As she worked to make a dough, her mind returned to Mr. Porter. She had always believed that men were the only ones who benefited from any sort of coupling, but after what had happened between them, now she knew that to be a terrible falsehood. Although she shouldn't want a repeat of what had happened earlier, she yearned for

the chance to see if her body might react the same way toward him again. Ironic, considering she hadn't wanted to embark on this courtesan experience to begin with, having been forced into it by the debt her brother owed to Mr. Porter, but now that she had gained a taste for what it might entail, she decided it might not be as bad as she had initially imagined.

The fire in the hearth was starting to heat the interior of the kitchen. Fleur swiped at her forehead as the slight wisps of hair around her face started to wilt from perspiration. But it didn't deter her from her task. She was grateful that she would soon have a fantastic meal to sustain her.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Fleur started as the irate voice of the master of this house came down upon her, causing her to upset a plate of fresh scones that she had just removed from the oven. They scattered across the floor, rolling in different directions. "Oh, no!" Forgetting for a moment that Mr. Porter was demanding an answer, she started to scramble about on her hands and knees trying to salvage what little she could. Her hand accidentally touched the fiery metal and she jerked back with a gasp.

A pair of black boots entered her line of vision and she glanced up to see Mr. Porter's thunderous face. He reached down and grasped her arm, forcing her palm upward so that he could see the damage caused by the burn. Fleur found it necessary to reassure him that she was fine but she was irritated that the meal she'd carefully prepared was promptly ruined.

Without a word, but a continual frown on his face, he dragged her forward until he could plunge her hand in a bucket of cold water. She hissed at the initial contact against her angry red skin but it started to improve as the water lapped at her wound.

After a time, she started to become aware of the man standing close to her, and the

memory of their interlude swept into her consciousness. “I think it’s fine now,” she said and slowly removed her arm from his grip.

Rather than appear appeased, he looked at her with a darker scowl than before. “What were you thinking?”

She set her jaw, irritated at his tone. “I was hungry, so I thought to make myself something to eat. I have baked before.”

He blinked, as if confused, and then he took a step back as he scrubbed a hand down his face. “Blast. I didn’t consider—” He stopped and attempted to speak again. “I’m not used to having guests.”

Some of her anger dissipated. “This is a new situation for both of us,” she noted.

That silver stare was intent when he said, “Leave this mess. I’ll have a cook here by this evening.”

Fleur’s mouth fell open. “I can’t ask someone to clean up after me!”

“Then I’ll add to the housekeeper’s duties as well.”

She shook her head. “I don’t need servants. I’ve lived my entire life without them. I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself.”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “That may be, but as long as you are under my roof, I have the final word and I say you are not to cook for yourself anymore.”

“Regardless if I enjoy it?” she asked primly.

He hesitated, and then moved forward. Reaching up a hand, he used his thumb to

wipe away a coating of white on her cheek. He held it up for her to see. “You mean you enjoy coating my entire house with your efforts?”

She gritted her teeth. “You don’t have to be so condescending,” she snapped, throwing down the linen on the counter, causing a flurry of white to fly up into the air. “It’s demeaning enough that you won’t allow me to dress properly, and now I must lay back and accept the efforts of others when I am more than capable. What am I supposed to do here if you won’t?—?”

She quickly dropped the rest of that sentence, but not quickly enough. His voice dropped an octave when he prompted, “If I won’t...what.”

It wasn’t phrased as a question and suddenly, Fleur was feeling very out of sorts. “It doesn’t matter.” She waved a hand and attempted to brush past him, but he stopped her with an arm out to the side.

Standing next to each other, shoulder to shoulder, his face so close to hers that as she turned to face him, it wouldn’t have taken much effort for them to come together for a kiss. “I won’t ask again,” he warned softly.

Knowing she was trapped, Fleur took a deep breath and forged ahead. With the memory of her body’s response to him flashing in the forefront of her mind, she said boldly, “I was in that auction to be a courtesan, and thus far, I’ve failed in that task.”

She saw his nostrils flare slightly. “You wish to be ruined?”

“No. I wish to know my purpose for being here other than your prisoner.”

“You’re not my prisoner.”

“Am I not?” she countered, and then added a heavy sigh, she said, “I wish I knew

why I was really here if it wasn't your purpose to punish me."

His eyes flashed with something primal, something dangerous, before it was quickly banked. She held her breath, wondering if he would say something, or act on the desire that was pulsing behind his calm demeanor, but instead he stepped away from her. "I will see that some gowns are procured for you."

With that statement, he turned on his heel and left.

CHAPTER 9

As Drake stood near the bridge overlooking the boundary between the Serpentine and the Long Water, he was alert for any movement or shadow that might be lurking around. He wasn't taking any chances on this meeting, because he had yet to learn who he was supposed to encounter. The note he'd received had not been signed and could have come from anyone at that auction. Not only that, but word traveled fast in London considering the size of the city. It wouldn't have taken long for anyone to learn that he had gained a paramour at an exclusive gentleman's club.

The question that remained was – what did this person want?

Drake was careful not to glance behind him where Amos remained out of site, as well as the other two men who had accompanied him. A third man had remained at the townhouse to watch over things while Fleur was blessedly oblivious to this evening's activities. He didn't need to worry about her safety when he couldn't guarantee his own.

Boldly walking to the middle of the bridge at precisely eleven o'clock, he waited for something to happen. His senses told him that he wouldn't have to wait long. He had been playing this game long enough to know when someone intended to follow through on their threats. While he waited, he took a cheroot out of his coat pocket and lit it.

He'd exhaled the first plume of white smoke when a feminine purr announced, "Mr. Porter. How good to see you again."

“Miss Wilson,” he returned curtly as he reluctantly turned around. “I was under the impression that I didn’t have much choice.”

To look at the former courtesan, one could see how she might have been alluring at one time with her dark upswept hair, but there was also a certain hard glint in her dark eyes that told of her experiences and not all of them had been kind. He would have felt pity for her if she wasn’t so calculating. “I lured you here this evening because I started to consider the prospect of your... generosity toward Miss Davies, and I wonder if that might be extended?”

Money. Of course, it was always about money. And this wasn’t the first time that someone had attempted to tempt Drake away from his sizeable coffers. However, it was the first time that something he actually wanted to keep was on the line.

He exhaled a plume of smoke, allowing it to filter into the lady’s face. It wasn’t exactly the cut direct but it proved that he wasn’t one to be moved by idle threats. “I’m not sure I understand what you’re saying,” he drawled.

“Come now,” she cajoled, waving away the cloud. “I know that you must have some sort of fascination with Miss Davies or you wouldn’t have paid such a high price for her. My question is, how much more would you be willing to pay to ensure her safety?” She paused. “Or that of her dear brother?” She blinked in a coquettish way. “You know how much he means to her, don’t you?”

He grinned tightly. “How is Flavian doing these days?”

“Quite well.” She nodded. “I am doing my best to turn him into an exceptional lover, but I fear we have a long way to go. He is so immature.” She clucked her tongue and moved closer to him. “Not like us, Mr. Porter. We have both experienced much of the world. I’m sure I am making myself clear enough now.”

He lifted a brow. “Indeed. However, I have heard that your grand following has dwindled recently, most notably after the release of your memoirs.”

She nearly lost her composure. However, she managed to keep herself together when she countered with, “Make no mistake. I am more than capable of gaining what I want thanks to your kind consideration during the auction. If need be, I will use it all to rip you to shreds to gain what I want.”

Drake narrowed his gaze, because he knew the woman finally spoke the truth. When desperation entered the fray, it was proof there was nothing left to lose. For Miss Wilson, she had reached that point, whereas Drake had suddenly found something he didn’t want to give up just yet.

He ground out the cheroot beneath his heel. “Name your price.”

She smiled brilliantly. “I do enjoy a profitable discussion.” She appeared to think for a moment but Drake knew it was all a ruse. He guaranteed that she had already thought of a sum the moment the auction had ended. “Shall we say another five thousand pounds?”

Drake didn’t bat an eyelash. He had the blunt to cover it. What he didn’t care for was her eagerness to take it off of his hands when he’d done everything to gain his wealth—by whatever means necessary.

Apparently, he wouldn’t be turning over a new leaf just yet.

“I admit that you are bold.”

“I can be much more,” she returned coyly, but Drake wasn’t interested in anything else she might have to offer. He just wanted to be rid of her. For good.

“I’ll pass,” he said flatly.

She frowned but didn’t press the issue. Instead, she returned to the previous topic. “Once I have the funds in my possession, I can promise that both Miss Davies and her brother are free of any further obligation to me. I might even move to Paris to live out the rest of my days.”

He snorted. “Are you sure you wouldn’t like to do that now?”

She lifted a brow. “I will send word when I’m ready for the funds. Don’t disappoint me, Mr. Porter. I can be a strong ally—or a worthy adversary. It’s up to you which one you choose.”

With her parting words hanging in the air, she spun around and headed into the darkness.

Drake watched until she was lost to the night and then he lit another cheroot.

It appeared he would be making one more stop.

* * *

Fleur wasn’t sure what woke her, but she sat up in bed with her heart pounding in her chest. Struggling to catch her breath, she threw back the covers and stood.

Walking over to the window, she opened the pane and inhaled large gulps of the slight breeze that wafted inside the room. Although the days were still warm, the nights were starting to become cooler with the dawning autumn. Fleur had always loved the slight temperatures that the waning summer had brought to England. As she looked up at the dark sky, it showed the signs of moving storm clouds overhead. She had to appreciate the fresh scent that a new rain would bring. It cleansed all of the

chimneys from their soot and the streets from the various refuse. It made everything new again.

She wished it might do the same for her. If only she could turn back the hands of time and keep her brother from going to that pub and exchanging hands with Mr. Porter none of this nightmare would have ever occurred. She would be back in Greenwich with Flavian and enjoying her students and happily oblivious to Harriette Wilson and the anger she had sent toward her brother before they were parted.

She feared for what he might be subjected to under the roof of such a woman. Fleur had been naïve to believe she might have held a charitable nature. The sting of her betrayal still felt heavy on Fleur's chest. But she would forgive her all of her transgressions if Harriette would only look after her brother to ensure he didn't get into trouble. Fleur knew she had allowed him too many freedoms but she was afraid that he might leave her and then she wouldn't have anyone. She would be truly alone.

His faults could be laid at her feet and she would admit to every single one of them. They weren't in this mess because of her brother. They were here because of her. It had been Fleur's decision to flee in the middle of the night and go to London to escape Mr. Porter. It wasn't that she had been that terrified of what he might do, but rather how he had made her feel. She wanted to fall down into the depths of hell with him and that scared her more than words could say.

Fleur didn't know how long she stood there and allowed the cool night air to envelop her, but as she was starting to close the window and go back to bed to try to get some sleep, she glanced down at the street and gasped. Standing and observing with the lit tip of a cheroot as the only light to be had, other than the gas lamp flickering softly, was the object of her fascination. Mr. Porter was looking up at her window, as if he could see her silhouette from the other side of the curtain.

Acting on impulse, she quickly slammed the frame of the window down and rushed

back to the bed. She shivered, although she couldn't say if it was from fear—or something else entirely.

Squeezing her eyes tightly shut, she ordered herself to go to sleep, but when she heard the sound of footfalls outside of the chamber, she froze. Would he continue on, or would he dare to come in? If he had noticed her, he would know that she was awake.

Her heart pounded in her ears as she waited for his next move.

The seconds ticked with endless torture until finally, he moved away from the door. She released a breath, but was it from relief or disappointment? It would almost be better if he would take her to his bed rather than endure this torment of wondering if or when he might decide to collect on his payment.

Unfortunately, she would never know the answers to those questions.

* * *

Light rain was pelting her window the next time Fleur opened her eyes. Her room held a soft glow, but it wasn't due to the sun that was enveloped by the clouds she'd witnessed the night before. Instead, there was a cheery fire in the grate.

And that wasn't all.

A silver dining service sat on top of the dressing table.

That caused Fleur to sit up.

Climbing out of bed, she padded over to the offering and lifted the lid to see an enticing array of delights awaiting her. Eggs, ham, fruit, scones—there was enough to

tempt every pallet and she eagerly dove in. There was a pot of tea, still warm, and she poured herself a restorative cup. She sighed in delight and wondered if Mr. Porter had followed through on his promise of a cook.

She glanced toward the wardrobe and wondered if perhaps...

Fleur walked over to the large piece of furniture and opened it to reveal?—

There was nothing inside.

Her heart sank slightly but at least she had something to keep her stomach from growling.

A light knock at the door caused Fleur to spin around. She waited for Mr. Porter to stride inside with his usual commanding air, but when there was nothing but another light knock, she called out to enter.

Fleur was surprised when a young girl dressed as a maid stood over the threshold and bobbed a light curtsy. “Good morning, miss. I thought you would like to know that the modiste is here to take your measurements.”

It took a moment for Fleur’s brain to catch up to what was happening. She closed her mouth, knowing it had fallen open and said, “Pardon me, but—who are you?”

The girl giggled. “Beg your pardon, miss. My name is Erin. I am here to serve as your maid.”

“I see...” Fleur cleared her throat. “Is there anyone else here?”

“Oh, yes!” The girl’s face broke out into a wide grin. “There is Mrs. Bright, the cook and Mrs. Honeywell, the housekeeper. Not to mention the excitement from the new

furnishings and?—”

That was when Fleur’s ears picked up the commotion going on beyond the door. “New furnishings?” She knew she was sounding as though she had escaped from Bedlam, but Fleur couldn’t fathom that Mr. Porter would allow all of these people intruding on his personal solitude, traipsing in and out of a house that he had not dared to turn into any semblance of a home. However, all of that seemed to be changing today.

And she could feel her cheeks warm, because she knew she was the reason for it all.

She hugged herself. “Is Mr. Porter in?”

Erin bobbed her head. “He’s in his study.”

With an acknowledging incline of her head, Fleur started to head for the door, but before she could make her escape, Erin said, “I was told that you were to stay in your chamber until the modiste arrived and you could be properly attired,” Erin noted.

Fleur had to wonder exactly what the maid knew. Crossing her arms, Fleur asked, “Do you know the... situation between Mr. Porter and myself?”

“I don’t ask questions, miss,” the maid said promptly. “I am the sole of prudence should anyone ask it of me. I have never been prone to gossip. I actually abhor it.”

“And the rest of the staff?” Fleur prompted. “Are they the same?”

“Indeed. The master was very clear when he came to the agency personally this morning. He needed immediate help and would pay well if discretion and punctuality were strong virtues.”

“I see.” Fleur was astonished that Mr. Porter had managed to put together a modest, but functioning staff in a matter of hours but she supposed money spoke volumes.

Their conversation was cut short by the arrival of a buxom woman wearing the finest fashion and a look that promised no nonsense. She breezed into the room with two other women on her heels and made a complete circle around Fleur, muttering to herself as she did so. “You will be a diamond when I am finished with you,” she clucked firmly.

Fleur was about to tell her that she didn’t want to be anything more than simply dressed but the woman was already barking out orders to her assistants and so she fell silent and allowed herself to be poked and prodded for the next two hours.

Once the modiste was finished, she handed a gown to the maid. “Your master was quite accurate of his description of his lady. This should fit her like a new glove.” She turned to face Fleur. “My ladies will work all day and night just for you. Your fabulous wardrobe will be ready for you first thing tomorrow.”

“That’s not necessary. I’m more than happy to wait?—”

“No,” the modiste waved a hand. “Mr. Porter was most insistent that you were properly dressed with the finest items from my shop. And he has paid me handsomely to see it done.”

She was out the door in the same whirlwind manner in which she’d entered. It was enough to make Fleur’s head spin.

“Would you like to get dressed?” Erin held up the ivory dress with an expectant look, as if Fleur couldn’t wait to get outfitted in the satin garment.

Instead, Fleur was eager to speak to Mr. Porter. When she had asked for gowns, she

hadn't intended for him to engage in the expensive services of a personal modiste to do it.

Unless this was his way of starting their affair.

She swallowed nervously, not sure if she was prepared to follow through with her commitment but knowing she had no choice if she wanted to remain in his good graces. In that regard, she would willingly oblige, because something told her it wasn't wise to be on Mr. Porter's bad side.

Fleur was patient as Erin styled her hair into a becoming chignon and assisted her into her new gown and undergarments that had also been provided. By the time she was laced into the corset and donned the petticoats and silk stockings, Fleur donned her old boots. It made her feel ridiculous to have such finery intertwined with her worn, scuffed shoes, but it was enough of a contrast that it gave her the courage to head downstairs to confront Mr. Porter in his study.

The door was open, so she walked inside. He had his cap on and was bent over a ledger, scribbling on the page. He seemed intent on his task but when he heard her enter, he glanced up and looked her up and down. "We shall outfit you in shoes and visit the millinery once the rest of your gowns arrive." He promptly went back to his ledger, as if she were dismissed.

Stalking to the desk, she set both of her palms on top. "When I asked to be outfitted properly, I didn't mean to empty London of all their material. A few simple dresses were perfectly fine so I didn't have to keep wearing that shirt."

His gaze flicked up at her, the silver piercing as always. "You find fault with your new wardrobe?"

She sighed. "I don't want to seem ungrateful but surely you can see it is too much. I

am not a member of the ton , and I find it unnecessary to dress in such high fashion. I'm not even part of the demimonde ." She straightened. "At this point, I'm not a courtesan. I am just a common Englishwoman."

He was silent for a moment, and then he returned his pen to the inkwell. Leaning back in his chair, he set his arms on either side. To the casual onlooker, he appeared perfectly at ease, but Fleur could feel the tension coiled up inside of him because it was always present—like a snake preparing to strike. "You are anything but common, Miss Davies, and perhaps it was my choice to attire you thus because it pleases me to see you outfitted like a duchess."

"But why? I am nothing to you but a prize you won, the sister of the man who owes you a large debt."

His nostrils flared slightly. "If you believe that, Miss Davies, you aren't as perceptive as I originally believed."

* * *

Drake wasn't in the habit of telling anyone how he felt, but surely, she could see that she was more than just a means to an end, more than an object of desire, but something else he couldn't dare understand. All he knew was that he wanted to keep her safe, and after his second meeting last night, those wheels had already been set into motion. Amos's son, Devon, would soon be part of his household, not just to keep an eye on Miss Davies when Drake wasn't around but to ensure that the rest of his staff were innocent of any foul deeds.

It was strange to have so many people under his roof. For years he'd always preferred his privacy and solitude. However, he no longer had his own comfort to oversee. Until he parted ways with Miss Davies, he had to make some adjustments. He might not have foreseen them at the time he had attended that auction, but then, he had

attended because of this absurd fascination he had with her.

“What is the purpose of this finery if I’m to be confined inside this house?”

His attention returned to the matter at hand. He got to his feet and rounded the desk. He was impressed that she stood her ground and didn’t shy away from him like so many others did. Not only did his reputation precede him but he had intimidation down to an art. He’d spent years perfecting the persona that he portrayed to the world. There were times he wasn’t sure he could ever be the man he once was again.

He decided it was better that way. Mr. Porter was feared and respected. Both were qualities that had served him well in this life.

“I have been thinking that we might attend some gatherings together.”

Her green eyes narrowed slightly and she tilted her black head slightly. She made such a charming picture that he nearly acted on his lustful impulses and dragged her into his arms for a passionate kiss. “What sort of gatherings? If it is another boxing match, I’m quite content to remain here.”

“Not quite,” he smirked. “I was thinking more along the lines of the opera. And perhaps Vauxhall.”

She blinked. “You make it sound as though we are embarking on a courtship.”

He mirrored her pose by tilting his head. “I hadn’t considered it in those terms but consider it however you prefer. You wanted a chance to experience something other than the same four walls. I’m giving you that opportunity.”

She shook her head in obvious bewilderment. “I don’t understand why you would go to so much trouble when you have already won my body.”

Reaching out a hand, he grasped her chin lightly with his thumb and forefinger. “It isn’t just your body I intend to own. But your very soul.”

He saw her swallow. “You sound as if you are the devil preparing to drag me to hell.”

“I have been called as much,” he murmured, his head dipping toward her lips. “But I can assure you that you would find nothing but paradise in my arms.”

He held her gaze captive, his innermost thoughts temporarily revealed. For an endless span of time they didn’t speak, just looked into each other’s eyes, trying to ascertain what it was they wanted from this arrangement. Considering the awareness that swirled around them, it was obvious that they were both in agreement when it came to desire. Drake had no doubt that they would have a satisfying sexual relationship, but once he took that step, what then? He had dared to allow another woman the power over him and he’d nearly perished because of it. Although something told him that Miss Davies was different than her predecessor, he wasn’t going to rush into anything blindly, where he would be betrayed again.

One mistake was quite enough.

He didn’t wish to make another.

CHAPTER 10

In anticipation of his kiss, Fleur's lids fluttered closed and she held her breath. She didn't know why she was so desperate for this embrace. Perhaps it was because of the dark promises that he offered her. Or that she was just as desperate for an ally in this sordid world. She wanted someone that she could trust, that she could dare to love.

But was that something she could even hope to gain from Mr. Porter?

Was it something she actually wanted from him?

He moved away and her frustration rose to the forefront. It caused her to lash out at him. "You offer paradise, and yet, you only tempt me with the prospect, dangling it in front of me but never following through."

His eyes flashed molten silver as he stepped back, so close that she could feel the heat emanating from his body and the tempest in his stare. "Do you really want to traverse this path, Miss Davies? Once you do, there is no turning back. Your virtue cannot be replaced and scandal is sure to follow."

Fleur's eyes filled with moisture until his face turned blurry. Angry at herself, she was the one to spin away from him. Hugging herself, she spat, "What does it matter any longer? What good is virtue if you don't have anyone special to share it with? It's not as if I had any suitors tearing down my door. I gave up everything—for Flavian, and now he can't even rescue me." She ended on a harsh sob, her heart breaking as she allowed herself to face the truth. If her brother was as honorable as she had tried to imagine he could be, he would have found some way for them to survive instead of

allowing her to take all of their burdens on her shoulders. Her brother was the one person upon whom she believed she could always rely, but after years of sacrifice and letting time pass her by, he couldn't be bothered to leave Harriette's side.

She wanted to believe that Harriette was some sort of monster who had trapped him in her townhouse, but Fleur knew that wasn't true. There was no dungeon in that townhouse, no evil spell that had been cast upon him. She worried for him, but she wondered if he was sparing a single thought for her. When she'd left for the auction, she had waited for him to forbid her to go, to promise that they would find some other way, but he had allowed it all, while he brooded about his shortcomings.

She remembered the last words he'd spoken to her, that some people weren't worth redemption. It had cut her to the quick then, and it did the same now. She didn't know how she'd allowed herself to fail him. She realized that he'd spoken the truth when he had called her a martyr for taking the fall for both of them.

Fleur put a fist to her chest, wondering if her very heart was breaking in half. The amount of guilt that she was carrying around inside of her was almost unbearable. It was bad enough that she blamed herself for Flavian's faults, but after she had understood who had won the auction, she realized that she hadn't been despairing of becoming a courtesan at all. She might have railed against it at first, mainly for her virtue's sake, but from the first moment she'd met Mr. Porter in Greenwich, she had been intrigued. Her brother might believe that she had willingly given up everything when they had parted on sour terms, but Flavian didn't know that she was willing—almost eager—to enact her new role with Mr. Porter. It felt like the worst sort of betrayal and she had no one to blame—but herself.

She suddenly felt as though the walls were closing in all around her. She couldn't take a full breath and her hands were starting to shake. "I need to get out of here," she whispered, and rushed for the door. Escape was within her grasp, and if she hoped to tell Flavian she was sorry for everything, she had to make an attempt to reach him.

She ran past the surprised housekeeper and threw open the front door. She flew down the steps and headed for Harriette Wilson's house. Everything disappeared in a blur as she focused on her goal. She swiped at her face, the tears that were still flowing and making it difficult to see.

Other than when her parents had died, had Fleur given in to the impulse to cry. There were many times she came close to losing her composure, wondering how she was going to make it, but Flavian had always managed to keep her strong and steady. Without his calm assurance, and her sole purpose for working so hard, what did she have left?

She gathered her skirts and sprinted up the stone steps of the courtesan's residence, the place she had come to for refuge only a few days before, and pounded her fist on the door, ignoring the brass knocker completely.

Her summons was answered in short order, the butler looking as though she had gone mad. Perhaps she had. She certainly didn't feel in control of anything anymore and it was a helpless feeling. "I need to speak with my brother," she urged.

He lifted his chin a notch. "I am afraid he's out at the moment."

He started to shut the door but she wedged her foot inside. "Then I will wait." She shoved her way inside and ignored the shocked look from the servant which proved that he was lying. Rushing around the lower rooms, she called out his name. "Flavian!"

Everywhere she looked was empty, so she headed for the second floor. The butler was saying something behind her, but his words didn't register as she started to inspect every room.

Her heart lodged in her throat, fearing that he was truly gone.

But then she tried one last door.

She skittered to a halt when she spied her brother in a compromising position—with Harriette.

Hearing the commotion behind her, Fleur started to back away, but it was too late. Her presence had been noted. Without bothering to cover her nakedness, Harriette's chest was in full view as she offered a look of surprise. It was soon replaced with a sly smile. "Why, Miss Davies. We weren't expecting company."

"Fleur?" Her twin had seemed to come to his senses. He blinked at her. "What are you doing here?"

Her mouth opened but no sound emerged. What could she say? That she had expected something different from him? That perhaps he might have actually been concerned for her welfare, rather than enjoying himself as Miss Wilson's current paramour? He certainly wasn't being mistreated or suffering in the least.

She met his gaze and expected guilt or— something , but nothing passed over his features save a flash of annoyance.

"Goodbye, Flavian."

It killed her to do it, to leave him behind, knowing that he was going to make the same mistakes, but she could no longer help him. He would have to stand on his own and face the consequences of his actions. She was done fighting his battles. She had her own life to contend with.

With a sense of defeat, Fleur returned to the first floor. She started for the door and when she glanced up, she saw the irritated glare from the butler. But more than that, Mr. Porter was standing in the frame, his cap hanging low over his forehead. He

didn't move, but seemed content waiting for her to approach him.

"I had to see—" Fleur's voice broke and she swallowed hard. "I needed to know—to say—" Heaven help her, she couldn't seem to string a coherent sentence together. Gathering her strength, she clenched her fists and lifted her chin slightly. "Take me home."

Without a word, Mr. Porter turned and together, they headed for his townhouse.

* * *

When they returned, Drake led Miss Davies to her room. There he ensured that the cook made something that would help her sleep. She had been through an emotional strain and she needed proper rest. She had endured a lot in the past few days, and he certainly hadn't helped to ease her transition. In one night, she had lost everything and he should have been a bit more sensitive to that. Sometimes, he forgot that not everyone was as jaded as he was, able to withstand the turmoil that life continued to toss in his direction. The last thing he wanted was to wipe that beautiful smile off of her face. There were times he wondered if she was the last bit of hope in his miserable existence.

As she obediently drank the tincture that the cook had brought, Drake struggled to keep his hands to himself. He wanted to brush the slight strands of hair away from her forehead. Kiss her on the cheek and murmur that everything was going to be all right. But it wasn't something he could promise, so he refrained. He didn't act on the other temptations either, because he couldn't allow himself to get too close. There were too many things he still didn't know about her and he had learned to be guarded. His heart seldom made an appearance except to keep the blood pumping through the rest of his body. He wondered, at times, if that blasted organ had turned black and cold as he didn't feel much of anything anymore.

Except when he looked upon her face.

Fleur .

He clenched his jaw as he sat on the edge of the bed. He would make sure she was properly settled before he left. He owed her that much.

It didn't take long before the drink started to take effect, as her eyes began to grow heavy. "How are you?" he asked softly, although he couldn't quite rid his words of the gruff undertone that he had adopted over the years.

"Better." She sighed heavily. She put a hand to her forehead. "I'm sorry for such a... terrible outburst. I assure you that I never act that way. I am generally much more... composed. I don't know what came over me."

Grief. Loss. Despair. Drake knew them all because he had suffered from the same. Instead, he said, "There is nothing to apologize for."

Her focus locked on him. "But surely you must think I'm mad."

He offered a slight curve of his lips. "We all go mad sometimes."

"Have you?"

All my life. "On occasion."

"How do you... recover?"

I hope you can answer that question. "I get up every day and go to bed every night." Feeling more vulnerable than he would like, he got up and walked over to the window. Glancing outside at the brilliant day, he adjusted his attention back to her.

“But I don’t lament what is already past. Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow is not promised. All we have is this moment.”

“That’s very poetic,” she murmured, and he could hear the weary tone in her voice.

If there was one thing Drake had never called himself, it was a poet. But he supposed there was a certain melancholy prose to his answer. He prayed that didn’t mean he was getting soft. He would never survive if so.

He cleared his throat and walked over to the door. “Get some rest. We will speak again when you wake.”

She mumbled something incoherent and he could tell the herbs were starting to take effect.

Unsettled, Drake returned to his study, intent on finishing his accounts, but the moment he walked over the threshold, he was struck with a sense of panic the likes he hadn’t suffered for many years. When he was young, abandoned on the streets of London, these attacks had occurred with more frequency, but as he’d matured and learned the hardships in life, it had molded him into the man he was today.

He decided that watching Fleur struggle with her own trials today, it had sparked something within him that he thought had long been buried. At least, he had tried to smother that part of his past with all of his transgressions. He had done terrible, likely unforgiveable things, to get where he was now and although he should be apologetic for most of them, he found that portion of his conscience had withered away. But the avenues of his brain that were still connected to that scared child were apparently still evident.

He walked over to the cabinet that housed his brandy and withdrew the decanter. He didn’t like to drink often because it dulled his wits and he generally needed them at a

moment's notice. But not tonight. Not now. He wouldn't allow any interruptions.

Removing the stopper, he took several long gulps. It was nearly empty by the time his hands had finally ceased shaking and his senses were gratefully dulled once more.

Drake took off his cap and threw it on top of the desk as he sank into the chair and momentarily closed his eyes. He was relieved that Fleur couldn't see him in such a state of dishabille. He never wanted anyone to see the boy that was scared of his own shadow.

He wanted that boy to stay dead.

He was better off for it.

* * *

Slowly, Fleur opened her eyes as consciousness began to return. For a moment, she was disoriented, uncertain where she was, but as memory came flooding back, she wanted to hide beneath the covers of her bed and never show her face again. It was cowardly of her to consider such actions but she would rather disappear forever than face the stern regard of Mr. Porter again.

Drake.

She didn't allow herself to think of him in such intimate terms, because it was best if there was a divide between them. They could share mutual pleasure without going any further. Not only did she know he would want it that way but it would be safer for her if she did the same. He offered her nothing but heartbreak if her emotions ever became involved. She wasn't sure she could ever extend the offer of something as simple as friendship. That would mean caring and she doubted the sentiment would be reciprocated.

And yet...

He had taken care of her in a dire time of need, when the pressure had become too much to bear and she'd crumbled beneath the weight of it all. It was temporary insanity, a momentary weakness. It wouldn't happen again.

It couldn't.

Fleur sat up in bed. She was glad to see that she was still fully dressed in the ivory gown. It had lost some of its luster when she'd first donned it but an attack of hysteria would upset most anyone.

Shoring up her courage, she went downstairs to brave the lion in his den.

He wasn't in the study.

Curious, she glanced in a few other rooms but Drake was nowhere to be found.

She was starting to head for the downstairs kitchen when she spied a footman walking toward her. Except it wasn't an ordinary man. This one had dark skin and a patch over part of his face, leaving one perfectly blue eye to glance out at the world. Drake's cohort was just as lean and muscled as she recalled, and his focus was direct and knowing as well.

"Amos, is it not?" she greeted with an uncertain smile as he paused in front of her.

He flashed a white smile. "You have a good memory, Miss Davies."

Thinking that he would surely know where Drake had gone, she asked, "Have you seen Mr. Porter? I was hoping to speak with him."

He sent a thumb in the direction of the dining room. “He was just finishing his lunch.”

She mumbled her thanks and scurried past him. As she walked inside the dining room, she was surprised to find a mahogany table and six chairs taking up the middle of the room. There was little else to recommend the space, but it was an improvement to the empty space before. It was the first thing to catch her attention.

“This is new,” she noted as she trailed a hand along the shiny wood.

“Yes.”

She looked up at the curt reply to find Drake standing by the mantel. She didn’t know if it was possible, or perhaps she was still feeling the effects of the tincture she had drunk, but he looked more intimidating than usual. That intent gaze nearly took her breath. “I saw Amos,” she said, for lack of her brain trying to remember what she had sought him out for.

“He’s here to fill in as a footman.”

This surprised her. “I didn’t realize he adopted so many roles to his personality.”

Some of his tight demeanor softened slightly. “He is doing it as a favor to me.”

“Why?”

He tilted his head to the side. “Did you sleep well?”

It was obvious he had evaded the question. It concerned her but she didn’t want to press the issue and put him in a foul mood. “As good as can be expected.” She took a restorative breath. “About earlier?—”

He waved a dismissive hand and pushed away from the mantel. “There’s no need. It’s forgotten.” He glanced at the table. “Order whatever you want to eat. The cook is under instruction to treat you as she would myself.”

He started for the door.

“You’re not staying?”

He hesitated, saying over his shoulder. “I will return later on this evening to escort you to the opera. Unless you have changed your mind?”

“No. That sounds... lovely.” And it wasn’t just because she was getting to do something exciting, but because she would be with him.

He nodded his head and left as Fleur sat down to dine alone.

* * *

“You didn’t tell her?”

Drake glared at Amos. “It’s best if she doesn’t know. It would only upset her more.”

They were on their way to make further arrangements in case they had to put their alternate plan into motion. He hoped it didn’t come to that, but he didn’t put anything past Miss Wilson and her desire to live as she’d always intended. She was already using Flavian as her pawn but it didn’t appear that Fleur’s brother minded in the least.

He clenched his jaw, angry that the man didn’t have the spine it took to stand up for what was right. He surely knew how his sister had been treated, and yet, he remained at the courtesan’s bedside like an obedient dog.

“You don’t believe it will upset her if she finds out you were privy to the lady’s schemes?”

“But I’m not,” Drake pointed out firmly. “I am merely making preparations to remove Flavian before she can squeeze any more funds from me.”

“And you believe that doesn’t count as concealing the truth.” The other man snorted, his blue eye revealed narrowing slightly. “All this time I thought you were keen on women but you don’t know much if you believe your paramour will take this information lightly. You need to tell her before she finds out by some other means and you return to being the cruel villain who separated her from her blood.”

Drake didn’t reply. He knew that Amos spoke logically but Drake didn’t need Fleur getting involved in something any more dangerous than necessary. If she should uncover Harriette’s motives, she might try to rescue Flavian on her own. God only knew what would happen should that come to pass. One of the things he admired about Fleur was her determination and her courage but Miss Wilson was not like a disgruntled patron Fleur might have encountered at Greenwich. She knew nothing of the tactics that desperate women in Harriette’s situation would do to secure their position within society, a position that had previously been stripped away.

Silence continued to remain supreme as Drake and Amos made their way to the East End of London. These were the streets that they were familiar with. They knew every stench filled alleyway, every dark and dirty lodging house, shop, and pub, as well as everything in between that most everyone else tried to ignore. Whitechapel was the breeding ground for crime, where a man could find himself at the mercy of a pickpocket and the barrel of a pistol in the same night. It was filled with the lowest of humanity, those that had fallen on hard times and had nothing left to lose.

People like Drake had once been. He didn’t have to look into the hollow, sunken eyes of the boys in their torn rags as they slept against the side of a roughhewn building.

He had been there many times. He could still remember the feel of the dagger handle in his grasp as he jerked awake with the slightest noise, wondering if he was about to breathe his last.

He despised coming back here but he knew these were the men he could count on. With a few coins, he could buy loyalty for a brief time. However, once the job was complete, he might find himself mugged and left for dead. It was the way of the world he knew. But he could also rub elbows with a duke and duchess in the midst of a ballroom if the occasion warranted it. He'd made sure to learn it all.

He led the way into the Crown and Sceptre that had already awakened for the evening. Drink was flowing freely, the loud guffaws from men already well into their cups seated around the center of the bar.

Drake ignored it all as he headed for the door at the rear of the pub. There was a man pissing out the back door but Drake paid him no heed. He was there to speak to someone in particular. Although he wasn't a man he could trust as well as Amos, he was a man who spoke and caused others to listen.

He rapped sharply on the wood four times in quick succession. There was a pause and then the wood flew open and Drake met the stone-faced expression of the gang leader's right hand. He had light hair that was plastered to his head, a gap-toothed grin and eyes that could pierce any soul. "Porter," he said with a snarl. It wasn't a polite greeting that he might have received in a ballroom but the closest he would get to approval to speak to the man in charge.

Drake started to move forward, but when Amos would have done the same, his way was blocked. "Your kind aren't allowed."

That was a slight that Drake had never stood for. He put his face directly in the other man's sight and said in a low growl, "Amos is with me." He waited for an altercation,

but a bored voice spoke up from the back.

“Stop being an ass, Reynolds. Let them both through.”

Reynolds stepped back with a snort that promised trouble but he did as he was instructed. As Drake and Amos moved further into the room, they encountered the man they sought. The clean shaven, well dressed, dark-haired gentleman looked as if he would be better suited in the middle of a Parliament hearing rather than behind the scarred desk that held more secrets of Whitechapel than Drake wanted to learn. Although he probably already knew most of them, Avalon had been chosen as the keeper of every misdeed that went on in Whitechapel. It was rumored that he had a list of offenders and their respected grievances, as well as the proof to back it all up, which is why he was more feared than the Runners who dared to patrol these streets.

Adopting a casual pose, Avalon clasped his hands together and regarded Drake as cordially as if they were about to have tea. “I heard you were going to be coming by to see me.”

“Did you?” Drake drawled, although he wasn’t surprised. The man had an uncanny ability to know information before it was ever suggested. It was another asset that made him so revered in the underground.

“You know an audience with me will cost you dear, as well as any assistance I might deign to give, since I prefer to be a neutral party in all matters, although I am somewhat empathetic to your plight.” He lifted a brow. “I heard your lady was quite comely. I would be keen to keep hold of such a prize myself. Perhaps you might introduce us?”

Drake wanted nothing less but he knew in order to gain this man’s assistance, as well as the men he had at his disposal at the snap of a finger, he had to play nice. “We will be at the opera tonight.”

His smile grew to showcase even white teeth. “Then I shall anticipate the curtain rising.”

CHAPTER 11

Fleur should have been thrilled by the parade of fashionable dresses that were brought through the bedchamber and crowded into the massive wardrobe. There were surely more gowns than she could ever hope to wear but she thanked the modiste on Mr. Porter's behalf and stared at the array of color on display.

She couldn't help but wonder what she was going to be trading to earn such a vast array of clothes, but then she remembered that it no longer mattered. Her brother was surely lost to her, engaging in such frivolous activities with the woman who had quite literally sold Fleur's virtue for her own gain.

Fleur tried to be thankful that her brother wasn't forced to live on the streets or worse. At least he had a place to sleep and he didn't seem to be hurting. Instead, he appeared to be flourishing without giving her a second thought.

Renewed anger flowed through her veins as she brought back all of the sacrifices and daring exploits she'd done on his behalf. She believed that he might have felt the same obligations but apparently that wasn't the case. Perhaps he was right and he was without redemption. Of course, she would never believe it was so. She had never given up the hope that anyone could recover their dark soul—even Drake.

She closed her eyes and recounted the kisses they had shared, and the earth shattering feeling he'd wrought out of her in the middle of the foyer. Never in her life had she wanted to toss away her virtue as much as she did now. It wasn't likely that she would ever make a proper match, especially as each passing day would draw her reputation closer to ruin. After a public display like the opera, it would likely be the

last attempt she might have had to recover some part of her innocence but it was fading away into oblivion and she suddenly wasn't inclined to mind.

So many times she imagined Drake's hands on her body, gently caressing her skin. She wanted him to kiss her, to let her heart pound with anticipation that more would follow. She wanted to feel his hot skin against her palms, to stand in front of him, fully naked, and let him look his fill. She wanted to see the fiery hunger in his gaze as he swept her into his arms and carried her to the bed where they were finally joined together as one.

Fleur's breath expelled on a shudder. As she walked over to the wardrobe, she closed her eyes and allowed her fingers to move among the soft silk and muslin until her breath caught. She opened her eyes and knew that was the dress she would wear that evening.

Removing it, she held up the gown next to her. It was a deep, rich silver that caught the light from the candles and shimmered with a brilliant hue. It was the perfect complement to her black hair and green eyes and the exact shade of his gaze. If there was anything that would surely capture Drake's attention, it would be this dress. By this evening, she planned for him to be slipping it off of her shoulders and laving a path down her spine with his tongue.

She rang for Erin to help her dress, eager for the night to begin.

By the time she had donned the gown and her hair was pinned into an elegant style, the housekeeper arrived to let her know that Drake had returned and was waiting for her downstairs.

With a steadying breath, Fleur left the chamber and began her descent.

From the moment she came into view, Drake's focus was riveted on her. His attention

never once wavered until the point she stood directly in front of him. She waited for him to say something but instead, he inclined his head and turned to open the door for her. She should have been grateful for the chivalrous maneuver when she knew he wasn't inclined toward such behavior. However, she was disheartened when she didn't receive a single compliment. But it wasn't as though they were courting. He didn't have to woo her, did he? He had already paid for the convenience of her time; had bought the gown she now wore.

Nevertheless, she had her pride and as the hackney stopped at Drury Lane, she stepped to the ground with the footman's assistance and smiled in her most charming and warm manner. She was rewarded with a surprised blink from the young man's direction and a slight coloring on his cheeks that she found adorable more than seductive.

Before she could climb the steps, Drake grasped her elbow and bent down to whisper in her ear with that smooth, velvety timbre. "What are you playing at?"

Her heart started to pound, but not with fear. She rather wished it was, because then she wouldn't be so drawn to him. "Is it wrong to be kind?" she countered innocently.

He saw through her ploy. "If you have something to say to me, perhaps you should do so rather than lead on a man who would be unable to protect you."

With that, he released her and started forward. Annoyed at his high-handed behavior, Fleur decided that if he wanted to act that way, she would show him how coquettish she could truly be.

Fleur thought they would be headed for the main auditorium but to her surprise, they went toward one of the personal boxes directly in the center that faced the stage. "You have quite an impressive repertoire at your disposal, Mr. Porter," she murmured. "First your many houses about the city and now the best viewing box to

be had at the most revered theatre in London.”

He paused before the curtain that led into the interior. “Alas, I cannot lay claim to this particular box. Mine is further down the row. We shall be joining a fellow acquaintance who is eager to meet you.”

Disappointment immediately shot down her spine. Fleur had been hoping it might be just the two of them for this evening’s entertainment. “When were you going to tell me?”

“I just did,” he returned curtly as he parted the curtain and held it open for her.

She glared at him as she passed but when her attention was soon diverted by a handsome devil-may-care of a gentleman with black hair and equally dark eyes rising from his seat to greet them, she decided that she could use this opportunity to her advantage.

The stranger’s eyes flickered to Mr. Porter before lighting on her. “You must be the Miss Davies I’ve heard so much about.” Fleur smiled broadly and extended her hand. “The pleasure is mine, domine carissime .”

Recognition immediately lit his gaze as he bent over and kissed her gloved knuckles. “Latin,” he murmured. “She is beautiful and intelligent. I may not allow her to return to you.”

Fleur’s stomach fluttered when he spoke, because although he directed his statement to Drake, he never stopped looking at her. It didn’t take her long to ascertain that he was an incomparable charmer.

He was perfect.

“That doesn’t seem very sporting. You know my name but I have yet to learn yours.”

He clucked his tongue in a manner of chastisement at Drake, and then the stranger waved a hand toward the front of the box—directly next to where he had been sitting, leaving Mr. Porter to take a seat on the other side of their host and away from Fleur.

She smiled broadly, because she couldn’t have planned things more perfectly. If Drake cared for her at all, tonight would force him to prove his devotion. She was tired of waiting for him to come to her. She still wanted to fulfill some sort of purpose—and forget everything she had failed to succeed for her and Flavian.

“You can call me Avalon,” he noted after they had settled. A quick glance at Drake proved that he didn’t care for this situation at all, but other than the muscle that flexed in his jaw, he kept his attention forward and all but ignored their interaction.

“Avalon... Is that a family name?” she asked softly.

Avalon lifted a brow. “You might say it’s something of a pen name.”

“How mysterious,” she purred. She reached out and laid her palm gently on his chest. “I imagine your closet is riddled with skeletons.”

He chuckled as he put his hand over hers. “You have no idea.” He slowly removed her hand but rather than cast her aside, he kept it within his grasp, as if he was laying claim to her, just as he’d promised.

Still, Drake didn’t appear to notice.

Fleur withheld a sigh. She was starting to despair that they would ever fulfill their personal commitment, especially if he didn’t care that another man was flirting with her. Unlike the harmless footman that he had acted willing to toss under the carriage

wheels because of her kindness.

Tossing her head as the opera began to start, Fleur told herself that she wasn't going to worry about Mr. Porter and his moodiness any longer. She had a handsome man beside her that hung on her every word and that was enough to ease the banishment she felt in her heart.

* * *

If Drake grasped the edge of the seat any tighter, he was sure it would snap in his bare hand. He hadn't liked the innuendo in Avalon's eyes from the moment Fleur had walked into that box, but if he wanted the protection of the underground that he would provide, he had to play by the rules. Jealousy was not one of them. Although Drake had no doubt that they would be evenly matched in a physical altercation, he didn't care to have the thunder from his gang raining down upon him should things turn sour. He was trying to turn over a new leaf by straying away from trouble, not actively engaging in it.

Especially when it came to Fleur.

He knew what she was doing. It had been obvious from the moment she'd offered that poor footman more than a crumb of her acknowledgment. The reason, he could only surmise, but he knew it had something to do with his lax demeanor toward her. She was confused and the last thing he wanted to do was add to her despondent spirit. She had lost enough. He was trying to give her control over something in her life but it appeared her virtue was not something she cared to protect. The way she was acting so boldly toward Avalon told him that she was eager to toss it away on the first man who showered her with any sort of regard.

Well, Avalon could just piss off. There was an unspoken rule in the underground, honor among thieves. And that was one didn't go after another's woman. That was

the sort of property that remained on neutral ground. Unless Avalon didn't wish to be the leader of the Blue Boys any longer, then he had best remember that Miss Davies had arrived on Drake's arm and not his.

Drake ground his teeth together. He wished he had a way to obtain something from Avalon's past to use as a threat against him but the man was effortless at keeping all aspects of his life carefully hidden. He was obviously a master of disguise to have evaded detection after more than three years. From the moment he'd erupted onto the scene in the underground he'd been a force to be reckoned with. He had gained the grudging respect of the most hardened criminals, even Amos, who was one of the most difficult men when it came to trusting others.

Other than himself.

As the first half of the Opera droned on in Italian, Drake tried to adopt a bored countenance but his attention was completely tuned to the couple chattering animatedly at his side. He wanted to yank Fleur up from that seat and send her home and directly to her chamber—where he intended to join her. However, he had no choice but to see this little play unfold. Oddly enough, most of the drama was in this box and not on the stage.

When the lights were lit and intermission was upon them, Drake could only pray that the second half was not filled with the same torture that the first half had been. He started to get up but Avalon waved him back down as a figure appeared at the rear of the box. "Miss Davies has expressed her interest in the ladies' retiring room and I have summoned Reynolds to escort her."

Drake narrowed his focus slightly on Avalon, not sure if he was comfortable with Fleur going anywhere without him. "I'm not sure that's a good idea," he said slowly.

Avalon leaned toward him. "I give you my word that she will be back unharmed, at

our side, momentarily.”

With a curt nod, Drake gave in, but his eyes burned a hole in Reynolds. He had never cared for the man and knowing that Fleur was going to be alone with him made him more than slightly uncomfortable.

Once they had departed, Avalon turned to him. “Shall we smoke?” He withdrew two cheroots from his vest and handed one to him.

Drake was eager to light the tip. He needed something to calm him down so he didn’t make a drastic error in judgment. He wondered if it might be too late for that. “What are you doing, Avalon?”

He released a plume of white smoke. “I call it entertaining a beautiful woman.”

“You know the rules.”

“I am aware, yes.” Avalon regarded him shrewdly. “As do you. If you want my assistance, you will allow the evening to progress as it is. I find Miss Davies very engaging.”

“I will not deny her appeal, which is why I spent five thousand quid to obtain her.”

Avalon smiled at the warning Drake couldn’t hold back. He had never allowed his emotions to get the better of him before. He didn’t understand why a woman, when there had been plenty before Fleur, that was causing him to act out now. “I never thought I would see the day that Mr. Drake Porter was besotted with any female. Be careful that you aren’t felled by her many charms.”

Drake smiled tightly. “I know my mind. I let nothing—and no one—stand in the way of what I want.”

Avalon leaned forward and mumbled. "I shall remember you said that."

He glanced toward the entrance to the box and Drake slid his focus in that direction. When he saw Fleur, he hoped she hadn't been standing there long, but by the stunned look on her face and the utter betrayal in her eyes, he could tell she had overheard what he'd said.

Bloody hell.

* * *

It was enough of a cold dose of reality to cool her earlier ardor. Fleur found that the second half of the opera wasn't nearly as entertaining as the first half. Although Avalon did his best to engage her in light flattery, she could think of nothing but Drake's harsh words. It was apparent that he still looked at her as nothing more than a prize to be won when she had foolishly believed that they had started to become more. Perhaps as much as friends. But he had clearly drawn the line in the sand and she was content to stay on her side from this point on. Instead of trying to do her best to compensate him for the money he had spent, feeling somewhat guilty because of her actions and her brother's debt, she was now going to concentrate all her efforts to drag Flavian out of Harriette's den of iniquity and go somewhere they never had to see Mr. Porter or that courtesan ever again. Things could go back to being the way they were, hopefully without the gambling and drinking. She could only pray that her twin had learned his lesson in all of this.

If she could just turn back the hands of time and never leave Greenwich...

But it was na?ve to want something that was already tainted.

Swallowing over the harsh lump of regret in her throat, Fleur was grateful when the lights overheard signaled the end of the performance. Sadly, her thoughts had drifted

and she'd missed most of the second part.

Avalon turned to her with a fond farewell. "My dear, it was lovely to meet you. Donec iterum convenient. " He kissed her gloved hand once more, lingering longer than the first time.

She tilted her head to the side and said coquettishly, "Shall we meet again?"

His dark eyes flashed with promise. "I shall make sure of it."

As he released her, a shiver of apprehension traveled down her spine. However, her unease didn't last long as Drake put his hand at the small of her back and steered her out of the box.

As they headed outside to hail a hackney, he nearly growled in her ear, "What do you think you're doing, making illicit plans with someone like that?"

She glared at him and moved out of his grasp. She despised how cold she felt without his warmth but she wasn't about to allow this slight to go unheeded. "I was being friendly."

"Oh, yes. I could see that. All. Night. Long ."

Fleur rolled her eyes. "If I didn't know better, I would believe you were jealous, speaking to me in such a crass manner. Perhaps you should emulate Mr. Avalon a bit more closely."

He abruptly spun on her. She came to a halt and bent backward to keep from running into him. "Should I? You have no idea what sort of man he is."

She tried to adopt a bored demeanor. "Much like you, I should imagine."

“He’s worse,” he snapped. “He’s the leader of the Blue Boys, one of the most notorious gangs in the London underground.”

She blinked. “Blue Boys? That doesn’t sound very threatening.”

“Perhaps not, but trust me when I will say if he gave the order to slit your throat you would be bleeding on the street right now.”

Feeling as though his point had been made, Drake turned and started to stalk away. Fleur had to pick up her skirts and rush to keep up with him. She despised his moodiness. It had her spinning in circles. “Then why did you encourage us to stay with him this evening?”

“He might be a good ally to have if?—”

The way he ground off his statement would not be borne. “If what?” she prodded.

He took off his hat and shoved a hand through his dark hair. He looked over his shoulder, piercing her with those silver eyes. “If things do go the way they should with us.”

She frowned. “What is that supposed to mean?” After a pregnant pause, she asked slowly, “Do you think I could be in danger by associating with you?”

“I have made a lot of enemies in my lifetime. It’s not unwelcome to require additional protection.”

As she absorbed this, he managed to hail a hackney. It stopped before them and he held out his hand to assist her inside. She went numbly. It wasn’t until the carriage set into motion that she recovered her voice. “Does the same apply to Flavian? Or just me?”

He looked directly at her. “I wouldn’t concern yourself about your brother.”

“How can I not?” she countered. “We are blood.”

“And yet, where is he?”

Fleur looked toward the window as tears stung her eyes. It was the one thing that she couldn’t seem to get out of her mind, and although she wanted to be happy for Flavian for being happy, she couldn’t resist the fact that she felt horribly betrayed.

She looked down at her hands as she blinked the tears away. “You’re right. He should have tried harder to help our circumstances, or preferably, not allow himself to get caught up in his old vices again.” She lifted her gaze to him. “But never has he made me feel as worthless as you did tonight when you said no one ever stood in the way of something you wanted.”

“It’s the truth. Would you rather I lie?”

“No.” She struggled to keep in her disappointment. It almost strangled her with the strain of holding it back. “But neither do I want to be just a pawn in someone’s life. If you never intended to care about me any further than what I could do for you, why go to that auction? Why bother spending so much on something you didn’t want?”

His focus remained steady. “I have been asking myself that very question,” he returned softly, and something told Fleur it was the truth.

She leaned her head back against the squabs. “It appears we are both stuck in a situation of our own making then. The question now is, how do we resolve it?”

CHAPTER 12

Fleur was weary when they returned to Chelsea Street. She told herself not to look toward Miss Wilson's townhouse but she found her gaze drifting that way regardless of her intentions to remain strong against the pull. She saw several lights shining in the windows and wondered what Flavian was doing in that moment. He had never been the type to read, and unless he was doing something to occupy his time, his boredom could be relentless.

She could withstand the misery she was currently feeling, the utter loneliness, if she thought he was truly happy. She wasn't thrilled at the prospect of having Harriette in their lives but she would endure it if she knew that Flavian's heart truly was content.

As she walked up the steps to Drake's residence, it was as if her feet were encased in lead. She wanted nothing more than to take to her bed and sleep for a week.

Perhaps it would be best if she didn't wake up at all.

As her slipper touched the base of the staircase, a strong, warm hand touched her shoulder. "You should know that things are becoming more...complicated with you here."

She fought the urge to close her eyes and lean back into his embrace. As angry as she was with him for being so cold and calculated all the time, she missed that connection to someone. She had always had her brother to lean on when it mattered, when the world became too much to bear.

She nodded her head in response, not sure what else she was supposed to do.

However, when she started to move forward, the pressure increased, holding her in place. “Fleur...”

She held her breath for countless seconds, the time passing slowly. But when it was obvious he wasn’t going to say anything further, she allowed her shoulders to sag. “Good night, Drake.”

This time, he let her go.

When she reached her bedchamber, she was surprised to see Erin sitting in a chair and working on some embroidery. When Fleur entered, the maid quickly rose to her feet. “Miss Davies. I thought you might need some help undressing.”

Rather than argue or claim that she just wanted to be alone, she found the assistance was actually quite welcome. “Thank you.”

Once the gown and undergarments had been discarded and Fleur donned a new silk nightdress, the maid departed. Fleur slipped beneath the covers, eager to close her eyes and lose herself to dreamland.

Unfortunately, as much as she tried to relax enough to do so, she found it quite hopeless. The fire had burned down in the grate but she wasn’t cold. In truth, it was as if her body was lit on fire.

She got up and began to pace the room. Perhaps she could tire herself enough for sleep to claim her. But it was apparent that was not going to work either. She was too restless, too aware of the man sleeping under the same roof for her to get any rest.

Sinking down in the single chair that Erin had vacated earlier, Fleur laid her head

back against the edge of the chair and stared at the ceiling. It was plain and white with very little to recommend it, and yet, she found it somewhat comforting. There was something about the simple design that reminded her of the house she had grown up in with Flavian and their parents in Oxfordshire.

Her heart ached, yearning to return to those days of carefree abandon. She had thought times were hard as a child but they had been absent of the cares she suffered as an adult.

She released a heavy sigh just as the door opened and a man was silhouetted in the frame.

Drake.

He glanced about the room until he spied her. “Are you well? I could hear movement...”

His voice trailed off as if he were uncertain of his welcome. Odd, since he never seemed to have a care for that before. “I’m fine. I just couldn’t sleep.”

“I would offer you a book to read but I’m afraid the library is rather ill stocked at the moment. I can see to it that some novels are procured?—”

She waved a hand and he fell silent. “Don’t worry yourself on my behalf.” She got up and moved toward the bed. “I am starting to get a little sleepy now,” she lied. “I’m sorry to have disturbed you.”

He reached out and grabbed her wrist. “Fleur.”

All he had to say was her name before she spun around and found herself in his arms. Their lips instantly fused together, drawn into a passionate kiss, as Drake held her

close enough that she could feel his heart pounding in rhythm to her own.

She moaned as her breasts were crushed against his chest, finding the pressure completely enticing. She had never been this close to a man before and she was finding it quite enthralling.

Fleur was glad that he had dispensed with most of his finery, leaving just his shirt and trousers on. She removed the hem from his trousers and allowed her hands to slide up the side of his ribcage as she broke away long enough to slip it over his head and toss the garment away. She looked at his muscular chest with its pattern of scars, the vivid memory of his lifeline marked forever upon his body. She ached for his pain, but more than that, she ached for him.

She brought his head back down to hers and they resumed their tumultuous embrace.

His hands roamed upward until they cupped her breasts through the thin material of the gown. Her breathing hitched as he found her nipples and toyed with them until they were taut peaks. She moaned, pressing further into him. It wasn't enough.

She wanted more.

“Take me to bed, Drake. Make love to me.”

He instantly stilled; his breathing harsh as he tore himself away from her. His eyes were like molten silver as they lit on her. “This isn't about love,” he growled. “You have to know that before we go any further. This is for mutual satisfaction.”

Fleur swallowed hard. “I'm sorry. I suppose it was a... poor choice of words.” She shook her head. “We don't have to continue?—”

He came back, putting his hands on either side of her cheeks. Forcing her to look at

him, he said, "Please don't tell me to stop now. I just wanted to be clear." He closed his eyes as if he were in physical pain. "To be honest, I'm not sure I have enough of a heart left to love. It barely keeps me alive anymore."

Her own heart going out to him she covered his hands with hers. "I don't accept anything more than tonight. Tomorrow is never promised to us. But I cannot send you away, because it would be a lie."

His eyes were intense in their probing, and when he met her lips this time, it was gentle and absolutely... perfect. She knew she was making the right choice by giving herself to him. She would never have any regrets about this night.

* * *

Drake could tell the moment Fleur fully opened herself to him. It was humbling, to say the least. For a man who had lived most of his life causing others to bow to his mercy, she was the one who held him in her grasp. He could never allow her to know the power that she held over him because it would be his demise. He'd made that mistake once and discovered that the woman he believed cared about him was using him for what he could provide. He had taken his revenge, although not before it had nearly broken him first.

He was confident that Fleur truly cared about him, but there would always be that small doubt that remained. But he could offer her one thing. As an innocent, she deserved everything he could offer her to make the experience, if not wondrous, then it could at least be bearable.

Gathering her nightdress in his grasp, he lifted it until he could whip it off and over her head. She was clothed in nothing more than the moon's soft glow and he was nearly brought to his knees by her astounding beauty. From the peaks of her full breasts to the triangle of hair at the apex of her smooth thighs, she was perfection in

itself. He almost hated to taint such a breathtaking display of trust and innocence but he vowed that if there was one thing he could do to atone for his sins, it was to take care of her to the best of his ability. Tonight, and as long as he was honored enough to have her at his side.

He dipped his head and made a trail with his tongue along her neck and down the curve of her shoulder, and along the length of her collarbone. She raised her hands and threaded them through his hair. He continued to move down further, until he caught one of her breasts in his mouth. Sucking and lightly biting each hardened tip, he massaged both mounds of flesh. Her breathing hitched and he could feel the steady beat of her heart.

He continued downward along her stomach and around her navel until he was on his knees in front of her. He paused to glance upward. "Move your legs apart."

She looked at him quizzically. "Why?"

His fingers dug into her hips, holding her close to him. He could smell the musky scent of her desire and it was driving him mad. He couldn't wait to taste her and bring her to the heights of bliss. "Just do it."

He sighed when she finally obeyed. He kept eye contact until his tongue darted out and he slid it up the center of her core. Her green eyes rolled back in her head and the smooth column of her throat was revealed. After that, he was dedicated to his task. He licked and teased her until the point her legs were trembling and she was pleading and calling out his name.

Drake knew that she was close to her release, so he stood and lifted her into his arms. Carrying her to the bed, he laid her down on top and then returned to give her the pleasure she was desperate to obtain.

It didn't take long before her body tensed and she arched off of the bed, her fists clutching the counterpane on either side of her. Drake watched her breasts quiver as wave after wave of the orgasm swept over her.

When she started to settle, he stood and removed his trousers. Kicking them to the side, he positioned himself at her entrance. While she was still dazed, he slowly began to press inside of her. He was almost overcome by her wet heat. She was gripping him so tightly that he had to grind his teeth together so he didn't spill himself too early. Without a sheath, he would have to pull out of her. It would be misery to do so, but he concentrated on the glory of this moment.

When he reached the barrier of her maidenhead, he leaned down and bit the tip of her nipple, causing two areas of sensation that he hoped might lessen the first. As he breeched her core and slid all the way to the hilt, he saw her eyes widened slightly, her mouth opening on a slight exhale.

"Breathe," he said softly.

She nodded and eventually her body began to ease following the intrusion. When he could tell she had relaxed, he started to move. His hips pumped slow and steady at first, but as her breathing started to become harsh once again, her nails clawing at his back, he increased his pace until beads of sweat started to form on his brow.

It was the sweetest torture he had ever endured.

As her body started to convulse a second time, Drake watched her face glow with a carnal awareness. She bit her lip and when her eyes opened to reveal a dark, emerald green, it was enough to send him tumbling over the edge.

With a hoarse shout, he withdrew from her just as the first hot jets of his ejaculation pattered the inside of her silky thighs.

His arms no longer willing to support his weight, he collapsed beside her. It didn't take long for his breathing to return to a normal pace, although he knew it would take much longer for his body to recover from such an experience. He had bedded many women over his lifetime but this was the first time it had seemed... different somehow. As if some part of him understood that this woman was special.

He turned his head to look at her and he was concerned when she continued to stare at the ceiling. Rolling to his side, Drake reached out to touch her chin. "How are you feeling?"

She looked at him and adopted a considering expression. "Strange. I never knew what lying with a man would be like."

His body tensed. "And now that you have?"

The corners of her mouth lifted. "I didn't think it would be quite so... appealing."

"Appealing?" For the first time in months, perhaps years, Drake found himself smiling. He had heard many things about his sexual prowess from various lovers but he'd never been told he was appealing before. It seemed so proper and virginal that he had to appreciate the sentiment more than anything that preceded it. "I suppose I will take that as a compliment."

She hit his arm playfully and his grin grew. "You should." She rolled onto her side and put her hands beneath her cheek. "Thank you," she whispered.

He lifted a brow. "For what?"

She shook her head. "No reason really. I just felt like saying it."

He leaned forward and kissed her. It seemed like such a natural thing to do that he

couldn't resist. "Then you're welcome."

* * *

Fleur wasn't surprised when Drake left her to own devices a short time later. He likely thought she might want her privacy. She was grateful for his consideration because with all of her slight twinges and changes that her body had just undergone, she was feeling not just awkward but unsure of herself. She supposed she was truly a courtesan now but strangely enough; she didn't really feel like a fallen woman. Instead, she felt protected, and dare she imagine, cared for as well?

She didn't know if Drake would ever make any sort of sentimental declaration. He wasn't that type of man, and knowing that at the beginning helped her to understand this connection for what it was—lust. There was a strong attraction between them and as long as they shared that, it was enough for her. At least it kept most of the loneliness she had been feeling inside at bay.

When a tub was filled with steaming water the next morning, ordered especially by the master of the house, as well as a breakfast tray filled full with tempting delights, Fleur had a smile on her face as she headed downstairs later that morning in an apricot day dress. She had told the maid she wanted to leave her dark hair flowing down around her shoulders, hoping that it might tempt Drake into interlude that afternoon. She was feeling a bit sore from their previous exploits but she was also eager to repeat the performance.

However, when she checked the study to find it empty, she was disheartened. She quickly located the housekeeper and inquired about Mr. Porter. "He stepped out not thirty minutes past," she said.

Some of her spirits fell. She hadn't expected Drake to laze in bed with her all day but she thought it would have been courteous if he'd told her he was going out. "Did he

say when he would return?”

“No, he did not. But I can say he wasn’t alone. He left with the footman.”

A chill of foreboding snaked up Fleur’s spine, although she couldn’t really say why. She murmured something that must have sounded enough like a dismissal, as the other man departed.

Standing in the midst of the still empty foyer, Fleur set her hands on her hips and wondered what she might do now. Drake had already banned her from the kitchen and there was a housekeeper that took care of cleaning the small bits of furniture that Drake had provided.

It was then she decided to find out where he spent his nights. She knew he didn’t leave the townhouse but she had never asked him where he slept. She burned with curiosity so she decided to investigate.

Passing by the rooms that she knew were still empty of any sort of furnishings, she found her steps had taken her back to the art studio.

When she walked inside, she noticed that there had been some changes.

Gone was the array of unfinished paintings that had lined the wall and the covered painting on the easel was conspicuously absent as well. She wondered where they had all been stored, because she knew he hadn’t had time to complete them all. And something told her he hadn’t destroyed them either. Although it had been a part of his past that he might not care to revisit, there was surely some sort of tie to something that had been such a large part of his personality. She imagined it would be difficult to brush it off completely.

Fleur took one more glance about the room and then she spied something curious on

the opposite wall. If she hadn't been looking that closely she would have easily missed the difference in wallpaper, the slight bit that was more worn than the rest.

Curious, she walked over and ran her hand down the section as a furrow crossed her brow. Something told her there was a secret beyond here. As enigmatic as Drake was, it certainly made sense that he would protect himself by any means necessary. Having multiple lodging houses throughout London was one way he was able to do that. But what about if he was interrupted in the middle of the night?

Thinking this had to hide some sort of secret compartment, she pressed the edge of the trim and found it solid. Pushing and pulling around the area proved the same. It appeared that nothing was out of the ordinary.

But then her focus slid to the light fixture a short distance away. She didn't know why it would make a difference that it was askew but she immediately walked over and adjusted it.

Her heart stopped when there was a definite click.

Her gaze swiveling back to the wall, she gasped when it was slightly ajar. Pulled forward like a moth to a flame, she reached out a trembling hand, wondering what might lay on the other side.

It was heavy, taking all of her strength to move it back. What lay before her was nothing but a dark passage. She worried her lower lip. It wasn't as though she had a lantern at her disposal, but neither did she want to miss this rare opportunity when Drake was gone and she was left to her own devices. Surely it wouldn't go that far and she could feel her way forward until light appeared again.

She dared to step forward, fully concealed behind the false wall. Taking a single step forward, her foot stepped on a stone. With the sound of a catch, the wall behind her

swung shut, trapping her inside where no one could hear her scream in the darkness.

* * *

By the time Drake returned to the townhouse with Amos it was well into mid-afternoon. He hadn't known the severity of the situation the messenger had passed along, or how long the errand to the other side of the city might take, but he knew he should have sent word to Fleur. He hadn't meant to be gone so long. She was likely worried by now—or furious.

He scrubbed a hand down his face and attempted to prepare himself for her wrath. Most women didn't take too kindly to being loved and then thoroughly deserted. It might not have been so devastating should Fleur be one of his former paramours who knew the interlude was temporary, but it was different with her. They both knew this relationship held more meaning, but neither were willing to put a firm name to the attraction.

He hadn't intended to leave before dawn that morning, but when Amos had found him and told him what news he'd received, Drake had no choice but to investigate. Supposedly one of his residences had caught fire and while Drake had received threats like this many times before with nothing to back up the claim other than the opportunity to try to catch him out in the open, this time the information had proved true.

Before the hackney had made it, the sky had turned a dangerous shade of orange to rival that of the early dawn. Dark clouds had plumed into the air, mixing with the rest of the chimney smoke of London, and as they finally reached their destination, they saw several men trying uselessly to combat the angry flames.

Drake and Amos had immediately gone into action to offer their assistance. A blaze this large could easily affect more than just one residence. Several houses were in

threat of turning to rubble if it couldn't be contained. Old wood and close confines were a recipe for disaster in the East End.

Tirelessly they worked, packing buckets drawn from the water pumps scattered about the area. It wasn't enough to combat the scorching inferno, and soon Drake's house was reduced to ash, as well as the lodging houses on either side of it. People were standing about staring at the ruinous scene with a mixture of horror and desolation. Drake couldn't allow these families to be displaced, so he offered the address of another residence and decided it would be put to better use by someone who needed it more than he did. It wasn't as though he didn't have more to utilize at a moment's notice.

After the worst had died down, Drake collapsed to the ground, his lungs heaving with the combination of his efforts and the dangerous vapor he'd just inhaled. Sweat poured down his face and mixed with the stains from the fire. He swiped a hand across his forehead to keep the worst out of his eyes and looked at Amos. "Something tells me this wasn't the work of Miss Wilson. If she wanted me dead, she knows where I live. The same goes for Avalon."

Amos narrowed his visible blue eye. "It could have been intended as a warning."

"Possibly," Drake returned with a mumble. "But I don't think so. You know I don't believe in coincidence or fate. This was a murder attempt. But from a new foe or one of the many friends I've gained over the past I have yet to ascertain."

Amos snorted. "It would be easier to make a list of who doesn't want to see you six feet underground."

Drake echoed his statement with a curt nod. "I need to find out the cause. That will help to narrow things down a bit." Having recovered his equilibrium, he got back to his feet. "It will be a good idea to check in on the rest of my residences to see if they

have been compromised and add additional security to Chelsea. Right now, it's the safest place because of its proximity. The powers of London won't take too kindly to some of their notable residents being in jeopardy. It turns out I won't have to bring on extra protection because it will be provided once rumor gets around." He absently rubbed his jawline. "I have other uses for Avalon should he decide he's still on my side."

"And if not?" Amos prompted.

Drake's gaze was hard. "I have never tolerated betrayal in any form from anyone. He is no exception."

Amos got up and for the first time there was concern in his focus. "Are you sure it's wise to test the loyalty of the Blue Boys?"

"I won't be testing anything but his word," Drake countered.

After that, other than the house he'd dedicated to the lost family in the street, the rest of Drake's residences around the city seemed secure enough. However, Amos promised that he would send someone around each day to see if that might change so this disaster wouldn't happen again.

Standing in the middle of the foyer in Chelsea, the housekeeper rounded a corner and stopped short when she spied them. "Oh, my." Immediately she set to work ordering that respective baths were to be prepared. Drake would be grateful for the chance to clean up but first he needed to ensure that Fleur was well.

When he asked about her, Mrs. Honeywell replied, "I haven't seen her since this morning, but she hasn't left the house to my knowledge."

An instant charge of warning shot up Drake's spine, but he told himself not to arrive

at any conclusions until he'd had a chance to ask the rest of the staff.

Erin, her maid, was the next to be questioned. The slight frown bothered him further. "She didn't touch her lunch but then, I don't recall seeing her since this morning either."

Drake's mind was racing by this point, but he managed to keep his composure intact. The exhaustion that had swamped him earlier vanished as he rushed from room to room looking for any sign of her. It wasn't until he reached the studio that he could feel the fine hairs rising on the back of his neck.

"What is it?" Amos asked at his side.

"I'm not sure..." Drake moved to the wall and looked closely at the fixture there. It had changed since the last time he'd been in the room. "Devil take it," he grumbled under his breath as he opened the door to the secret passage. There was nothing on the other side, but he knew where it led. Turning to Amos, he instructed, "The blasted woman is too intuitive for her own good. Stay here in case she finds a way to return."

With that, he disappeared on the other side.

CHAPTER 13

She couldn't see her hand in front of her face. It didn't matter if her eyes were open or closed, it was the same sensation. It was both disorienting and terrifying, but without knowing how to get back into the room behind her, Fleur knew she had no other choice but to move forward and hope it led to more light.

Putting her hand against the wall, she slid it along, moving her feet slowly and cautiously lest she encounter any steps along the way and tumble to her death. It was not a pleasant image, to be certain. At nearly the same time that image was fresh in her mind, she hit a step. Thankfully, it led upward, so she started the ascent.

Fleur kept telling herself that this would bring her closer to solving the mystery surrounding Mr. Drake Porter. She wondered if he would ever truly open himself up to her, so she was going to have to find a way to understand him on her own.

Perhaps the answers she sought could be found at the end of this labyrinth.

Inching her way along, Fleur concentrated on steadying her breathing and not giving into the panic that was hovering just below the surface. Right foot, left foot . Eventually the stairs ended and she was back on level footing once more.

Time ticked by with endless precision as she waited for the end of this maze to appear. Finally, her foot hit something and she sighed with relief. Moving her arms out in front of her, her palms felt wood. She prayed it was another door. Feeling downward, she felt a knob and turned it. If it was locked, she wasn't sure what she might do. Who knew how long it would take anyone to find her?

Thankfully, luck was on her side as it opened. A blessed window shone magnificent light into the room and she could have cried with relief. She rushed to it and looked outside, finding that she retained a similar view from her bedchamber. It appeared she was still in the house but in some sort of attic. Now that she considered it, she found it odd that she had never seen an attic opening in this house, but obviously Drake had the space altered to suit him, complete with a secret room in which to hide.

Knowing that if she needed to escape, she could climb out onto the roof, Fleur turned and began to inspect her surroundings.

She turned to see a cot along one wall, beneath a single painting of a man in the midst of a dense forest. Fleur walked over and lightly touched some of the professional brush strokes. She wondered if Drake had fashioned this piece but then she saw it was signed from a well-known artist. She was surprised that he might have such a piece in his collection and yet, chose to display it in such dismal surroundings.

Turning from the image, she walked over to the crude desk sitting in the midst of a scattering of newsprint clippings. Wooden shelves were filled with ancient leather-bound tomes that looked as old as England itself. She bent down to read some of the titles and was surprised to find most of them had to do with law. But there were other items dedicated to agriculture, nautical expertise, science and philosophy. There were also books dedicated to the study of Latin, French, and Italian. There was a wealth of knowledge in this room, most of which she had only glimpsed in a museum. And yet, Drake had this treasure trove completely at his disposal.

She moved toward the desk and began to inspect the clippings. There was a tallow candle that had burned halfway, wax overflowing onto the handle and spilling onto the desk. A pair of wire rimmed spectacles and a magnifying glass were also present among the chaos. She picked up the latter and began to rummage through the various articles that had been removed for whatever importance he had deemed necessary.

She read about men losing everything to gambling debts and living the rest of their lives in debtor's prison. In every article that she read, they shocked her to her core, because something told her this was a personal accounting of Drake's conquests through the years, including the ruination of a prominent baron, Lord Devonshire.

Suddenly, a horrible thought struck her and she began to riffle through the newer articles that hadn't been tinged with age. She wasn't sure what she was looking for, but something told her she would know it when she saw it.

And there it was.

Her hand shook, her eyes widening in shock as she spied an article about Mr. Porter himself. It was clipped from a scandal sheet, showcasing a ghost of the underground that had been deemed, 'The Devil,' for his dark dealings among the outer fringes of the city. He was feared by many with some going so far as to claim his actions were nothing more than historical folklore, that a simple commoner couldn't possibly have that sort of drastic reach.

With numb fingers, she allowed the paper to flutter back to the desk. She had believed that there might have been some redeeming qualities to the man she had shared her bed with the night before, but she had to doubt that conviction after what she'd just read. There was no denying the offenses he had done in his lifetime. To imagine that he had gone to such lengths to gain the success he had now was almost too much for her to comprehend. He had to be 'The Devil' in order to commit these offenses so effortlessly, so coldly.

She heard the scuff of a boot and she glanced up to see Drake's silhouette framed in the doorway. She gasped in alarm and moved backward until she hit the bookshelf. For many tense minutes she waited for him to speak.

He said nothing, did nothing. His expression showed nothing.

Finally, the damning evidence of his misdeeds caused her to speak. “Is this true?” she whispered in horror. She pointed at the desk. It wasn’t as though he could deny any of it. The truth was there in literal black and white.

“Yes.”

A part of her respected the fact he could admit to such heinous activities without restraint, and yet, a part of her trust crumbled right then. She didn’t know what she’d been expecting, perhaps for him to deny it all, or try to find a way to explain the nightmare that was printed there. But it was obvious he wasn’t going to do either. Nevertheless, she had to try to find a way to make some sort of sense out of it all. “Is this some sort of... trophy room for your exploits?” She shook her head in disgust. “A place you can go to bask in all the chaos you’ve inflicted on so many others?”

The condemning accusation hung in the air for a long time, so long that she didn’t know if he would even answer. “I had my reasons.”

It was a cryptic answer, but she supposed it didn’t matter if he went into a grand detailed explanation or not. The damage was done. These people were dead or spending the rest of their lives in misery. Because of him.

A sickening thought abruptly occurred to her and she put a hand to her stomach to quell the sudden nausea. “Is this what you’d intended to do to my brother? To me ?”

His gaze was as hard as steel. “No.”

“Really?” she demanded. “Because these articles would suggest differently.” She lifted her chin defiantly. “They call you ‘The Devil.’”

His expression didn’t alter. “I was that man at one time. I didn’t care about anyone but myself and what I could gain,” he returned flatly.

“What’s different now? What’s changed?” she snapped. Her chest ached to the point she wondered if her heart was breaking. She had told herself that she hadn’t started to develop feelings for this man, but apparently her heart didn’t understand that refusal.

Rather than answer her query directly, he moved to the painting. Standing in front of it, he spoke quietly in that velvety voice. “Do you know why I bought this particular painting?”

She didn’t reply. She wasn’t sure she could, her throat was so tight.

“For the first time in my life I could connect to something. The man in that dense forest.”

He exhaled heavily and Fleur closed her eyes. She didn’t want to hear this. She didn’t want to allow herself to feel empathy for someone who would eventually hurt her, that would cause her demise as he had so many countless others. A leopard seldom changed his spots and she had no doubt he would have treated her brother just as shabbily if she hadn’t intervened and taken his place. The single reason she wasn’t expunged from his life now was for reasons of his own that she couldn’t begin to deduce. She’d believed it was merely revenge, and looking at the articles scattered about the desk, she could easily think that was the sole reason.

And yet...

The gentle way he had made love to her the night before also told her that perhaps there might be a small bit of redemption left inside of him, that his heart wasn’t completely as black as coal. Unfortunately, that was the part that drew her to him.

He turned to her and she told herself to stand strong against the magnetism that called to her, that made her yearn to go to his side. “For years, I was that lost soul, searching for some sort of light in the darkness. I had wealth and respect, everything I had

demanded for myself, but it wasn't enough. I wanted more, but I didn't know what that was. All I knew was that I didn't think there could be anything innocent and pure left in my miserable existence, and then—" He took a step closer to her. And another. And another, until he stood directly in front of her. "I saw you."

She told herself not to fall, not to drown in those silver pools as she had the night before, but it was difficult to stand against such a virile man. In an attempt to withstand the pull, she snorted. "In Greenwich? I'm sure you were instantly smitten."

He shook his head as he touched the side of her face, and she leaned into the embrace, like a soul that was already lost and eager to complete the damnation. "In that club. You looked so lost, but also... brave and determined. I couldn't take my eyes off of you." She shivered as he traced a finger down the side of her neck, but it wasn't due to revulsion. "I can't change who I was," he uttered, as he leaned closer, until their lips were mere inches apart. "But I know I don't want to stay on that path. I want to be different."

She told herself not to be pulled deeper into his web but she couldn't resist his siren's call. It was deafening.

With a groan, she threw her arms around his neck and pressed herself against him as their mouths fused together. She wanted to resist the attraction, but the passion wouldn't be denied. It was too strong, like a tidal wave of awareness that pulsed through her, telling her that she was alive. With every beat of her heart, she was drawn into the carnal world of desire. Her thighs burst into flames, her core pulsing with raw need.

Fleur had always thought of herself as a good person, doing her best to survive by honorable means, but perhaps she had a dark streak within her. It was surely the reason she was drawn to someone like Drake, a man who had sold his own soul several times over for personal gain. Or perhaps she wanted him because he was a

fallen angel begging for a redemption, for a second chance. Forgiveness had been her largest failing when it came to Flavian. She supposed nothing had changed with Drake.

As he loved her, the anticipation rising within her was almost frightening in its intensity. Surely it had to be something devious and evil to allow her body to feel such strong sensations. And to allow the next words to tumble out of her mouth with such bold abandon. “Touch me, Drake.”

He didn’t hesitate or question her motives; he simply lifted her skirts and swiped his finger along her core. Splinters of white-hot light erupted throughout her body and she tensed, knowing the bittersweet pinnacle was already so close within her grasp. “More,” she panted. “Don’t stop.”

He readily obliged and without kisses or gentle prose, he took her to the heights of pleasure. Fleur’s eyes fluttered closed as she clutched his broad shoulders. Tremors wracked her body, and before she had enough time to recover her senses, she reached out and kissed him passionately. “Make me yours, Drake. Now. ”

She didn’t have to ask twice.

He spun her around and as she clutched the bookcase, he impaled her from behind. She moaned when he filled her completely and without restraint. He answered with a low groan as he thrust in and out of her as if possessed. And perhaps he was, but it wasn’t some demonic force that propelled him.

As the ecstasy began to build higher, he lightly bit the curve of her bare shoulder. As he expelled everything that he had within her, Fleur found her second release.

She sobbed his name as her fingernails dug into the wood. Her head spun from the force of their tryst and it took a moment before she understood that he was pulling out

of her.

As her focus began to clear from the lust filled haze, she could feel her skirts fall back into place. Now that their passions had cooled, Fleur wasn't sure what to say or do. It wasn't like last night when he had taken her virginity. Today was a new day filled with dark secrets and an eager, sexual coupling. It had nothing to do with tenderness or caring. This pairing had been heavy and demanding.

Raw.

Once Fleur had gathered her emotions enough to turn around, she acted as though they hadn't shared anything untoward as she nodded toward the cot. "Is this where you sleep every night?"

He sighed, as if he didn't want to have this conversation. "When I make it up here," he said evenly. "Generally, I stay in the chair in my study."

"That can't be comfortable," she noted primly.

"Trust me when I say I have not always had luxurious accommodations in my lifetime. The cot, or the chair, are better than many places I've tried to rest." His eyes darkened. "Do you have an alternate suggestion?"

"Surely we can manage to stay in the same chamber, considering it was yours to begin with. Now that I have fulfilled my courtesan duties that you paid for so handsomely, I see no reason to keep you out."

She swallowed hard over the lump of guilt in her throat. She had spoken harshly to Flavian before and had regretted it. No doubt it would be the same with Drake. She had wanted this—had practically demanded for him to turn her into a courtesan.

Last night she hadn't felt like a fallen woman, just a changed one. Today, she understood there was no going back. She was effectively ruined. But not just her virtue.

She was ruined for all other men.

* * *

Drake despised uncomfortable silences, and after that little quip Fleur had made, the tension had returned with a vengeance. Determined to steer the conversation away from what had just happened, he gathered the lantern he'd left outside the door and led them back through the dark passage to the studio. "How did you find that room?"

"I noticed the slight difference in the wallpaper coloring and then the crooked light fixture." She shrugged as he shut the wall. "It wasn't difficult to figure out after that."

"Hmm." He silently admitted that he was impressed, but then he wondered if it was that easy for Fleur to learn his secrets, how easy would it be for someone else to do the same?

"Where were you all day?"

He had been anticipating the question earlier. Now it seemed even more dismal since she'd found his secret room that was no longer so secret. "I received word this morning that one of my lodging houses had been sent up in flames. When Amos and I went to investigate the claim, we discovered it was a total loss."

He wasn't surprised when she looked horrified. But that didn't mean he approved.

In truth, he hated it. He didn't want empathy. Or pity. He had never felt comfortable with people feeling sorry for him. She should understand, after seeing that room, that

he didn't deserve it. If there had been any time that he was worthy of such regard, it had long since passed when he'd started handing out his own brand of judgment.

"You think it was done on purpose." He sent her a glance that must have been speaking, because she added, "You could be in danger!"

Again, there was that keen perceptiveness. "I'm not sure yet, but until I know for certain, I would ask that you don't leave the house without proper protection, either me or Amos."

She nodded her assent. "Do you have any idea who it might be?"

He looked at her hard. "You saw those articles. I have more enemies than friends. There are several possibilities, but it will take some time to sift through who would go to such lengths to see my end."

"I'd like to help. It does concern me, after all."

He couldn't dispute the truth. He would rather she wasn't involved at all, but he had brought her into his circle which made her a victim just as much as he was.

He inclined his head. "Amos and I are going to compile a list. After that, it's a matter of elimination."

She winced. "I hope you don't mean literally."

He believed she was serious but the slight lift of her mouth told him she was teasing. He was grateful for the brief reprieve. Thus, he offered an olive branch in return.

"Are you hungry?"

Her eyes lit up. “Famished.”

As they started to head downstairs, she asked, “Where did you take all of your paintings? I noticed they were all missing.”

“I had Amos gather them up and take them to another house.” He paused. “Coincidentally, it was the same one that burned this afternoon.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was a part of my life I would soon forget.”

There was a brief silence, and then she noted, “Perhaps that is what happened today. The person responsible for the fire might have thought you were staying there which is why it was targeted.”

His mouth kicked up at the corner. “You’re almost too intelligent for your own good, Miss Davies.”

She offered a coy expression that would have hit him directly in the heart if he wasn’t so sure that particular organ was dusty from so many years of neglect. It was odd to feel any sort of emotion other than anger or frustration and he wasn’t sure if he would even know joy if it struck him directly.

“I shall take that as a compliment,” she preened, and then threaded her arm through his. With a faux pout, she moaned, “Does this mean no more outings? I have all those new clothes and no chance to wear them.”

Drake snorted. “I have never been one to hide from anyone, no matter what their end result may be. I will be more wary of my surroundings as your escort, but I will not be waylaid. I thought you might like to see Vauxhall this evening. I understand it’s

going to be quite a show.”

Her green eyes instantly lit up and Drake felt as if he had accomplished some great feat. He vowed he would do whatever it took to keep that blazing look in her gaze. “I have long wanted to visit the pleasure gardens.”

His focus warmed on her and he bent down slightly to whisper in her ear, “As to the pleasure part of the gardens, I am more than happy to supply that portion of the entertainment.”

CHAPTER 14

That evening, walking next to Drake in his formal attire, his Baker's boy hat ever present so that there was no doubt who he truly was, Fleur lifted her chin with pride. She had chosen a deep violet gown to wear, complete with a fur lined pelisse. Although it wasn't that cool during the day, the nights were starting to bring a slight chill with the autumn. Knowing that Drake would share her bed from that night on, she decided that she would remain quite warm.

It was odd, that a few hours earlier, she wasn't sure what sort of man she had sold herself to at that auction. Although the stories she'd read were horrible and she knew that Mr. Porter was responsible for the demise of so many, she couldn't seem to feel as though he was the same man at her side. Drake seemed far removed from such a calculating criminal, even if she knew he was still that dangerous man who had stopped at nothing to gain what he wanted. The fact he seemed to want her was somewhat... flattering.

It made no sense, of course, nor this heated attraction that she felt toward him, but perhaps she was hoping that he was sincere, that he did intend to alter his life. She wanted to cheer him on if that were true, not chastise him for the misdeeds of his past.

She could certainly atone for some things herself. Masquerading as her brother during a fencing duel certainly came to mind. She could have ruined herself long before now if anyone had discovered the true identity behind that dark shroud.

But something had led her here—to Drake. Her mother had always said things

happen for a reason. Perhaps that reason was she was meant to rescue Drake from himself.

Unfortunately, memories of how she'd failed her brother so terribly flooded her thoughts. She had demanded they leave Greenwich and thus, put them both in an untenable situation that they might never recover. She yearned to know how Flavian was faring but she hadn't the courage to go to that house again. She couldn't bear to see the smug expression on Harriette's face and know that dreadful woman had taken everything away from Fleur in one night.

For now, she would content herself by being with Drake and finding the peace she'd long been searching for. She hoped that her brother was able to do the same. As much as she loved Flavian, he was a man grown and he had to make his own choices. She could no longer take care of his mistakes. He would have to find a way to take care of them on his own.

Nevertheless, her heart ached thinking of their separation. It was the longest they had been apart since their parents had died. But she forced herself to focus on the evening before her, and the night ahead.

She was thankful that Drake was a considerate lover. He never found his pleasure until he was confident she had found hers. While their affair might never lead to anything more permanent, most of the society unions she knew of lacked true adoration. The majority of those happy family portraits were fabricated for one reason or another.

With Drake, she could be honest, because he wasn't trying to be someone else. He admitted to some of the darkest parts of his history. There was nothing for her to fear, because although he had done some terrible things, something told her that he wouldn't hurt her. At least, not physically.

As far as her heart...

But no, she wasn't going to think about that now. She was here to enjoy herself and that is what she would do.

She thought about the hungry, promising look in Drake's eyes when she had come down the stairs that evening in that silver gown which hugged all of her curves. With its plunging neckline and the diamonds combs placed in her dark updo, he hadn't been able to take his eyes off of her. When she'd joined him in the foyer, his nostrils had flared when he said, "You shall be the envy of the moonlight this evening."

It was the highest compliment she had ever received. And by Drake's side, she could almost feel as though she was as beautiful as he'd claimed her to be.

Thus far, he hadn't allowed her to walk on her own, keeping her firmly at his side so everyone present knew that she was spoken for.

Fleur's heart was skipping with joy at the possessiveness of his actions, because it told her that he cared. If he didn't, he would have gotten lost in the crowd and left her to fend for herself.

With a permanent curve to her lips, Fleur realized it had been a long time since she had felt so... free. She had always been burdened with trying to survive and keep Flavian out of trouble that she had lost herself somewhere along the way. It was nice to finally be able to take some time for her own enjoyment.

As soon as the thought crossed her mind, Fleur noticed a familiar face in one of the private booths near the heart of the entertainment. Her steps faltered and Drake looked at her. "Do you want to ignore them?"

Fleur exhaled slowly. Did she want to approach her brother and Harriette in the midst

of such a public place? “I don’t want to make a scene.”

“You won’t. And I won’t allow her to do so.” His focus was as direct as it usually was. “If you wish to speak to your brother, I will make it happen.”

Fleur twisted her hands in front of her. Although she had told herself to leave Flavian to his own devices, she couldn’t, in all good conscience, walk by without a single word. It would hurt too much for her to give him the cut direct. He was her flesh and blood and the trials they had faced together meant something to her, even if they didn’t mean much to him.

“Yes. I would like that.”

Drake inclined his head and they made their way across the lawn.

* * *

Drake knew it had taken a lot of courage for Fleur to agree to meet with the man who had betrayed her in the worst sort of way. He didn’t know if the scoundrel actually understood everything that Fleur had gone through since they had parted. The initial melancholy was followed by the shock and anger of his actions with the woman who had traded her as effortlessly as a sack of grain.

He was surprised that she wasn’t bitter to the point she never wanted to see either of them again, but that was another part of Fleur’s kind nature that had called to him. While there wasn’t an actual angel halo around her head, tonight he could almost believe it. There was still compassion and love in those green eyes, something he had long ignored, nor cared about. But because he didn’t want to see her as jaded as he was, he was willing to do whatever it took to keep that beautiful smile on her face.

Miss Wilson saw them approaching before Flavian had glanced up. He appeared a bit

rumpled in his finery, slumped in his chair with a glass dangling from his grasp. Drake clenched his jaw at the sight of the drink in his hand. The idiot had learned nothing. He was making the same mistakes now as he had in Greenwich, allowing his vices to consume him. Drake had known men like him, and sadly, they never changed until it was too late.

“Mr. Porter,” the famed courtesan preened as they stopped before her. “I didn’t expect to see you out this evening.” She flicked a glance at Fleur. “And Miss Davies. How... altered you look.” She returned her focus to Drake. “I see that the current situation suits you both. I’m quite relieved.”

It was all Drake could do to retain his composure. Luckily, Flavian seemed to notice them out of his drunken stupor. He stared at his sister as if he didn’t recognize her and then he quickly stumbled to his feet. “Fleur.”

“Flavian.”

Drake wasn’t sure how to interpret the tone of Fleur’s voice, but he imagined it was a mixture of disappointment and resignation. “Would you mind giving us a few moments alone?” she whispered to him.

He said nothing, just reached out and grasped Harriette’s elbow and steered her toward the back of the tent. “Let’s allow the siblings a chance to catch up,” he uttered.

Miss Wilson laughed gaily. “Of course. I shall certainly not pass up an opportunity to entertain you, Mr. Porter.”

Once they were out of earshot, Drake released her as if she was venomous snake and the truth wasn’t that far removed. “What are you doing with Flavian Davies?”

She shrugged her narrow shoulders and tossed her brunette head. Pinning him with a flirtatious expression out of her green eyes, she returned smoothly, “He’s actually a rather competent lover. He is learning quickly and eager to please.”

Drake clenched his fists. “You can find a suitable cock anywhere. He has nothing else to offer you. You know he has no funds at his disposal.”

She gave a mock gasp. “Don’t be so crude. I know you have a reputation to uphold, but truly, it doesn’t become you.”

Drake ignored her. “Release the young pup and let him roam free where he might have a chance at repairing the life you are trying to destroy for your own amusement. Wasn’t it enough that you separated Fleur from her flesh and blood?”

Her eyes narrowed slightly. “My, my. Who would have thought the Devil would ever care about anyone’s circumstances other than his own. You are either besotted with the chit, or you are becoming soft. If the former, I shall have to rethink the additional funds I requested for Miss Davies. It appears she might be worth more.” She smiled in a cunning manner, and again, Drake saw a slithering snake coiling to strike. “If the latter, I should warn you that would be quite drastic for your future happiness.”

Drake took an intimidating step forward. “I am well aware of the coin you are trying to lighten from my coffers. We have already had this discussion. Is that why you are keeping Flavian comfortable at your side?”

She lifted a delicate brow but said nothing. It was all the confirmation he needed.

However, something else was niggling at his brain now. “You mentioned that my future happiness might be at stake. Is there something you aren’t telling me?”

Harriette gave an exaggerated sigh. “Don’t be so tiresome, Mr. Porter. I merely

wanted to offer a cautionary. I heard about the fire. It would be drastic should it consume you. I do wish for your continued safety.”

He snorted. “I assume your silence comes with an additional sum?”

She smiled broadly. “I have always admired you, Mr. Porter. We can come to an agreement if you would but put your faith in me in return.” She reached out and drew a finger down the center of his chest. “Say the word and I will release Flavian in return for you. I have heard about your prowess in the bedchamber and am eager to see if the rumors are true.”

He reached out and calmly took her hand and removed it from him. “You would do well to remember that I can also be a formidable foe, Miss Wilson. It is not wise to test my patience.”

* * *

Once Drake and Miss Wilson had left, Fleur waited for her brother to speak, if he was even capable of it. She shook her head. “I can see you are getting on well with Harriette.” She looked at the empty bottle by his feet and the nearly empty tumbler in his grasp. “Or rather, you are continuing to get on well with your brandy. I had hoped things might change, that you might change?—”

As tears started to sting her eyes, Fleur turned to leave. She didn’t know where she would go without Drake, but neither could she stay there and continue to watch her dear brother ruin himself further.

There was a tug on her sleeve. “Fleur, wait!”

She didn’t want to turn around, but the desperate whine in his tone caused her to pause. Reluctantly, she faced him once more. The glazed sheen over his brown eyes

cut her to the quick. “I have found a way to set us free.”

“Have you?” she whispered sadly.

He nodded almost emphatically. “There is a card game tomorrow evening?—”

She jerked her arm away. “If you recall, that is what got us in this mess in the first place.”

He frowned, as if confused. “You are the one who insisted we come to London!”

“I did.” She looked down at her hands. “To my everlasting regret. Look what has happened to you. You are in deeper now than you’ve ever been. You’re going to end up indebted to the wrong person, someone that will demand immediate satisfaction.” She lifted her gaze once more. “I won’t be there to help you this time.”

He gave a loud guffaws, causing a few of the passerby to glance in their direction. “I don’t need you to fight my battles for my any longer, Fleur. I am capable of handling myself.”

All that Fleur heard was I don’t need you. She swallowed over the bitterness rising in her throat. At least she didn’t want to cry any longer. She wanted to hit him in the chest and demand that he see reason, but it was useless. “I’m relieved to hear that, Flavian. I wish you all the best.”

Again, she turned to go. “Are you happy, Fleur?”

She paused. It was the first time he’d ever asked her that question. Glancing back at him, she said, “As happy as a courtesan can be, I suppose.” She wanted to tell him that she enjoyed being with Drake, but Flavian would only see it as a conquest, that he had done his part by standing aside and allowing the auction to take place. And

since there were no promises or confessions of anything other than carnal adoration, she couldn't very well say that she was wading in blissful contentment.

She saw his throat work as he swallowed. By the way his forehead was starting to bead with perspiration, she knew that he was starting to crave his true mistress yet again. His hands shook slightly as he said, "Is he good to you, at least?"

She couldn't lie about that. "Yes. He is very kind."

Flavian inclined his head sharply and returned his attention to the tumbler that was still in his grasp. As he lifted it to his lips, Fleur walked away, determined not to see the rest of her twin's downfall.

She put a hand to her stomach as she moved to the edge of the main entertainment. She was still well within the public eye, but far enough removed that she could watch everything from a distance.

She made it in enough time to bend over and wretch all over the neatly trimmed lawn. Putting a hand to her mouth, she tried to breathe deeply, to calm herself after the tumultuous reunion with her brother. She had told herself that he was well but perhaps it was an intuition she had as his twin, she knew that things were not as they had seemed when she'd stumbled upon him with Harriette. She was manipulating Flavian's weaknesses, tearing him down just as she had enjoyed watching her ruination.

It wasn't much different than what Mr. Porter had done to those poor, lost souls.

No. She couldn't think like that, or she would not be able to make it through the rest of the night at his side. Perhaps it would have been best should she passed Flavian by. At least that way she could have remained in that solitary bubble of joy and pretend that nothing was amiss. But she had to see the reality for what it was.

And it wasn't very pretty.

"Feeling better?"

Fleur spun at the sound of the soft, masculine voice. When she saw Drake she wanted to rush into his arms, but they didn't have that sort of understanding. Emotions could not get involved. It would make things entirely too complicated and make a ruin of her heart until it was no longer recognizable—until it resembled his.

"I appreciate the chance to experience the magic of Vauxhall, but I would like to retire now, if you don't mind."

He stepped closer to her. "I know you want nothing more than to run and hide, to recover your defeat in private, but that isn't what you need."

"How do you know what I need?" she countered.

He held out his hand. "Come with me."

With an unsteady extension, Fleur gave him her palm.

His grasp was sure and steady, warm, as he led her toward the Dark Walks that branched away from the majority of the assembled. There were lanterns flickering among the paths, but cast very little light. The sliver of moon overhead offered slightly more in a cloudless sky, twinkling with brilliant stars.

It would have been a perfectly romantic night, except that her chest was aching with grief.

Through several twists and turns, Drake led her through the labyrinth, until he finally stopped near the water's edge. There, bobbing all alone, was a dinghy with two oars

on the sand—just large enough for two.

“It would be a shame to miss the fireworks display. I thought you deserved a front row seat for your first viewing. It is best from the water.”

Fleur’s chest tightened, but this time, it was for a different reason. She reached out and threaded her hand through his. It was probably more intimate than sharing his bed. That was just a sexual act, but this showed how much she appreciated his thoughtfulness. “Thank you.”

He clenched his jaw as if he was uncomfortable with the praise and assisted her into the small boat. Once he’d shoved the hull into the river, he climbed in opposite her and took up the wooden paddles. She was impressed by the strength in his torso as he easily sailed them through the smooth water. It was a still night with light wind, so when he finally paused a short distance from a few other boats floating nearby, they bobbed gently on the lapping waves.

After a time, the easy sway of the boat lulled her into a sense of security. Out here, so far removed from the shore and the troubles that had dogged her heels there suddenly seemed very far away.

“How long do we have to wait for them to begin?” she asked. The purple hue of dusk had long given way to the darkness. There were a few candles flickering from some of the other boats, but their dinghy remained mysterious and subdued.

“They should be starting anytime.” Allowing the oars to drift, he held out a hand to her. “Would you care to lean against me? It might be more comfortable.”

Fleur decided she would like that very much. Carefully moving so that she didn’t tip the boat, she relaxed against his strong warm chest, her head lying in the crook of his shoulder. It quickly swept away all of her earlier cares.

“You looked enchanting this evening.” His breath teased the fine hairs near her temple and sent shivers down her spine and gooseflesh along her arms.

Suddenly, she didn’t care about anything but being with Drake.

As if reading her thoughts, his right hand slipped beneath her bodice to cup her naked breast. She gasped as he toyed with her taut nipple, rolling it between his fingers and palming her flesh until her core was pulsing.

At the same time, the first sparks erupted overhead. She gasped again and the pressure increased. She bit her lip and arched into his touch.

“You’re so responsive,” he growled deeply. “You drive me mad with desire for you.”

Fleur could say the same, but the combination of the light flashes overhead and the passion flowing through her body, she was quite at a loss for words.

“Bend your legs and spread them for me. I want to feel you come.”

Obediently, she did as he asked, eager for his ministrations. Now she understood why they had remained further away from the rest of the spectators. She wondered if he’d also planned this seduction all along.

The moment he inserted a finger into her wet passage, Fleur’s eyes rolled back in her head. She could still hear the loud booms and the applause in the distance, but all of her senses were focused on Drake and the pleasure he was causing with her.

She clutched at his arms and moaned lightly.

“That’s it. Give yourself to me.”

Fleur could tell she was close to her peak. And as the display turned fervent overhead, the sensations inside of her exploded when he flicked his finger along her sensitive bud.

She cried out as her body tightened and then became awash with a glorious release that made her cheeks flush and her legs tremble with the force of it.

As the fireworks ceased, Fleur floated back to reality. Her eyes fluttering open, she felt like a woman who had been well and truly loved. She sat up and turned to look at Drake. "Take me home."

He bent forward and kissed her tenderly. "As my lady wishes."

CHAPTER 15

D rake awoke early the next morning, naked and hard, lying next to Fleur in bed and eager to take her again. However, he wasn't such a licentious scoundrel that he couldn't let her gain some much needed sleep. The sun had just touched the horizon, and while he knew there were things that required his attention, he was reluctant to leave her side.

When they had returned from Vauxhall the night before, he'd carried her up the stairs where they had quickly divested themselves of those hindering clothes and spent the better part of the night and early morning intertwined in each other's arms.

She was definitely shifting something inside of him, and while he should be grateful that she was able to see the man behind the previous offenses he'd committed, he wondered if his luck would someday run out. The idea that Fleur might be snatched from him was not something he wanted to ponder. He had never contemplated such fear before, and it concerned him that Harriette was right. Perhaps he was getting soft.

It was not a comforting thought.

Forcing himself to leave Fleur, he donned the shirt and trousers he'd discarded the night before. He would change later, but right now he needed to confer with Amos to see if his cohort had discovered anything of interest from his inquiries the previous afternoon.

He was still tucking his shirt in his trousers when he walked in his study and spied

Amos kicked back in his chair, his booted feet crossed at the ankles on his desk.

With a snort, Drake said, “By all means, make yourself comfortable.”

“It was taking you quite some time to rise. I grew bored.” Dropping his boots to the floor, Amos straightened but he didn’t move and allow Drake to sit in his place.

However, he wasn’t interested in sitting right then. The brandy decanter on the sideboard looked more appealing at the moment. He poured two fingers’ worth in a tumbler and downed it in one fiery swallow. He repeated it a second time, and by the third he was starting to feel as if he could keep his focus from straying to Fleur.

Amos waited patiently for Drake to face him. Leaning against the mantel, he waited for his makeshift footman to speak.

He withdrew a sheet from his vest and tossed it on the desk before him. “This should give us a start.” He pointed a finger in the center of the paper. “The names on this list are men that you have had previous altercations with that are currently in or near London. While it is a possibility that someone else could hire a paid assailant, I feel it’s best to review these names before reaching that far.”

“Agreed.” Drake walked toward the desk and picked up the list. At a brief glance, he counted more than thirty suspects. As he read through the names, he shook his head. “It’s none of these.”

“How can you be so certain?” Amos returned.

“Because while they may be in London, they aren’t free men. Most of these I assisted into jail.” He walked over to the desk and gathered a key from a secret compartment where he opened a locked drawer. There, he pulled out a sheet of paper and handed it to Amos. “This is the list I compiled myself. I feel they would be more worthy

adversaries. Or if not, they have the ability to manipulate others to do their will.”

Amos copied Drake’s perusal, and then his brows winged upward until they nearly disappeared in his dark hairline. “Avalon? I thought he was an ally?”

“I am not discounting him,” Drake said evenly. “I would hope he would have more sense than to cross me but he was rather infatuated by Miss Davies when they met and since he is starting to act as though he is untouchable, I wouldn’t put it past him to betray me.”

Amos nodded. “I can’t believe I didn’t consider the courtesan.”

“She is just as devious as to back me into a corner. She is already trying to do so but I am not as worried about her. One snap of my fingers will have her behind an iron door if I have my way.”

“It seems to me we shouldn’t ignore the threat of any woman, including scorned ladies.”

“You will not find any of those,” Drake said emphatically. “I was very clear when I started any affair that it would be brief and there were never any hard feelings at the end. I made sure of it.”

“Fine.” Amos got to his feet and gathered his previous list. Tearing it into small pieces, he walked toward Drake and tossed them into the fire. “I will return tomorrow morning with an update, assuming you will not need me in the interim?”

“No. I plan on laying low today.”

“And spending time with your new interest?” Amos guessed with a wink from his exposed eye.

Drake offered a tight smile. “I’ve never been one to kiss and tell.”

Amos brushed past him and headed for the door.

Once he was gone, Drake walked to the window and looked out at the day. Whereas the day had begun sunny and bright, the clouds were starting to roll in from the west. No doubt there would be heavy rains descending on them later in the day. It seemed like the perfect time to laze the day away with Fleur. But he would never call her a courtesan. It seemed like such a crass word to call the woman who was slowly reminding him that his heart was worth more than pumping blood through his body to keep it alive.

Ignoring any further duties, he headed back up the stairs.

* * *

With a yawn, Fleur lifted her arms above her head—and hit something next to her. She turned her head to see Drake staring at her. His eyes roamed over her face with mirth and she rejoiced at the sight. “Have you been here all this time?”

“Hardly. I have never been someone who can sleep until the twelve o’clock hour.”

“Noon? You cannot be serious!” Instantly, Fleur sat up with a shocked gasp and stared at the rain pounding against the windowpanes. Although it caused the day to be dark and gloomy, she had never been one to sleep so late.

“I am,” came the dry reply. “But then, I did keep you up rather late.”

Fleur flopped back against the pillows, only realizing that she was fully naked beneath the covers. She clutched the counterpane to her chest and glared at him. “You’re turning me into quite the lazybones.”

He reached out and rubbed a hand on her bare shoulder. “I would not call the positions we engaged in last night as being idle.”

Heat rushed to her cheeks at the memory, a combination of embarrassment and enthusiasm. She didn’t know she could throw such caution to the wind and allow all of her senses to become so engaged with another person. She had nearly forgotten about the unfortunate interaction with her brother, lost as she was in Drake’s strong arms.

With the new day, those same reservations returned in full force to drown her with melancholy. “I am concerned about Flavian. I feel he is going to do something drastic.”

Drake frowned tightly. “What makes you say that?”

She sighed. “He mentioned a card game this evening and I am terrified he will find himself in dire straits. I can only hope he can’t find the blunt to engage in the match.”

Drake’s expression was grim when he said, “I’m sure Miss Wilson will give him the amount necessary to play.”

Fleur blinked. “Why would she do that? Does she despise both of us so much?” She put a hand to her forehead and closed her eyes. “I made the worst mistake of my life by convincing him to leave Greenwich. I only did it because—” Her gaze popped open and she looked at him.

“To escape me,” he finished. “I am aware, and I do not fault you for it. You were only doing what you thought necessary to take care of your brother. I know that now even if it does prick my pride to know that you were so desperate to escape me rather than come to an alternate understanding.”

She reached out grasped his upper arm. “I had no idea what sort of man you were. All I knew is that you terrified me.” Her eyes widened slightly, as if she’d realized what she’d inferred. “Of course, I no longer feel that way?—”

She could see the shutters behind Drake’s eyes slam shut. “Then you would be foolish to ignore your instincts.” He rolled out of the bed and walked over to the window where the rain and wind were pelting the pane with relentless force. “Don’t you remember the attic room? My life is littered with misdeeds. If you think I won’t revert to drastic measures if the situation warrants it, then you would be wrong.” He turned to face her and the resignation on his face tore at her heart.

“I know who you were ,” she countered. “But I don’t feel you are the same person you once were. People have the ability to change.”

“If they want to,” he stated. “I’m not sure I’m ready to give up all the power that Mr. Porter has gained over the years. He was a force to be reckoned with. Everyone knew my reputation and it preceded me wherever I went in England. If these people discover that I don’t possess the same threat, they can use it against me.” He shoved a hand through his dark hair. “Burning that house is just the beginning of the trouble I could be facing.”

“Then we speak to Bow Street. We can gain assistance from reputable gentlemen out to secure justice.”

Drake snorted. “Do you know how many of those Runners are in the pockets of the underground? They are eager to turn the other way when trouble starts to brew. Its why the London gangs were established. They make their own rules, ensuring that they are the ones who benefit. If there is a misstep, the traitor is dealt with accordingly. I know because I used to be a part of their numbers. While I should regret it, I can’t say that I do. Being involved with criminals makes you understand how they think.” He walked back over to her, but he didn’t sit down or gather her into

his arms. Instead, he looked down at her, as if to emphasize his position within the lower echelon of society. “I have made use of the talents I have gathered over time, and I cannot stop now, not until this threat against me has been vanquished. I will not apologize for my actions beyond this point. Do you understand that?”

Fleur swallowed hard. She was worried about where this path might take him. She feared he might revert to his misdeeds like her brother was threatening to do. Whereas she could only hope that Flavian came to his senses before it was too late, she knew that Drake was a stronger man. He had survived this long against all the insurmountable odds.

He would survive this too.

She reached out a hand to him. Allowing the coverlet to drop away and expose her breasts, she said, “I suggest that we make use of the time available to us.”

* * *

After spending most of the afternoon in a tangle of bedclothes, Drake left Fleur to bathe in their chamber as he left to make use of the tub he’d retained in the kitchen. However, rather than startle his cook, he had it moved to the studio.

Lying his head on the rim of the copper, he allowed the sting of the steaming water to help secure his next course of action.

Following what Fleur had told him about the card game to be held, Drake had begun to wonder if Flavian was being lured out into the open in order to get to Mr. Porter. He could easily be used as bait. Or perhaps it was that Harriette intended to laugh at the young pup when he was shoved back into misery yet again. The courtesan knew that his sister wouldn’t be there to protect him, so no doubt she was curious how he might stand on his own. Drake, unfortunately, already knew the answer to that.

Flavian was not as strong as his sister. He would collapse under the weight of his actions. Because Fleur still cared about him, Drake felt honor bound to try and stop the man from making a complete mess out of his life, where there was no longer any turning back or chance at redemption.

Amos had disappeared until the morning, so Drake reached out to the only other person he might trust, Devon.

Drake sent round a code that Amos' son would be able to decode with efficiency. They had devised their own means of communication some years ago. It had worked then and it didn't fail him now. A reply was sent by messenger a short time later that gave him the information he required.

He scrubbed a hand down his face when he saw that the match would be held at the Crown and Sceptre, the same pub that he'd fought in that illicit boxing match. He wasn't eager to return there, as his presence would start to become noted, but he realized he didn't have a choice if he wished to drag Flavian out of there.

He ground his teeth together. The man would owe him dearly for this, supposing they actually made it through the night unscathed.

Stepping out of the tub, Drake dried himself off and wondered what he might say to Fleur. Now that they were sharing the same bed, she would wonder about his absence if he wasn't there. He certainly couldn't reveal the truth because she would insist on going with him. And considering the apprehension he would be under about her safety; he couldn't take the risk. It would be easier if he slipped into the pub and back out without drawing too much attention.

Unfortunately, for all his conniving in the past, he couldn't seem to lie to her now. Instead, he instructed a footman to head up with a note that he had to slip out for a brief time to check on one of his other lodgings. He might not be able to tell a blatant

untruth to Fleur, but he had no trouble putting it on paper.

Determined not to spend too much time out, Drake hailed down a hackney to take him near the pub. Instructing the driver to stop a few blocks away, Drake walked the rest of the way. He kept his shoulders slumped and his cap pulled down low over his brows. He wore clothes suited to his surroundings and moved as though he had never left. Too much confidence would see a knife in the center of his ribs. He had the scars to prove it. Thankfully, none of the wounds had been deep enough to drain the last of his lifeblood.

Entering through the front door, Drake was glad to see most of the patrons were already well into their cups and flirtations with the serving wenches that Drake slipped among the assemblage with little heed paid to his movements. He didn't think he had been recognized as yet, but he wasn't going to go out of his way to renew old acquaintances either.

He headed toward the back of the pub where a crowd had gathered. It was a key indication that large sport was about to take place. This place was notorious for illegal boxing and gambling, where the stakes were generally much higher than simple coin. These weren't the gentleman clubs that the aristocracy frequented where the largest hindrance was a cloud of cigar smoke and the scent of brandy wafting on the air.

Here, lives were traded with the expertise of nothing more than a sleight of hand.

He allowed his gaze to travel over the faces eager to jump into the game when they had the chance. Some were almost salivating with each turn of the cards. Drake had never bothered to engage in these deadly matches. He preferred to engage when there was blunt to be had, or perhaps a bit of sport. With Flavian, he had seen an ease to his boredom by having a bit of fun. At the time, Drake had found himself at a crossroads, not sure where he wanted to go. He had considered the western coast, as he had

enjoyed some previous exploits near the sea, but instead, something had compelled him to travel in the opposite direction, toward Greenwich.

Some days he wondered if he would have been better suited to follow his first instinct.

But then he wouldn't have met Fleur and he wasn't sure he wanted to ponder that regrettable circumstance for long.

Finding a sturdy, timber frame to lean against to observe the match, Drake was relieved to see that Flavian was nowhere in sight. He hoped that meant the young pup had decided to forgo this evening's entertainment and decided to stay home to nurse the hangover he'd likely been suffering that morning.

Waiting for over an hour, he was almost convinced that Flavian wasn't going to appear, but then the door opened and Avalon walked inside. But it was the man striding beside him that caused Drake to mutter a curse.

Fleur's brother.

CHAPTER 16

Fleur paced the bedchamber. Something was making her restless. It was as if a dark premonition had taken hold that told her something bad was about to occur.

She wished that Drake would have told her where he was headed so that she could ease her mind if he didn't return by dawn. At least she would know where to begin the search.

Instead, she was left to walk anxiously about the room and tell herself that her instincts were wrong, that she was being unreasonable.

Nevertheless, she couldn't dare try to sleep, so she lit a candle and headed downstairs. If she couldn't sleep, then she would raid the larder and see if cook had made any of those delicious sweet honey biscuits that she couldn't seem to get enough of. If Fleur wasn't careful, she was going to find all those new gowns Drake had bought for her start becoming a little snug.

She stopped suddenly, wondering if that might be the only reason they wouldn't fit. She sucked in a breath as she put a hand to her abdomen. Drake had told her that he'd always been careful when it came to sex, but thus far, things had been progressing as nature intended. She knew she was playing with fire, daring to tempt fate in such a fashion, but being with him felt so right that she hadn't been thinking of tomorrow, although she should probably start doing so. She didn't think Drake was eager to start a family any time soon. He hadn't gone so far as to mention a more permanent situation between them, so that told her enough about their current relationship.

Walking into the kitchen, the light from the flame in her grasp flickered slightly. She shivered, the earlier sense of unease prickling over her skin once more. She set down the candle on the counter and searched the larder. With a pleased smile, she found what she was looking for and eagerly snatched one of the biscuits from the metal tray.

Finishing her first satisfied bite, she licked the crumbs from her lips.

She ate a second and a third before she shoved the tray back where it belonged. She knew it was nerves that was causing her to react like this, but until Drake returned and she could be assured that all was well, she would find little relief.

With little else to do but be consumed by her own concerns, Fleur headed for Drake's study. She hoped it might offer some distraction before she forced herself to return to their chamber.

Their chamber. It was unsettling how quickly she was starting to imagine them as a couple, rather than a man and his mistress.

She hoped she might find a book to read to keep her mind off every bad scenario that was crashing through her mind. She was worried that the individual responsible for setting flame to his other residence might do the same—while Drake was there. The note had been brief, but it had set fear inside her heart when she'd read his masculine hand sweeping across the page. She realized that he had lived this long without her guidance but perhaps it was time that changed. If nothing else, Fleur admitted that she was starting to care for him. She didn't want to see him injured—or worse. She could have assisted him tonight if he'd only confided in her. She appreciated that he wanted to keep her safe, that the less she embroiled herself in his life the better off she was, but she was finding it impossible to ignore the dangers that swarmed him constantly.

Sitting in a chair by the mantel, Fleur laid her head back against the cushions of the chair and stared into the dying flames. They were little more than glowing coals and

she would have discounted them entirely if it wasn't for the slight flutter of a white bit of paper.

Curious, she straightened and wondered why it had been tossed into the fire at all. Unless, of course, it was something that no one else was meant to see.

She carefully reached into the ashes and pulled out the charred scrap. Most of it had burned beyond recognition, but there was enough that she could tell it was a few smudged names on a list. One in particular standing out more than the rest.

...vian...

An icy chill crawled up her spine. Was Drake so distrusting of Flavian? And what sort of list was this? Was it connected to the fire that had sent his house up in flames? Granted, Flavian had more motivation to cause Drake harm than anyone else she could think of at the moment, considering his hatred in spite of her, but Drake himself had explained he had made several enemies through the years.

The only person she knew that Drake had ever hesitated around was Avalon. Was he also considered a suspect?

Tossing the paper back into the fire, Fleur's mind began to race. She was starting to wonder if she could really trust Drake if he wanted to paint her brother as such a villain. Perhaps instead of Avalon, Drake was the one she needed to fear. Sometimes the most obvious choice was the correct one.

It was certainly something to ponder as she waited for Drake to return.

As the ormolu clock noted the two o'clock hour, she curled her legs beneath her and hugged herself and prayed she was wrong.

Where are you?

* * *

Not wanting to give away his identity just yet, Drake hung to the back of the entertainment as Avalon and Flavian moved forward. The crowd of people parted for them as if Avalon was Moses commanding the Red Sea. Drake wasn't surprised, for if there was anyone that held a fiercer reputation than Drake, it was the king of the Blue Boys.

"Do you have room for my good friend?" Avalon clapped Flavian on the back and urged him forward. "He tells me he has what it takes to take home tonight's winnings."

There were a few chuckles that resounded, and then a burly man with unruly red hair kicked out a chair toward them. "By all means, I could learn a thing or two about the game."

Flavian sat down and Drake could almost see him salivating as the cards were slid in his direction. Next to him, Avalon set down a small coin purse that clanked with awareness as he moved away from the table.

Drake moved forward swiftly. Now was the time for him to learn what Avalon's deeper purpose was for Fleur's errant brother.

"I thought you were more inclined to play Hazard rather than Faro," Drake murmured dryly next to Avalon.

The dark-haired man smiled before he turned his head to peer at Drake. "I do. But I agreed to introduce young Mr. Davies to some of the more delightful clubs this fair city has to offer."

“Is that so? Are you sure you weren’t coerced by Miss Wilson for some other reason?”

Avalon looked at him with the same crooked smile, but his dark eyes foretold that Drake was wading in deeper waters. “Let’s have a drink, shall we?”

He led the way over to a table and two chairs at the edge of the room. While the rest of the pub was rather crowded that evening, they were served with two pints of ale as soon as they sat down. “Such service,” Avalon complimented the wench as she offered a sly wink and strode off. He took a drink, and then peered firmly at Drake. “I have the feeling you are accusing me of something rather unsavory. I am not sure that I approve.”

Drake shrugged. “Take it as you will, but you must be aware that Miss Davies is very protective of her brother. And it surely can’t be a secret that it is Flavian’s penchant for gambling that set them on the path to London in the first place. I know you are well informed about anything of interest that takes place in the city.”

“That I am,” Avalon said evenly. “But in this regard, I did not know about Mr. Davies weakness for the tables. I was merely trying to perform a good deed.”

Drake narrowed his eyes, not believing a word that the man uttered. “I find that difficult to believe. I feel that there is some sort of understanding between you and Miss Wilson you wish to keep silent.”

“If that were true, then surely you can’t expect me to confide in you.” He tilted his head to the side. “Unless, of course, you are willing to make a trade. Mr. Davies for your lovely Fleur.”

His hands clenching into fists beneath the table, Drake uttered a soft growl of warning, “I fear the lady is not up for bargaining.”

“Pity.” Avalon sighed heavily. “I was rather hoping to deepen our acquaintance. Instead, it could be that young Flavian is beholden to me.”

“So, it’s come to this. An ultimatum.” Drake shook his head. He should have seen this coming but he had imagined Avalon interested in more than Miss Davies.

“That is such a crass definition,” the other man murmured as he took a long draught of his ale. “I prefer to think of it as more of a mutual understanding. I fear that Harriette is already tiring of her latest plaything. It’s the least I can do to see he isn’t forced to beg on the streets.”

“I can accommodate him at any number of places,” Drake countered.

Avalon tapped a finger on his chin thoughtfully. “And yet, I was under the impression that you were two less than your previous holdings. How many does that leave?”

“More than enough,” Drake snapped.

A pair of dark brows lifted. “I didn’t mean to cause offense. It is all that everyone has been discussing of late. They wonder if you are still the same Mr. Porter you’ve always been, or if you have become... weak.”

It was all Drake could do not to pound the scarred wood of the table with both of his fists. “I would dare any man to test my patience and they shall quickly find out which is true.” Deciding he’d had enough baiting for one evening, he got up and drained the nearly full glass of ale before he slammed the empty tankard down. He leaned toward Avalon and said in a smooth, deep voice, “Fleur is mine. Flavian is not to be harmed. And if any further holdings are damaged following our conversation, I shall personally see to it that there is another body being pulled out of the Thames.”

“Threatening murder? Really, Mr. Porter. That is rather unsporting of you.”

But it was the slight flash of uncertainty in Avalon's dark eyes that made Drake go in for the lethal strike. "It is a promise. Whoever has been responsible for my latest run of bad luck will soon be quite unfortunate as well."

With that, Drake turned on his heel and left the pub.

* * *

Fleur jerked awake, immediately on the alert, but when she spied the silhouetted figure walking into the study, she was comforted by the sight of Drake. The last dregs of her restless slumber faded quickly as she jumped to her feet and confronted him as he strode purposefully toward the sideboard.

"Where have you been all night?" she demanded. "I have been worried sick!"

She heard the sound of liquid being splashed into a glass. "That brings me such solace," he sneered.

She blinked, confused by the cruel note of his tone. "What happened tonight? Why are you acting like this?"

He slammed down the tumbler and almost shouted, "Must you pummel me with questions the moment I arrive? You are not my wife, and I am not beholden to explain anything to you."

This time, a gasp escaped her. Clenching her fists, she returned brusquely, "Very well. If that is how you feel then I shall not bother you any longer. However, I would ensure your cot is in proper working order because you will not be sharing a bed with me again!"

She stalked toward the door but it was slammed in her face before she could cross the

threshold. Drake's arm blocked her way and he exhaled heavily, as if he had run a great distance rather than sprinted across the room. "Forgive me. I fear I am not myself this evening." His hand slid down the frame. "Leave, if you wish. It is probably for the best if you do so."

As he moved away, Fleur hesitated. She ought to go but something compelled her to stay. Perhaps it was the defeated manner in which he returned to the sideboard, his stiff stance as he stood there, as if contemplating his entire life.

Fleur walked softly across the room and laid a hand on his arm. Giving him a gentle squeeze, she whispered, "Talk to me. Tell me what happened that has upset you so. Was there another fire?"

He didn't speak for several moments. However, Fleur was grateful that he was no longer so cold, nor did he shrug her off. She hoped that meant he was considering confiding in her.

"I lied to you about where I was going tonight."

At first, Fleur was taken aback. "Oh."

He finally turned to face her directly. "I went to see if Flavian would actually make his way to the gaming tables."

She didn't want to ask. "Did he?"

"Yes."

She swallowed hard. "I see." This time, she was the one who turned away. She had been under the illusion that he might change his mind after their conversation at Vauxhall. She should have known that nothing would change.

She sat back down in the chair she'd vacated earlier. Clasping her hands together she tried to keep her eyes from stinging.

"Drink this."

She blinked back the moisture as she reached out and accepted the drink in Drake's hand. "Thank you," she murmured, and then tipped up the glass and downed it in one burning swallow. Her breath caught and she coughed as the liquid blazed a path down to her stomach. He returned with another and she drank it as well.

Slowly, the heat that swirled in her stomach started to flow out to her limbs and her upset started to fade.

He must have noticed she had calmed slightly, because he moved to the mantel. Leaning against it, he looked at her with that intent silver stare. "There's more."

She sighed. "There generally is."

"He was there with Avalon."

This revelation caused her to frown. "What were they doing together? I imagined Flavian would still have been hanging on Harriette."

"I am under the impression that her enthusiasm for him is starting to wane."

"So, she thrusts Flavian off on a criminal of the underground?" Fleur burst out of her chair and paced the room angrily. "I could strangle that woman with my bare hands for the punishment she has put us through. I believed that I was going to incur sympathy from that woman. Instead, all I received was more misery." She stopped and put a hand to her forehead. "I shall never forgive myself for this mess. Not only have I ruined myself, but I have ruined Flavian as well. I can't believe I was so na?ve

to allow my trust to fully rest on her!”

Her breath started to come in deep, heaving gulps. The drink that had calmed her was now swirling inside of her like a snake, infecting her with its poison.

Drake soon stood in front of her. “You were doing what you thought was necessary. You had no way of knowing that sort of person you were dealing with. We have all made that error at one point or another.”

She pinned him with a hard stare. “Have you?”

Drake’s face was wiped of any emotion when he replied, “Her name was Elina Waters.”

She stilled.

“I fancied myself in love with her but when I was injured, I discovered how deep her feelings for me went.” His voice contained more than a touch of bitterness. “I called out to her, believing I was breathing my last, and she left me, bleeding, in the middle of an alley and returned to her lover. If it wasn’t for Amos, I wouldn’t be here today.” His nostrils flared. “It is human nature to want to love but I learned the hard way what that can do to you.”

“Which is why you won’t open your heart to me.” Fleur hadn’t meant for those words to escape, but now that they had, she couldn’t recant them.

His eyes glittered. “I can make no promises to you for they would undoubtedly be broken. All I can do is say something is... different when you are near. But I can’t say whether or not I can allow that much trust again.”

She wanted to be hurt, to be angry and rail at him. Instead, she said softly, “I will not

ask for more than what you are willing to give me. Whatever that may be.”

He reached out and cupped her cheek with his hand. “I will not allow Flavian to be drawn into the underground. I will do everything in my power to ensure that doesn’t happen. But it might take some time.”

She nodded. “Fine. And while I understand it is difficult for you to trust anyone, please don’t keep secrets from me. I can bear anything but blatant lies.”

He put his forehead against hers. “Agreed.”

She pulled back and looked at him steadily. “If something involves my brother again, I’m going with you.”

He sighed heavily. “Fleur?—”

“I won’t accept no on this. He’s not just the last of my family. He is my twin . There is a connection there that can’t be denied. I knew something was wrong tonight. I could feel it. It is why I stayed here and waited for your return. If he is in true danger, I want to be there. I am the only person who has ever been able to make him see reason, even if I’ve failed in that regard lately.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose but he gave a curt incline of his head. “Very well. But you will have to don the shroud. I won’t have Avalon targeting you instead.”

She echoed his earlier sentiment. “Agreed.”

He withdrew and said, “Come. Let’s get to bed. I’m exhausted and no doubt you are the same.”

Fleur wasn’t sure about that. Her mind was still racing with what she’d been told. But

there was nothing further she could do tonight. More than likely the damage had already been done.

Tomorrow would tell the tale of how deep Flavian had dug his own hole.

After Drake had divested himself of his clothes, he climbed into bed. Fleur kept on her nightdress and proceeded to do the same.

“No.” Drake’s voice was firm. “I want to feel your skin against mine.”

She complied, withdrawing the garment from her and tossing it the edge of the bed. Climbing in next to him, he held her close, her back to his front. She could feel the pressure of his cock against her upper thigh, but she was thankful that he ignored the urgency of his member. Neither of them seemed to be in the proper state of mind to engage in such an intimate activity.

As Fleur’s lids grew heavy, she realized that she hadn’t yet talked to Drake about protection. She promised herself that would be the first topic of the morning.

CHAPTER 17

Fleur's moan broke through Drake's reverie. He thought he had been dreaming but he realized rather quickly that his consciousness had blurred the line between wake and sleep. His hand was stroking her core and yet, he still had to shake off the last of the cobwebs in his brain.

However, when his cock began to pulse with need, he knew that he couldn't stop now. He wanted her too much. He needed her too much.

He moved his hips back and forth against her, mimicking the act of lovemaking as she did the same against his hand. His other arm was beneath her, so he cupped her breasts, toying with the hardened nipples as he kissed and sucked the delicate curve where her neck met her shoulder. It seemed to be a particular favorite of hers.

The sharp gasp she emitted told him he'd acted appropriately. As her heart began to pound against his hand and a rush of moisture coated his other hand, she released a low moan as her body shook with her release. He was relentless in his teasing of her, wringing every last tremor from her body. As she lay limp and replete in his arms, he slid his cock into her. Holding her close, he thrust in and out, grunting with the force of his rhythm.

It didn't take long before she was clutching his arm and crying out his name. "Drake, please."

Together, they found their mutual completion.

In the quiet aftermath, as their breathing slowly began to return to normal, Drake sensed a change in Fleur. “What’s wrong?”

She slowly turned in his arms until she was lying on her back. Ensuring that she stayed wrapped up in his warm embrace, she looked at him in concern. “We haven’t been using any... preventative measures against... having a child.”

Drake stilled and then realized that he had been the fool. “Damn.” He fell back against the pillows and stared at the ceiling overhead. “I haven’t been thinking...” He shook his head and looked at her. “I will remedy that oversight today and procure some sheaths.”

She worried her lower lip. “What if it’s already too late?” she whispered.

He grew quiet. He had been so wrapped up in the chaos that generally surrounded him that he hadn’t stopped to consider the ramifications of his own actions. The women he’d lain with before had usually used some form of remedies to prevent an accidental pregnancy. He had pulled out before his seed was spilled as well but he was so fazed by how good it felt to be inside of Fleur that he’d failed to do even that.

“When did you last have your courses?”

She hesitated and then said, “I can’t say for sure. Three weeks ago, perhaps? I daresay I lost track with the move to London and the subsequent events that proceeded it.”

“Then we shall wait.”

“And if I do not bleed?” she prodded.

He frowned at the ceiling. “I don’t know. But there is no use putting the proverbial

cart before the horse. We will take things as they come. I have never looked for tomorrow.”

She said nothing further but Drake could tell that she was still troubled. He leaned over and kissed her lightly on the lips. “Get some rest. I’m sorry for having disturbed you.”

She offered a slight smile. “I’m not.”

His gaze swept her naked form. “Much more talk like that and we will be up rather late, indeed.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck at the same time her legs went lax. “I don’t see any problem with that,” she murmured seductively.

Drake wasn’t sure if this woman was his salvation—or if she would end up being the death of him. Either way, he was eagerly heading toward the light.

* * *

Later the following morning, Drake was in his study when Amos strode in. Until that point, he’d been able to pretend as though things weren’t as dire as he’d imagined. The night he’d spent entangled in Fleur’s arms had been one of the most spectacular of his entire life. He couldn’t actually recall a moment that had held such tenderness and warmth, not even when he’d been with Elina. He could almost forget that the harsh realities he’d suffered since he was a lad had faded away, leaving nothing behind but a pure, unadulterated... contentment.

However, the moment Amos entered the room he could tell his expression didn’t bode well and any happiness that Drake might have tried to grasp dissipated in front of him. “I heard you had an altercation with Avalon.”

Drake leaned back in his chair. Withdrawing a coin from his vest pocket he began to thread it through his fingers. “I wouldn’t necessarily call it an altercation but more of an involved discussion.”

Amos didn’t find his assessment amusing in the least. “What the bloody hell were you thinking to challenge him like that? He has a veritable army at his disposal. Are you trying to paint a target on your back?”

Drake slammed the coin down on the table with his palm. “Things change!”

Never before had Drake raised his voice, not to Amos, not to his worst enemies. A show of such strong emotion was a definite sign of weakness and would cause him to lose the last of his reputation with the underground. If he were to best Avalon at his own game, he had to remember to play his part just as well. It was true that Avalon had the Blue Boys but Drake wasn’t without his own resources. Amos had been a formidable ally and to have their acquaintance blow up now would be disastrous.

The single blue eye narrowed in disapproval. “I expected more of you. I don’t care to drag you out of another alley because of the mistakes you made regarding another woman.”

Drake glanced away. “Fleur is different.”

A derisive snort was his reply. “They all are until the lights go out.” Amos stalked to the desk causing Drake’s focus to snap back to him. As the other man slammed his own palms on the top of the wood, he growled, “You can’t honestly sit there and tell me that you are confident that should the decision arise where your courtesan has to choose between you and Flavian, she won’t choose her brother?”

Drake stilled. If anyone else of his acquaintance dared to call him out like Amos, he would have ensured they weren’t able to speak again afterward. Unfortunately, for all

of his current assurances that Fleur cared for him, Amos was right. The entire reason Fleur had ruined herself to begin with was to save her twin. If he actually hoped that her affection for him would trump that of her flesh and blood, he was fooling himself.

Scrubbing a hand down his face, Drake leaned back in his chair. He had required someone to wake him up from the daze he was starting to slip into with Fleur. Thankfully, he wasn't so far gone in his besotted state that he couldn't allow logical thinking to return.

"Do you have a list of possible females?"

Rather than act confused by the sudden change in topic, Amos straightened and withdrew the paper from his vest. Drake removed a slip of paper from his desk and as they exchanged names, it didn't take Drake long to discount most. He did, however, keep Miss Wilson as a likely suspect for arson.

Amos took both lists and after tearing them up, he tossed them in the fire. "I suppose we know who the guilty parties are. I can't say I'm surprised. They have been giving you the most trouble of late."

"Indeed," Drake murmured. "It would seem that way, unless there is someone else that we haven't yet considered." He steepled his hands before him. He had one more name but he wasn't giving it up just yet. But then, it might behoove him to tell Amos so the individual could be watched carefully. "There is young Flavian."

Amos's brows winged upward. "I was wondering when you were going to count him. Of the three, he has the most reason to do you harm. You absconded with his sister and he is, no doubt, wishing to enact revenge."

"If he might be sober long enough to do the job," Drake added. "I do think his movements should be monitored closely."

Amos inclined his head. “Consider it done.”

* * *

As purposeful steps began to approach the door, Fleur quickly fled back down the hallway, ducking into the closest room and securing herself behind the door.

Once Amos strode past, she put a hand to her pounding heart. Unfortunately, it wasn’t racing due to her rapid flight, but rather the conversation that she had overheard.

She had intended to approach Drake and let him know that their nightly worries had been unfounded, as she had gotten her courses that morning. Relief had flowed through her and she had eagerly gone down the stairs. Her hand was poised to knock when she paused just in time. Drake’s outburst had startled her, so instantly she feared something must be wrong. Desperate to know if it had anything to do with Flavian, she’d pressed her ear to the wood and strained to listen, half scared to actually enter and discover her brother was dead—or worse.

What she’d learned next caused ice to freeze in her veins. Following everything that had transpired between her and Drake, he still didn’t want to trust her. It caused her heart to break, but then, she couldn’t really fault Drake because if the decision arose where she had to choose between her lover and her brother, she would be honor bound, if nothing else, to save Flavian. That had hurt nearly as much as thinking Drake believed her brother was responsible for the heinous crime of arson.

She shut her eyes tightly and tried to ignore the desire to hear Drake’s voice, to be held in the warmth of his arms. She was starting to find it entirely too comforting to rely on him when she had known all along it was nothing but an illusion. She had known from the beginning that he had a cold heart, that he was incapable of love, although she thought she might be the one to change him. For someone as tender and

caring, to ensure her needs were met before his, she imagined that her patience and understanding might have started thawing his icy demeanor. Instead, she was the fool who had allowed herself to believe there could ever be more between them, that a criminal like Drake Porter could be persuaded to accept someone— anyone —into his life forever.

What disturbed her the most was that she had started to picture a life with him. As absurd as that sounded, for it wasn't as though they were completely infatuated with one another, nor was there any true hope of a blissful future together, Fleur had started to imagine what it might be like to have his child. She pictured a raven-haired daughter with piercing silver eyes, or perhaps a boy that had his father's smooth personality and his mother's green gaze that saw the world through a different perspective.

It was the furthest thing from a poet's romance or a childish fairy tale, and yet, Fleur was starting to think it was perfect. For them. Not everyone's love story was the same, and while she told herself she wasn't in love with Drake, neither could she deny she could easily fall to his charms, because he had them in abundance. He just chose not to share them with the rest of the world. She thrilled at the idea he saved those coveted moments when they were alone. Then, and only then, could she catch a glimpse of the man that Drake had once been, before society had jaded his positivity.

Taking a few deep restorative breaths, she had to come up with a way to get out of this house. She needed some space from him, some time to sort out her thoughts, and she decided that a brisk walk through the park would do much to help restore her broken spirits.

Walking back out into the hallway, Fleur hadn't taken more than a handful of steps before Drake called her name. She reluctantly turned to face him.

"I was just coming to see you."

He offered her a slight upturn of his lips, as if smiling was still something he found difficult to do. At the moment, Fleur felt much the same.

“I had considered doing the same, but I didn’t think you would grant my request.”

His gaze turned wary. “Which would be?”

“To take a walk in the park. I’m finding the walls a bit too close for comfort today.”

“I see.” He studied her expression, as if trying to ferret out the true reason for her escape. She did her best to adopt a perfectly neutral repose. Finally, he gave a curt nod. “Very well, I shall escort you?—”

“No, please.” She shook her head. “That’s not necessary. I think that would only be courting danger should we be seen together. Two birds with one stone, if someone is truly out to do you harm.” She prayed that her explanation was enough to throw him off of the scent that something was amiss.

Thankfully, although he frowned darkly, he exhaled sharply. “Very well. I shall have Amos escort you.”

Fleur wasn’t thrilled at the prospect of his henchman following her about, knowing that he also thought the worst of Flavian but since she knew she wasn’t going to get out of there without an escort, she nodded her head. “Of course.”

As he strode off, presumably to collect Amos, Fleur released a slow breath. She walked to the foyer, and after donning her pelisse, she waited patiently.

A short time later, Amos appeared, his single blue eye regarding her steadily. She said nothing but walked for the door where the housekeeper opened it from the other side. Sometimes she forgot that there were other people about in the house. They

seldom made an appearance unless they were needed. She was sure that Drake had ensured it remained that way. He enjoyed his privacy, and if she was honest with herself, Fleur did too. She wished she was alone at the moment, as she didn't feel any sort of threat, but she knew that nothing short of a miracle would have convinced Drake to let her leave on her own. She should have been grateful that he was concerned for her safety.

Instead, it made her feel like she was some sort of prisoner that had to be watched constantly. That sensation had faded after she had been with Drake for a while but after today, she was starting to experience the same uncomfortable feeling.

Rather than hailing down a hackney, Fleur opted to walk the short distance to the park. The air had finally turned brisk with the approaching autumn, and as her cheeks and nose became cold, it helped to numb the rest of her body as well. It had been the right idea to head out for this little excursion.

"Is there something you wanted to say to me?"

Fleur glanced quizzically at her companion. He faced her with his eyepatch on the opposite side. While there was only one eye peering at her, it seemed more intimidating than if he'd had full sight. "What happened to your eye?"

She hadn't meant to speak so boldly, because Amos didn't seem like the sort of man to openly speak about his afflictions. However, he didn't seem to take offense as he returned matter-of-fact, "It was a knife fight."

"How... dreadful."

"Not for me." That blue eye flashed. "I retained my life. He wasn't so fortunate."

"Oh. I... see."

“Does it bother you to know that I have killed someone?”

Fleur considered that statement. “I suppose it should but something tells me you aren’t a cruel man. You wouldn’t have acted so rashly if it wasn’t warranted.”

Some of the stiffness in his shoulders relaxed slightly. “Then you would be correct. Believe me when I say the man I fought was not a great loss to anyone.”

She inclined her head but didn’t reply. She didn’t feel there was a need to do so.

They allowed silence to envelop them until they reached the park. As they walked toward the toll gate, Amos noted, “This will soon be a distant memory for the park.”

Fleur glanced at him curiously. “What do you mean?”

“The city has requested a man by the name of Decimus Burton to construct an arch honoring Wellington’s effort during the war, as well as a grand new entrance.”

“Interesting,” Fleur murmured. “Although I saw nothing wrong with the current one.”

“Aye. But there are some who prefer the newest and most fashionable, and who want to remind everyone that England is the greatest country in the world.”

She slid her focus to him. “You sound as though you don’t agree.”

He shrugged. “For someone who has had to struggle under the tutelage of such a revered nation, perhaps I’m not the best person to ask when it comes to my opinion. I know several other people who would agree with my assessment, that for all the wonderful things England stands for, it has a habit of neglecting its own people.”

Fleur had never thought about her own existence in those terms. “I would have to

disagree.” He looked at her steadily, so she explained, “I have not had an easy time of it myself. After our parents died, I devoted my life to taking care of my brother. We struggled but not once did I blame anyone for our dire straits. I knew I hadn’t been born to the upper ten thousand but it didn’t make me bitter or despise them because of it. I have heard of many members of the peerage who are not content when they should be able to buy their happiness. It shouldn’t matter whether you are poor or rich. The fact remains that you have to discover the determination and find a way to better your circumstances.”

He gave a light snort. “Is that what you’ve done by aligning with Drake?”

She stopped abruptly and glared at him. “It doesn’t matter if Drake had anything at all to his name. It matters how he treats me. He might have been insufferable at first but he has been more than kind to me since.” She set her hands on her hips. “Since it seems I must explain myself, I should set the account straight. I don’t ask for charity or fancy baubles. I’m not his mistress. He bought my virtue in an auction. ” As a couple of curious heads swiveled in their direction, Fleur lowered her frustrated tone. “I know you wish to perceive me as a villain, perhaps because Drake told me about Elina, but rest assured, I am not intent on hurting him.”

She turned and started to proceed further into the park, however she could feel Amos’s presence behind her.

“I can tell you care about him.”

Her steps faltered. “I do.”

Another slight silence fell and then, “I can’t believe he told you about her.”

Fleur didn’t know if he was actually speaking to her or muttering aloud but she responded. “He did.”

“He doesn’t confide in anyone.”

“I gathered that,” she said dryly.

“Did he tell you about the paintings?” he asked incredulously.

“Yes.” Her cheeks warmed. “He told me everything about his life before I met him if that’s what you’re wondering.”

There was another hesitation, and then he said softly, “You must mean a great deal to him. He doesn’t confide in anyone.”

Her chest ached. “I hope so.”

She felt a hand on her arm and she glanced at Amos. “I know you will have to make a tough decision soon. Don’t regret your choice.”

Fleur froze, wondering if he had known she’d been listening at the door when he had been discussing her brother with Drake. Gathering her conviction, she said firmly, “I won’t. Anything I decide will be for the good of everyone.”

Amos didn’t seem to know what to think of that reply but he gave a curt nod and released her.

As Fleur continued the rest of her walk, she was glad that she had been able to clear the air with Amos. At least he would know where she stood if things turned sour.

CHAPTER 18

Drake caught himself drumming his fingers on his desk as he impatiently waited for Fleur and Amos to return. He couldn't seem to stop thinking of the odd way she had been acting that morning. He considered that it had something to do with his lack of sheaths during their lovemaking and he had already rectified that oversight. He couldn't imagine that he had been so caught up in the moment with her that he'd completely forgotten one important factor.

However, that wasn't the worst thing on his mind. Instead, he kept imaging her belly becoming swollen with their child. He had always been abhorrent of begetting any offspring before, but it didn't seem quite so distasteful anymore. Of course, they would have to live somewhere other than London. He wasn't about to stay here where he felt as though he had to look over his shoulder for ensuing trouble. He wouldn't dare add that sort of misery to everything else that Fleur had endured thus far. She had taken so much upon herself by worrying over her brother that it was time someone looked out for her.

To distract himself, he'd made a quick trip to see Miss Wilson to check on Flavian, but he wasn't surprised when he was turned away, with the claim that neither of them were home. For the first time, he actually believed the butler.

Now, as he heard the front door open, Drake jumped out of his chair and strode out of his study. Fleur was just removing her bonnet and pelisse in the foyer. She handed them to Amos and offered him a friendly smile as he walked away.

She was patting her hair when she spied Drake and hesitated. The wary look in her

expression concerned him. He wondered if it had something to do with Amos. He knew the man couldn't always be the most accommodating. "Did you have a nice walk?" he asked.

"Quite," she returned evenly.

How the hell was he supposed to interpret that?

As someone who had never bothered to dance around a subject that was bothering him, he said, "I ordered some sheaths this morning, so you can set your mind at ease."

She appeared to force a smile. "Wonderful."

Rather than stay and continue their conversation, she started to move toward the stairs. This would not do at all. He recognized evasion when he saw it.

He blocked her escape. "I would know what's troubling you." He didn't phrase it as a question and he made sure his focus told her that he wasn't going anywhere until they'd had a proper discussion.

"Nothing."

Devil take it but he despised those one-word replies. "Very well." He grasped her elbow and steered her in the direction of his study.

"Drake! What?—?"

Her disapproval was evident but he ignored it as he propelled her into his private sanctuary and shut them inside. Leaning against the door, he crossed his arms and said, "Speak."

She gasped in indignation. “You are being ridiculous!”

“No. I’m being sensible. You aren’t telling me the truth. I will release you once you?—”

“I’m not with child!” Her brusque announcement rang through the room with the force of a thundercloud. She released a heavy breath. “Now let me go.”

She started toward him but he didn’t budge. “Are you sure?”

She offered a bark of humorless laughter. “Of course. It’s not something that can go unnoticed.”

Drake scrubbed a hand down his face. He hadn’t realized how much he was starting to grow accustomed to the idea of expanding his bloodline until then. Although he would have been shocked to learn she was going to have a baby, it made him feel... strange to know she wasn’t. “I’m sorry.”

She opened her mouth to release another retort but she snapped her mouth closed when what he said sank in to her consciousness. She seemed just as surprised to hear him offer an apology as he was that he’d uttered it. “Oh.”

“Indeed.” He lifted a brow. “It isn’t something I say often. Just know that I mean it now.” He pushed off of the door and moved toward his desk, but he veered at the last minute and stared out the window. He waited for the door to open and close, signaling her departure.

“Are you... disappointed?”

He turned back to her. The look of uncertainty on her face struck something deep within his chest. “Are you?” he countered softly.

Her forehead furrowed. “I... don’t know.” She shrugged. “I know it would be the worst possible circumstances and yet?—”

Drake nodded. “I know.” He reached up and removed his cap. Tossing it to the desk, he ran a hand through his hair. “It’s an odd sensation to want something you never thought you did.”

Her eyes brightened. “Exactly my thoughts.”

He snorted as he walked over to the sideboard and splashed some brandy into a glass. “Care for one?”

“Actually, yes.”

He hid a smile when she walked over expectantly. Before he released the glass into her care, he warned, “Take it slower this time. Let the burn slide down your throat and warm you from the inside out.”

She nodded and obediently took a small sip. She inhaled sharply but didn’t gasp in alarm as she had previously. “I never considered myself as someone who liked to imbibe but this is rather good.”

“It’s fine French stock,” he noted. “I managed to collect several cases during the war.”

She blinked at him. “You were a smuggler?”

This time he did offer a crooked smile. “Don’t look so stunned. You read about my exploits. Smuggling was one of my many talents.” He allowed his gaze to lengthen on her. “You are familiar with the others.”

He loved the slight tinge of pink that stained her cheeks. He didn't know if it was due to the brandy starting to take effect or her own awareness. Perhaps a combination of both, but he found the reaction charming and quite appealing.

Glancing away, she finished the rest of her glass and handed it to him. "I should go now," she whispered.

He grasped her wrist lightly. "Why rush off?"

She closed her eyes as if pained. "We can't possibly?—"

"A kiss. That is all I ask for."

She looked at him with those wide green eyes and he found himself lost in their enchanting pull. "One kiss?"

"One kiss."

The glass was set aside and she moved toward him. He took her arms and placed them around his neck. Allowing his hands to slowly slide up and down her sides, he said, "Kiss me."

She tilted her head quizzically. "Me kiss you?"

"Yes."

She pressed her lips together and raised on her tiptoes. As she slowly touched her lips to his, he allowed her the chance to nibble and explore his mouth. When she stepped closer to him, her breasts pressing against his chest, she started to expand the embrace.

Drake had meant for this to be a chaste interlude but his body was starting to stir with unrequited desire.

“Drake...” She moaned his name against his mouth and he pressed her closer to him. It was going to take all of his self-control to end this madness before it got out of hand.

He allowed the torment to continue until their breathing was mixing together in heavy pants. Finally, he lightly set her back from him. “As much as I would like this to continue, we must stop.”

With a regrettable sigh, Fleur nodded. “I suppose you’re right.”

He placed a finger beneath her chin. Kissing the tip of her nose, he said, “There will be plenty of time for us to resume our activities when you are feeling up to it.”

She smiled and it was as if the entire room lit up because of it. “Letting me have all the control. Where is the fearsome Mr. Porter?”

Drake allowed his jaw to clench. Her statement shouldn’t have bothered him, but it did. It clawed its way through his brain and refused to abate. As much as it pained him to admit that he was losing some of his drive to succeed in the harsh realities of life, perhaps it was time that he reminded himself—and everyone in the East End—who he was.

“That is a very good point.”

She looked at him with mirth still shining in her gaze. “What is?”

He straightened. “I need to remind everyone who Mr. Porter is. I fear he’s been missing of late. Rumors have already started to abound and without him, I won’t have

the proper enticement at my disposal.”

Any lingering amusement vanished from her face. “What does that mean?”

He looked at the floor to gather his thoughts and then said, “It means I’m going to the Crown and Sceptre tonight to confront Avalon about his real reasons behind that card game. I feel it was a distraction for something else.”

Determination lit up her green eyes. “I’m going with you.”

He was going to sound like a cad, especially since he’d relied on her assistance before, but when it came to Avalon and his personal interest in the lady, he couldn’t risk her safety any further. “No.”

“He’s my brother!” she cried. “I told you that I wasn’t going to stand by. I have every right?—”

He gathered his jacket and shrugged it on. His glare was hard when he looked at her. “Be that as it may, my word is final.”

She appeared as though she wanted to argue the point further, but as she spun around and quit the room, Drake exhaled heavily. He’d had a tough decision to make, but then, at some point, everyone did. And he knew, in this instance, he’d made the right one.

* * *

“I would say I’m surprised to see you, Porter,” came the low drawl behind the desk as Avalon spun his chair around and faced Drake within the Crown and Sceptre pub. “But, to be honest, I thought you might have approached me earlier today instead of waiting until dusk.” He lifted a dark brow and rubbed the back of his hand along the

short dark stubble on his chin.

Drake crossed his arms and widened his stance. “I thought I would give you time to come up with a plausible excuse.”

Avalon snorted. “I don’t need one. I was performing a service for a friend.”

“If you are speaking for Miss Wilson, no doubt you have performed many services for her.”

“Tsk, tsk, Porter. No need to be crass,” he admonished. “Such lewd comments don’t endear you to my corner.”

Drake’s gaze narrowed slightly. “I find I am no longer in need of your assistance. I may have already discovered who wishes me harm.”

“Have you?” The reply was silky smooth. “You know the villain who started the fire?”

“Nearly,” Drake hedged, not wishing to give too much away. “It is only a matter of time before I can securely point the finger of blame.”

Avalon inclined his head. “I do wish you the best of luck in that regard.” He tilted his head to the side. “Now, about Flavian Davies. What is it that you wanted to know?”

“How much is he indebted to you?”

With a grin, Avalon retorted, “What makes you think he lost?”

“Because I have partnered him and I know how clumsy he is at cards.”

“Ah.” The other man’s lips tightened. “Eight hundred quid.”

Drake closed his eyes to gain his fortitude and then he asked, “Where is he now?”

“Licking his wounds with Harriette.”

Drake wondered if that were true considering they hadn’t yet returned home by that afternoon. “And how long does he have to recoup his losses that you were kind enough to allow?”

Avalon’s dark eyes glinted with warning. “Again, Porter, you dance rather close to that line that isn’t meant to be crossed. I don’t care to have suspicion and dark accusations tossed at my door.”

“Then perhaps you should have acted with more decorum when you were well aware that Flavian isn’t capable of containing his vices.”

“That isn’t my concern,” Avalon said with a careless shrug. “He should have refrained from the invitation if he wasn’t able to accept defeat.” He rose from his chair. “To answer your query, he has a sennight to get the funds to me or I will be forced to call in his markers.” He stopped a few feet in front of Porter. “I will be glad to wipe his record clear, should you care to take on his debt for him.”

Drake could tell that he was being goaded. He didn’t like it but he had no choice but to hear the choice he was being offered. For Fleur’s sake. “What are your terms?”

Avalon’s lips twitched. “Flavian shall have the freedom to leave London with his name and reputation intact. In return, I would ask for his losses to be paid to me and in return for my generosity in allowing you to assume his debts, you also relinquish your lovely house guest to me.”

Drake clenched his fists at his sides. “Never.”

Some of Avalon’s cool demeanor faded. “I’m sorry to hear that, Porter. I was hoping we could come to an agreement but you will leave me with no choice but to insist Flavian pays his debt to me by his own honor. You cannot offer assistance of any kind if you wish for him to see the light of another day. And considering you may be emptying your pockets of another fortune to Miss Wilson very soon; you may well find yourself in dire straits after so long on top.” He returned to his chair. “I will bid you good evening if you need nothing further since I don’t take kindly to being duped and my consideration thoroughly ignored.”

Drake wanted to say more, but he was content to let Avalon think he retained the upper hand. It was best he kept silent. His actions would soon speak for themselves.

He walked out of the office and spied Reynolds standing there. With his light hair plastered back from his forehead, he offered Drake a broad grin.

Drake ignored him and continued toward the back of the pub where he intended to quit the establishment and head back to his townhouse. He was eager to see Fleur again. He wasn’t quite sure what he might say to her that would lead her believe that all would be well when he wasn’t entirely certain his plans would be enacted as they were meant to be. He needed to consult with Amos to see where they stood.

He had just opened the door when he heard the scuffle of a boot behind him.

Drake ducked as he spun around, narrowly missing the baton that Reynolds held in his hand. Instantly, his fighting instincts came to the forefront and Drake replied with an uppercut to the man’s jaw as they stumbled out the door into the mews. He had never particularly cared for Avalon’s right hand, so he was eager to teach the scoundrel a lesson. He might be calling the kettle black by referring him to the title he’d always worn with pride but even Drake had his limits with what he would

tolerate.

Reynolds' head snapped back from the force of the blow but he shook it off and came rushing at Drake. He was prepared for the head that came crashing toward his abdomen. Drake answered as he brought his elbows down on Reynolds' back. They instantly fell to the ground in a tangle of limbs, obscenities, and bloody knuckles.

As they each scrambled to their feet and began to circle one another, the mental games began.

"I'm not surprised that Avalon sent you to deal with me," Drake snarled. "But he sent the wrong man if he thought you could defeat me."

"Oh, I don't intend to defeat you," Reynolds snapped in return, as he spat out blood onto the ground from a split lower lip. His left eye was already starting to turn purple from their brief scuffle. "I intend to destroy you and take pleasure in doing so." He withdrew a jagged knife from the back of his trousers and held it out before him. Drake was unarmed but there was no rule book for gentlemanly warfare in the underground. It was every man for himself.

Drake laughed richly as he easily dodged the first swipe of the knife. "You can try. Many men have and all of them have failed."

Another swipe was easily evaded. The third, Drake was anticipating.

As Reynolds lifted his arm in an arc and began to bring it down, Drake kicked upward and sent the weapon sailing through the air.

The other man cursed vividly and with a howl of anger, came at Drake again.

This time, Drake fell to the ground, but it had nothing to do with Reynolds.

He sensed the danger behind him a moment before the glass bottle crashed over his skull. Reynolds came to an abrupt halt as Drake's vision wavered. He could feel his knees growing weak but he told himself not to falter.

It was no use. The darkness closed in around the edges of his vision. His last image was that of Fleur and how he'd failed to tell her how much she had changed him and how much he wanted to keep her in his life forever before he lost consciousness.

CHAPTER 19

Something was wrong.

Fleur didn't know how she could sense it but when Drake hadn't arrived home by two in the morning, she decided she needed to gather some reinforcements.

Most of the servants returned to their respective lodgings for the evening since Drake wasn't a conventional master. However, Amos was the exception since Drake wanted someone to watch over her in his absence in case there was trouble.

Still dressed, Fleur headed down to the study to see if she might find Amos there. Thankfully, he was kicked back in Drake's chair. He had his feet propped up and it appeared as though he was sleeping but the moment her feet crossed the threshold, he turned to her. She didn't have to say anything before he was on his feet.

"Thank God. I thought I was the only one who didn't have a good feeling about this night."

Her stomach clenched. "Do you think something has happened too?"

"Aye. It's not like Drake to spend any more time with Avalon than necessary."

He started to move toward the door. She was directly on his heels. "What are we going to do?"

"I'm going to check on things while you stay here?—"

“Absolutely not!” Fleur rushed in front of him and blocked his way, although the massive man could have easily pushed her aside. She shoved a finger in his chest. “I tried it Drake’s way and this is what happened. I will not stand by idle again. I know how to wield a sword if needed and I still have the shroud to conceal my identity. I’m going .”

He must have decided it was easier to give in than to deal with a hysterical woman, so he said curtly, “Get dressed and meet me back here in five minutes.”

“Four,” she countered as she rushed up the stairs.

She threw open the chamber door and yanked open the drawer where the dreaded shroud was. She had hoped to never don the miserable garment again but she would do whatever it took to ensure Drake’s safety and that of her brother. They were the two most important men in her life and the thought she might lose either one of them was not pleasant. While she was still uneasy about the conversation she’d heard earlier that morning between Amos and Drake, she had to believe that they weren’t unnecessarily targeting Flavian, that they would give him a chance to redeem himself. Although he’d had several chances to do so, she’d always believed that he would come to his senses.

She made it back downstairs to the foyer at the same moment Amos appeared with two pistols and a saber. The latter he handed to her. “Let’s see if we can’t put your skills to the test.”

She nodded curtly. If there was one thing she knew how to use with precision, it was a sword. She’d fought more than one duel under the guise of her brother and survived. Surely that was a testament of her abilities.

Fleur followed Amos outside and rather than rely on public transport, they headed toward the East End on foot. “I can’t believe Drake did something so asinine. He

should have known he would be in danger.”

Amos gave a rusty chuckle. “Drake has always been a man who lived life on his own terms. He likely didn’t think he would encounter any trouble from Avalon tonight. He is usually better prepared for any situation.”

“Until tonight,” Fleur grumbled irritably. “If he’s not dead I might just kill him myself.”

She didn’t receive a reply, but she wasn’t surprised. She hadn’t really expected one.

They continued their trek through the dark alleyways of London that had caused a shiver to trail up her spine the night she’d traversed these same dank streets with Drake. Tonight, she ignored the refuse and staggering vermin that inhabited the East End, her mind focused on getting to Drake and learning his fate. And hopefully, that of her brother as well.

She was thankful that it wasn’t the same pub they entered this night but it didn’t hold much more favor as they made their way inside. The patrons barely spared Amos a glance, although they seemed a bit more curious about the covered figure that entered with him. Some blatantly stared, while others tried to be a bit more covert in their perusal.

Heading to the barkeep, Amos inquired after Avalon. He received a crisp reply that the man was out for the evening.

Fleur could tell that the man was lying and it was evident that Amos believed the same when he reached across the bar and gathered the man by his cravat. Tightening it into a noose, he demanded in a low tone, “Let’s try that answer again.”

As two men shoved their chairs back and started to approach the bar, Fleur swiftly

moved to protect Amos. Whipping up the saber as the first man approached, she nearly nicked his neck. This caused him to rethink his strategy as he held up his hands in surrender, although she could see his mind was calculating his odds should he decide to press forward.

“What is all this?”

Immediately, the charged atmosphere in the pub was sucked out, the earlier commotion inside making way for silence.

Behind her mask, Fleur could make out the visage of Avalon. She recalled the dark hair and smug countenance quite well.

Amos released the barkeep and faced the leader of the Blue Boys, most of which Fleur decided were standing and eager to come to Avalon’s aid. It made Fleur more infuriated than before. If her brother and Drake could waltz into the lion’s den, it was no wonder something dreadful might have befallen either of them. This was no place to come alone. She was terrified being there with just Amos.

“I’m looking for Porter,” Amos announced firmly.

Avalon flicked a glance at him and then his attention fixated on her. “Such intrigue you’ve brought to my front step.” His jaw hardened. “I don’t care for mysteries.”

Fleur decided she’d had enough. Whipping the hood from her head, she kept her firm hold on her saber. “Is that better?” she retorted.

The grin he offered was enough to tell her he approved. “Naturally. It would be a shame to cover such a lovely face.” He waved a hand toward the back of the pub. “Shall we speak in private?”

She glared at the men who had decided to back off. However, she didn't lower the sword until she was a safe distance away from them.

She moved toward Avalon but when Amos would have followed her, Avalon held out a hand. "Just the lady."

Amos clenched his fists.

"No harm will come to her."

Fleur wasn't sure Amos was content to let her go without him, but something must have passed between the two men. Honor among thieves perhaps. Either way, Amos narrowed his eyes and said, "Fifteen minutes."

"That is plenty of time."

Avalon waited for her and as Fleur cast one last look over her shoulder at Amos, she disappeared into the true lion's den.

As he started to shut the door behind them, she said, "I would rather it stay open."

He paused. Lifting a slight brow, he smiled. "As you like." He remained where he was and looked at the sword in her grasp. "So long as you promise not to run me through with that thing."

"I won't, as long as you don't give me a reason to do so."

He chuckled. "I knew there was spirit about you when we first met. It is why I approached Porter with a proposition this evening that he didn't care to accept. Maybe you will be more amenable to the idea."

Fleur stilled. "If Drake was here, then where is he now?"

"In that regard, I fear I cannot answer."

Somehow, she didn't think that was true. And since she was intrigued by his supposed proposition, she decided to humor him for the moment. "Very well. She sheathed the sword in her belt and crossed her arms in front of her. "What is your grand idea?"

His lips quirked, and then he became all seriousness. "I want you as my mistress."

Fleur blinked. Drake had told her that Avalon had found her agreeable but she never imagined he would dare take it so far. "I see." She acted as though she were mulling the prospect over in her mind. "I fear I must decline your generous offer, sir, as I am quite taken with Mr. Porter."

He exhaled heavily. "That is quite regrettable. If you agreed, I was going to sweeten the deal by forgiving your brother's debt to me."

Suddenly, the blood turned to ice in Fleur's veins. She straightened and took a step toward him. "How much does he owe you?"

Avalon attempted to appear contrite, but Fleur could easily see through his guise. "Twelve hundred pounds."

She closed her eyes. It was a staggering sum. Double what he had lost to Drake. With her gaze focused back on the man, she asked, "What if I was able to clear his debt?"

"You mean from Porter's generosity?" He shook his head. "I fear his funds are about to run short. After the deal he made with Harriette, his circumstances are bound to falter."

Fleur clenched her fists at her hands. She knew she was courting trouble by daring to ask the question but she couldn't stop herself if she'd tried. "What are you talking about?"

He blinked, as if surprised. Another ploy, she was sure of it. "You didn't know they had met in secret to discuss another five thousand quid for you?" A strange buzzing began in Fleur's ears that threatened to eclipse the rest of the other man's words. "I didn't realize Porter kept such significant secrets from you." He released a slow breath. "I shouldn't like to be the bearer of bad news, but I heard it from Miss Wilson herself."

"For what purpose?" Fleur asked. "That sort of money doesn't get thrown about without good reason."

"Harriette wanted to ensure your safety, of course. She was regretful with how things went on at the auction and begged Porter to release you from his hold. She knew that his reputation would eventually sully him and she didn't want you to get caught in his snare. It was why she sent Flavian with me that night." He hung his head. "Unfortunately, after the game, he fled. No doubt he feared Porter's retribution. Everyone in the pub heard Porter threaten him."

Fleur was finding it difficult to draw a full breath. "Are you saying that my brother is... missing?"

"I'm afraid so. And now it appears that Porter is as well."

She shook her head. Drawing out the sword, she held it in front of her while Avalon's face blurred in her vision. "You're lying. Drake wouldn't hurt my brother because he knew it would hurt me."

Avalon's face looked empathetic. She hated him for it. "You forget the sort of man

that Porter was, that he still is. You're blinded by your love for him while he's used you most ill." He held out his hand to her and cajoled, "Hand me the weapon and I will ensure that you don't have to endure this sort of misery anymore. You will be well cared for under my protection."

Fleur looked at his hand as if he were offering her a poisonous apple. The hand holding the sword trembled, and she despised any show of weakness when she told herself to remain strong and courageous. Something told her that if her brother and Porter were missing it was due to this man.

Making a decision and trusting in her love for Drake, she took a step forward and sliced the sword through the air, making a neat cut through Avalon's outstretched palm. "I don't need anyone's protection. I have my own."

As he uttered a howl of pain, she turned and started to run back toward the main room to find Amos.

She never made it.

* * *

Drake groaned. His skull was splitting and he had the sensation that he was floating. Perhaps he was dead, but then, why the hell did his wrists ache?

When he opened his eyes, he realized that it wasn't a dream but a harsh reality. His arms were bound above his head by a coarse rope and he was dangling a short distance from the floor. It caused him to swing lightly in the air.

He struggled to gain focus and it appeared that he was in a large building, that might have once been a prominent warehouse, but was now devoid of most anything that might have been useful. He looked up and could see the early rays of dawn drifting in

through the holes in the open roof. He supposed he could call for help but that usually didn't work. Unfortunately, this wasn't the first time he'd been in this sort of bind, quite literally, so he knew he just had to wait for the opportune moment to escape.

Hearing another groan, he glanced to his left as best as he could and spied Devon's bloody face. It appeared that Amos's son was in dire straits as well. He intended to find out what he'd done to gain such animosity, but for now, he had to concentrate on getting them out of there.

He was too far away to kick to gain his attention but he did call out his name.

His limp head lifted slightly and he peered at Drake through slitted eyes. "Porter?" he rasped. "What are you... doing here?"

It was probably one of the most idiotic questions that Drake had ever heard. "Oh, you know. Just hanging around." When Devon blinked, as if not quite getting the joke, he snapped irritably, "It appears that we've been captured."

"Oh." Devon looked around, as if just now coming to his senses. "Indeed. I would say so."

Drake forced himself not to sigh. Instead, he said, "Do you have a knife or anything on you?"

He appeared to consider the query. "I don't think so."

"That's fine, because I do. As you know, I'm not unfamiliar with these situations."

"I didn't realize you've been kidnapped before," Devon drawled, sounding more like his father every day.

Drake snorted. “Kidnapped sounds so infantile. I prefer to say I was seized or something that sounds a bit more heroic.”

“I see.”

Drake wasn't sure that he did, but neither did he care at the moment. Drake had gone to hell and back more than once during this life. If they managed to get out of this scrape without much more injury, he would consider it a victory and he would make sure that Amos steered Devon in a different direction. It might take a bit of hard work to persevere, having grown up in the underground as Drake had, but he was convinced he could live a better life than his father. Drake wished someone had given him that sort of advice when he'd been that age. Perhaps if they had, he wouldn't have lived with such bitterness and angst for so long.

And yet...

He wouldn't have known how to slip out of a knot that was meant to hold him firmly.

Drake was about to demonstrate his skills when a door opened and footsteps started to draw closer. He whispered urgently to Devon, “Act as if you are still unconscious.”

Drake was grateful when Devon's head dropped back down to his chest and his eyes closed. He mimicked the same reaction moments later just as he heard a snide, masculine voice say, “Turns out Porter isn't that tough after all.”

“The great criminal of the underground subdued by an empty whisky bottle,” his cohort chuckled.

Drake ran through the catalog of people in his mind but he couldn't place these two men. More than likely they were from the East End and were eager to gain some blunt and notoriety for bringing down Drake Porter.

It was almost enough for him to laugh. He decided that would have to wait until he was facing off with them firmly on the ground.

“I guess our work here is done,” the first man said with a bored sigh. “I want another ale.”

As they shuffled back out the door, Drake waited until the door had shut fully behind them and silence had resounded about them once again before he dared to crack open an eye and ensure that they were alone again.

He didn't waste any time in wriggling his wrists back and forth to loosen the bonds. It didn't take long before they started to fall slack. When they did, he used the force of his weight to kick downward and force the rope to stretch even further apart. The moment he felt the bindings give way; he landed on the floor in a neat crouch.

He turned to Devon who was watching him with a crooked smile. Drake tilted his head to the side and said, “Don't move.” He reached into his boot and removed a knife. Moving back a few paces, he took a running start and then flipped upward, drawing out the blade at the exact moment he reached the rope holding Devon in place. He fell to the ground, landing perfectly on his feet.

Returning his knife to where it had been, Devon finished untying his bonds and tossed the ruined rope aside. At the same time, he glanced up and spied a shadow moving along the farther end of the warehouse. “Someone's here. We have to move quickly.”

They were too late.

A large explosion sent the warehouse up in flames. Drake and Devon both fell to the ground as debris rained down all around them as the building starting to groan from the sudden burst of heat and flame.

Once he'd recovered his faculties, Drake grabbed hold of Devon's arm and pulled him toward the door. "Run!"

The damaged structure started to collapse in on itself as they burst outside. Drake was glad that his earlier instincts were correct and they were near the Thames. As another explosion sent heat searing into his back, they hurled themselves into the river.

CHAPTER 20

Sputtering as they resurfaced a brief distance away, Drake looked at Devon. “Are you hurt?”

It took a moment for the younger man to respond. “No. At least, I don’t think so.”

That was good enough for Drake. It would take a moment for the shock to fully wear off. Drake was feeling some of the stunning effects from the explosion himself.

He glanced back at the wood that was steadily sending flames shooting high into the sky. He could hear people shouting and chaos starting to ensue, and he decided it was time to go.

Turning to Devon, he said, “I have a house not far from here. But we need to swim and keep a low profile. It will help us if there is a question of whether or not we survived the blast.”

Devon nodded and together they made their way down the river. Thankfully, they were going with the current, so they didn’t have to exert as much energy. Drake wanted to conserve the strength he had to pay another visit to Avalon.

He wondered about Fleur and how she must be pacing the floor of their chamber with worry. He’d said he would return and he had yet to keep his promise. But so long as his luck continued to hold out, he would.

As Drake gave the signal, Devon followed him toward the bank where they climbed

onto grassy knoll. Taking a moment to catch their breath, Drake led the way a short distance to another lodging house. He didn't have a key with him but he knew how to pick a lock.

Once they were inside, he walked toward the corner of the main living area where he proceeded to pry up a few loose boards and withdraw two brown wrapped parcels. He tossed one to Devon. "I don't know that it will be a perfect fit but at least they will be dry."

As Devon inclined his head and moved into another part of the dwelling to change, Drake made short work of his sodden clothes. He was grateful that he'd secured provisions all over town in case he needed a quick fix. There was even needle and thread and a bottle of scotch if he needed to make a hasty stitch. He didn't think Devon required anything of the sort. His abrasions looked rather shallow.

He waited for Devon to return. When he did, Drake lifted a brow. Although the trousers fit snugly, they didn't appear to be bursting at the seams. The same for the shirt and jacket. The same couldn't be said if he had just left the river with Amos. He would have been standing there in useless rags.

Knowing time was of the upmost importance, Drake said, "Might you tell me what you were doing in that warehouse?"

Devon scrubbed a hand down his face. "I honestly have no idea. I was leaving the Ten Bells last night and I was ambushed from behind. The next thing I know I woke up in that damned warehouse."

Drake frowned. "Did you know who those men were today?"

"No. Which makes it even more strange why they would target me."

Taking a moment to consider this information, Drake returned slowly, “Unless they weren’t after you. It could be that they meant to get to Amos through you.”

“My father might have enemies, but I don’t see anyone going to these lengths to do it. There is some money involved here, whereas that is in short supply in the East End.”

“Yes,” Drake murmured. “I do. I will have to discuss this with Amos when I return to Chelsea. I would suggest that you join me and relay this same information to your father.”

The younger man nodded.

Drake gathered the pistol and another knife that he tucked into his other boot, and together they walked out the door.

As they did so, Drake spied a cloaked figure rushing along on the other side of the street. He might not have given it much thought, except his instincts had been on high alert for several days, ever since the fire that had destroyed a former residence.

Seconds later, he was grateful he had listened to that inner voice of warning. “Get down!” he shouted to Devon as they dove for cover, just as an iron ball was launched at the house he’d just vacated. It shattered against the side of the building and exploded into sharp fragments that hurled through the air, narrowly missing each of them with the deadly blasts. The structure wasn’t so fortunate. The thatched roof caught fire from the sparks that had landed on top and started to burst into flame.

By the time Drake searched for the menacing figure, they were swallowed up by the crowd that had started to gather around the chaos.

“Damnation,” Drake muttered under his breath as he helped Devon to his feet and they took off down the street. Hailing down the first hackney they saw, they climbed

inside and Drake gave them the direction of the townhouse on Chelsea. As the sounds of bells could be heard clanging from the water trucks rushing to extinguish the fire, Drake leaned his head back against the squabs as they headed in the opposite direction. “At least now I know how the original fire was started.” He stared at the roof of the carriage with a frown. “It appears that the person who retains a grudge against me is a bloody grenadier.”

He searched his memory for anyone who might fit that description but came up with nothing. He had never purposefully attacked soldiers because they were the lifeblood of the country. Noblemen were another thing entirely. They were entitled men who hadn’t learned the benefit of true sacrifice.

Nevertheless, there was a reason he was being targeted now and he had to know why that was.

As the hackney stopped in front of the townhouse, he climbed out of the carriage. Devon followed close behind, and after a thorough look around the street, Drake walked inside.

* * *

Fleur froze at the sight of several men surrounding her with pistols drawn and pointed directly at her.

“Are you quite sure you don’t need my protection, Miss Davies?” Avalon’s smooth voice slid down her spine as he walked into her line of vision. “Don’t be foolish. If you want to save your brother, all you have to do is agree to be mine.” She opened her mouth, but he shook his head. “Why me? Is that what you were going to say?” He grinned broadly but it wasn’t the sort of smile that encouraged her or set her at ease. It was the sort that warned her to stay away, that this man was dangerous. “Allow me to answer that for you.”

He circled her as the guns around them were slowly lowered. “I have something of a grudge against Mr. Porter. You see, he took something quite dear from me and I have never forgotten the slight.” He stopped in front of her. “Did he tell you the sorrowful tale of a woman named Elina Waters?” She must have paled because he nodded. “Ah. I can see he did. I’m sure he made it sound as though she was the worst person to walk the earth, but the truth was, I was in love with her and he charmed her away from me. I was crushed, heartbroken, but I decided all would be well so long as he could make her happy. But that’s not what happened. He used her ill and when he came to his senses, it was too late. She came to me for assistance, and I vowed that I would do whatever was necessary to protect her. I ordered Porter’s demise but decided I didn’t need a death on my conscience, so I changed it to a thorough thrashing. As you can see, I kept my word and he survived.”

There was a question that had been burning through Fleur’s heart since Drake had first mentioned his previous paramour. “What happened to her?”

Avalon’s mouth turned down at the corners. “I fear that her tale of woe isn’t quite finished. After she had what she wanted from me, she moved on to other protectors who promised more and more, until finally, she came to me, disease ridden and desperate for money.” His lips twisted with disgust. “She begged me to take her back, but I refused. She left, and for years she was lost to the London underground, the worst parts that most criminals won’t dare to go. I felt a temporary twinge of guilt, but it was soon extinguished when I learned that she had allowed herself to become nothing but a common whore. She was intelligent. She had the ability to be anything that she wanted, but she squandered it all on meaningless tups for pence in dingy alleyways.”

Feeling a bit of her bravado returning, Fleur stated, “You sound bitter toward her . Why punish Drake?”

His dark eyes flashed, the only indication that he was disturbed. “Because he was the

one who took her from me in the beginning.”

“Now you want to do the same to him?”

He shrugged. “It seems fair.”

“Does it?” Fleur countered. He tilted his head to the side, as if curious to her reasoning. She took a deep breath and continued, “Two wrongs seldom make something right. You can’t change the past, but you have the ability to redirect the future. Instead of being at odds over something that happened years ago, help me find my brother.”

His gaze shuttered. “What of Porter?”

“Something tells me he won’t be gone for long.”

Avalon snorted. “You may be right about that.” He looked at her hard and her heart pounded in her chest while she waited for him to speak.

“Bring Reynolds to me.” He tossed the command over his shoulder.

One of the men stepped forward and whispered something in Avalon’s ear. Fleur watched as his expression turned dark. “I see.” There was something quite menacing in those two words. To her, he murmured, “Miss Davies, I am feeling charitable at the moment, and you can thank your courage for that. You have a wisdom beyond your years.” He turned and addressed another gentleman standing nearby. “See that Miss Davies is returned to Chelsea unharmed.” The man inclined his head.

Before they left, she asked, “What of Amos? What have you done with him?”

Avalon peered at her, some of his earlier demeanor returning. “I prefer to keep him in

my company for now.”

She wanted to argue for his release but she decided that she was being allowed to walk out the door so she shouldn't press her luck until she had the proper reinforcements. “I'll return for him. And my brother as well.”

To her surprise, instead of seeming irate, the lines around Avalon's eyes crinkled with a modicum of respect. “I wouldn't expect anything less from you.” He straightened and then offered her a bow that would make anyone in the nobility proud. “Until we meet again, Miss Davies.”

Fleur could feel his dark eyes boring into her as she headed for the door. Although Fleur was anxious about traveling alone with one of the Blue Boys seated across from her, she realized that she was no longer afraid of Avalon nor the men who chose to follow under his leadership. She had never really felt threatened by him, that was all from Drake, but now she understood why there was such tension between them.

To say that she needed to have a long talk with Drake was an understatement. They had much to discuss, including the supposed deal he'd made with Harriette, but that would all be later, after she had discovered what had happened to her brother. She wished she'd paid a call on the courtesan as soon as she'd heard about that dreadful card game. She should have known that something terrible would befall him. They were the same age but Flavian was still very naïve in many ways.

As the hired hackney stopped in front of Drake's residence, she stepped to the ground. The moment she did so, the door flew open and Drake came rushing down the front steps. “Where the devil have you—” He stopped when he saw the man in the carriage before it headed back down the street. His dark expression pinned her in place. “You went to see Avalon.”

It wasn't a question so much as an accusation. “I did, because you hadn't returned

and I had grown concerned. Amos accompanied me but he is currently being held under Avalon's protection." She turned on him in the midst of the early morning street. "What I want to know is what happened to you ?"

He offered her a stern expression. "Why don't we discuss this inside?"

She headed up the steps and entered the main foyer to see Amos's son, Devon, standing there. "Oh, dear."

"Indeed," Drake intoned. Addressing Devon, he said, "Make yourself comfortable in the parlor. I need to speak with Fleur in private."

* * *

Leading the way down the hall to his study, Drake attempted to steady the pounding of his heart. It was all he could do not to drag Fleur into his arms and kiss her senseless. When he'd arrived home and found her gone, he'd immediately felt sick to his stomach. He had been about to head back out and tear London apart when he'd overheard the arrival of the carriage. Relief had immediately flooded through him. He'd lost so much already he wasn't sure he could stand to lose her too. He yearned to show her how much she meant to him, but at the moment he required answers in order to solve this mystery.

However, the moment he shut the door behind them, he found that the scent of her feminine allure was too much to ignore. Pulling her to him, he set his hands on her face and pressed his mouth to hers. Initially, there was a stiff set to her shoulders, but it relaxed as he continued the onslaught. She gave a breathless moan that shot straight to his groin. He wanted to lay her down and lose himself in her wet heat but he reminded himself that there was still the problem of her missing brother.

"As much as I would like to see this moment until its glorious completion, we have

things to do.”

She blinked when he pulled away, as if just now remembering the same. “Avalon told me about Elina. I daresay his version of events differs remarkably from yours.”

He stilled. He could tell she hadn’t meant to speak so boldly but now that they were floating in the air between them, he knew he had to clear the air or that mutinous look on her face might never subside. “He never knew when to keep his mouth shut.”

“Is it true? Was he her lover first?”

He shoved a hand through his hair and although he wanted a brandy to ease his mind for this conversation, he refrained, knowing that he needed a clear head more than anything else. “Yes.” When she had a horrified look on her face, he added, “You know I wasn’t a gentleman. But she told me she was finished with him.”

“Apparently, he didn’t know the same.” She looked as if she might be ill. She put a hand to her stomach and he realized he’d never wanted to alter the past so much as he did in that moment. But he couldn’t go back and change anything. It was done. The best he could do was try to repair the present to have any sort of hope for a future.

With Fleur.

The desire to have her by his side for the rest of his days abruptly struck him as sharply as an arrow to the chest. He wouldn’t have been surprised to see the cherubic Cupid floating overhead right then with a smug expression on the bastard’s face. It was just what he deserved after years of discontent. He had never felt the sort of burning emotion toward Elina that pulsed through his chest when Fleur was near. Sadly, Elina hadn’t been the love of his life as he’d imagined. Her allure was because she was aligned to the man he had deemed his enemy. It had taken him all these years to discover the truth but only because what he felt for Fleur couldn’t be anything but

all-consuming passionate love.

“What about your agreement with Harriette? Why did you hide that from me?”

Drake’s jaw clenched. “How did you find out about that?”

She gave a harsh snort. “My God, I am starting to wonder if I know you at all. I can’t believe you would continue to be in league with that woman after what she did to me!”

“It was to keep you safe!” Drake had a moment’s panic when he thought Fleur was starting to pull away from him. He moved forward and held on to her upper arms with an urgency he had never allowed before. He had pushed aside any weakness when he’d been a child, telling himself that he would never let that frightened side of him ever resurface. But it did then. “I despise her for that blasted auction but I can’t say I regret the outcome. I would give up everything I have to do it all again.”

The flat look in her gaze tore through his chest. “I’m not sure I would.” She pulled away from him and walked a few paces away.

Drake’s arms stayed suspended in midair until he slowly let them drop to his sides. Her words stung but he couldn’t say he faulted her for her honesty. No doubt she would have rather found another way to resolve her brother’s debt. If it wasn’t for Drake, she would have never found herself in this predicament to begin with. He’d never hated himself more than he did in that moment because he realized that, as his heart had finally started to feel something other than bitterness, hers was turning in the opposite direction. He had hoped they might be able to move forward, put this nastiness behind them once her brother was found, but he decided he would release her from his protection. The only way he could hope to earn her love was to set her free.

Putting any further intimacy behind them, he moved behind his desk and sat down. He withdrew a map of London and decided that the best thing to do was to pinpoint any of the places that Flavian might have gone. Or been taken. If Reynolds had decided to do away with Drake, he could have done the same for Fleur's brother. The key to it all was whoever wished Drake harm. It seemed that they were also protecting Flavian.

"I discovered something today after I managed to free myself?"

Her mouth fell open slightly. "You were kidnapped?"

"Seized," he corrected. "But since it's nothing I haven't faced before; I was able to escape. The odd thing is that we must have been followed, because when Devon and I went to one of my other lodging houses to change, there was a cloaked figure across the street when we left. He threw a firebomb at us that set the house ablaze. I believe that my attempted murderer is a grenadier."

"Dear God," she breathed, her face turning white. "You could have been killed."

"Indeed." He made sure his tone was even, without emotion. "It wouldn't be the first time someone has attempted to end my life." He cleared his throat and switched topics. "Something tells me that the incident today, as well as your brother's disappearance might be connected. Do you know of anyone else that Flavian might trust other than you?"

She exhaled heavily. "I'm not sure. I can't think of anyone?"

He frowned when she abruptly broke off the rest of her statement. "What is it?"

She shook her head. "I'm sure it's nothing."

“When you believe that, it is usually quite the opposite.”

She put a hand to her forehead, as if the possibility rushing through her mind couldn't have any merit. “If he could have managed to get there, he might have called upon Daniel, the stablemaster at the Coach & Horses in Greenwich.”

Drake admitted that he hadn't considered the possibility that Flavian might have returned to the original scene of the incident that had started this domino effect of events.

“I'm afraid that's not all.” As he returned his focus to Fleur, she had an expression of dread on her face that didn't bode well. “He is so good with horses because he was a former grenadier in the war.”

His neck started to prickle with unease. “Do you recall his last name?”

She nodded, appearing perplexed. “Reynolds.”

CHAPTER 21

“B loody hell.”

Fleur’s blood ran cold because that curse was filled with so much meaning. “What is it?”

“Avalon’s right hand is named Reynolds. He’s the one that tied me up in that blasted warehouse.” He shoved a hand through his hair. “It appears this intrigue goes deeper than I’d originally thought.”

She found it difficult to follow his line of reasoning. “I don’t understand.”

“You soon will. Wait here.” He left the room and she started pacing, stopping only when he returned a few moments later. “I sent Devon on an errand. If there is anyone who might be able to get us any quick answers about Avalon’s next in command, it will be him. Until he returns, it would be a good idea to see if Harriette has returned.”

Without a second’s hesitation, Fleur joined Drake as they headed down the street. They made their way up the steps to the former courtesan’s house on Chelsea and she waited anxiously for the butler to answer their summons. His bored gaze flicked over them as he said, “The mistress is out.”

When he would have shut the door in their face, Drake set his foot in the jamb and pushed his way inside. “That’s fine. We are here for information and she doesn’t need to be present for us to find it.”

The butler gasped in outrage. “I must protest this intrusion?—!”

“Protest all you want; it won’t change anything,” Drake noted firmly.

“I’ll send for the watch!” the servant sputtered.

This time, Drake paused and set his face directly in front of his. “You will mind your own business and look the other way. Mr. Porter didn’t earn his reputation for no reason, so for your sake, I would be careful how far you test my patience.”

Immediately the butler looked as though he’d seen a ghost. He actually made the sign of the cross, proof of his apparent Catholic upbringing, before he turned and rushed the opposite direction.

Although Fleur hadn’t been sure what to think about Drake’s fearsome repute, she was thankful for it right then.

“Where shall we begin?” she asked.

He glanced at her. “Where all women keep their most prized possessions. In the bedchamber.”

She nodded, but when they reached the lady’s hallowed apartments, she glanced at Drake curiously. “What am I looking for?”

He finally paused to look at her steadily. “Anything tying her to Reynolds.”

Her mouth fell open. “Do you mean?—?”

“Indeed,” he said almost bitterly. “There is a twisting tale starting to unfold and I should know the truth.”

As he started to open drawers and go through them, Fleur's mind began racing. For no particular reason, the conversation he'd shared with Amos flew back into her mind and she knew that, before she could go any further, she had to know some truth of her own. "Do you still think Flavian is guilty of wrongdoing?"

Drake stilled in the midst of his task, and without turning to face her, he asked softly, "Why do you ask?"

She swallowed hard over the lump threatening to choke her. "I overheard your conversation with Amos about a list of names and how he needed to be watched." She blew out a heavy breath. "In light of recent circumstances, and your confirmation that you believe the villain was a grenadier, please tell me you still don't cast Flavian in such a bad light."

Drake finally straightened and turned to her. "Honestly, I'm not sure what to believe. I told you the idea was likely that it was a grenadier, but that doesn't make it so. Since your brother is missing and I didn't gain a good look at the culprit, I can't answer that question yet." He paused and she could feel the center of her stomach drop to her toes. "But," he added. "I hope that Devon can answer that for us, along with whatever information we might find here."

Fleur nodded. She supposed that was as close to an apology she might receive. And at least he appeared to be speaking the truth. That meant more to her than any lies he might have uttered to the contrary.

After that, silence took over the room as they continued to rummage around Harriette's personal effects. Drake stood with his hands on his hips and glared as he looked about the room. "I'm going downstairs. Perhaps she has a study she utilizes."

When he left, Fleur was starting to feel the same frustration, mainly because she didn't know what sort of evidence she was supposed to be procuring.

Closing her eyes, she started to imagine where Harriette might put something close to her heart. Her eyes popped open and she moved to the bed. While the trunk at the foot of the bed had been exhausted, she bent down and searched beneath the frame. When that proved fruitless, she ran her hand beneath the lady's pillow and the feather mattress. She wondered if that would turn out to be nothing more than the same worthless endeavor, but her fingers brushed the edge of something that felt suspiciously like an envelope. Her heart started to race anew as she grabbed the paper corner and slid it out.

There, with simple, feminine handwriting, was Harriette's name scrawled across the front. Fleur's hands were shaking as she turned it over and removed the folded letter inside. It had creases of wear, as if the precious item had been read over and over again. There was a slight smudge of ink, as if a tear had fallen upon the words where the sadness would remain for all time.

The lines were faded, but she still had no trouble reading the poor entreaty.

Dearest Harriette,

I employ you to help me. I have lost everything although I cannot blame anyone but my poor sense of judgment. I had two men who would do anything for me and I have used them most ill. They have washed their hands of me and I have no one else to turn. Elijah has tortured me anew and I fear that his mind is tarnished. He was not the same since he returned from the war and I thought I might find some semblance of peace with him, but I fear I am not long for this world. I am riddled with disease and melancholy and I yearn for easier days in which to pass on from this life. I know I do not deserve any sort of special consideration from you, dear cousin, but I beg of you to ease my suffering. Send for the apothecary and request a bottle of arsenic. I shall contrive the rest. It will be a blessing to leave this world behind. It has not been kind to women of our ilk and I find I no longer care to remain. After the loss of two children that might have carried me through these days of grief, I no longer have the

desire to continue. Please do not blame Elijah, as I truly believe he wants to live a good life. He is just unable to do so without the proper guidance, the sort of which he cannot gain from Avalon. I fear he will soon lose all sense of reality and fall prey to his own mind. I have also written to his brother in Greenwich to see what might be done to save him. I pray that he isn't struck down as I have been—as you may be someday, cousin dear.

I will eagerly await your arrival. It is the last wish of my miserable existence and I hope you will grant it.

Yours Faithfully,

Elina

A tear slid down Fleur's face, but before it could fall upon the letter, she folded it and set it back inside the envelope. Pressing it to her chest, she closed her eyes and exhaled a shaky breath. She understood the plight of this poor woman because she had nearly fallen down the same path should she not allowed her love for her brother to keep her getting up each day and pressing forward. Unfortunately, for Drake's ex-lover, there was nothing more to be done for her fractured soul.

"Did you find what you were looking for?"

The snide, feminine comment had Fleur spinning around to meet the accusing glare of Harriette. The woman's dark eyes were a menacing bore as they peered at the letter held in Fleur's grasp. Wiping away the evidence of her empathetic grief, she asked the one thing she was desperate to know. "Did you?—?"

"Yes." Harriette confirmed firmly. "It seemed a charitable kindness to offer someone who was dying of syphilis. It can be a painful and dreadful disease and just as I wouldn't wish to see an animal struggle with a broken leg, neither could I allow my

cousin to deal with the same fate when I could send her to the heavens myself.”

A thought occurred to her. “You wrote that memoir to honor her memory.”

The courtesan’s mouth tightened. “I did it for all the women who trusted in the faithless consideration of men. I wanted others to know that they didn’t have to have the last word.”

“And what of my brother?” Fleur countered. “I daresay he wasn’t among men like Elijah Reynolds.”

“Perhaps not right away, but it was apparent that his love of drink and vice would soon steer him in the wrong direction. It is best other women are spared from the disaster that he promises.”

The blood promptly fled from Fleur’s face. “You know where he is.”

“I do.”

That single word both relieved and terrified Fleur. Harriette said it with such cold abandon that Fleur was worried now, more than ever, for her brother’s fate. She took a step forward. “Please, tell me.”

A derringer was whipped forward and pointed directly at Fleur’s heart. “I would ask you to remain where you are.”

Fleur froze but that didn’t keep her from pleading for Flavian’s life. “Please, just release him into my care and I vow that we will leave London this very night. We will trouble you no longer.”

The lady shook her head almost sadly. “I know that you love your brother, Miss

Davies. It would be difficult not to do so considering the strong bond that you share. Twins are a remarkable gift for any mother but the fact still remains that he must face the responsibility of his own actions. You have allowed him too many freedoms.”

Fleur’s anger was starting to spark. “And what of the freedoms you offered when you sent him along with Avalon to the gaming tables?”

She shrugged. “I gave him a choice. Choosing the wrong one further proves that he must be punished for his actions.”

“He’s young. Don’t you think we all make mistakes?”

The lady’s face twisted bitterly. “Some mistakes can never be undone. It causes a demise the likes that Elina did not deserve.”

A sound at the door caused Fleur’s focus to temporarily disengage from Harriette. She saw Drake’s head whip in the direction of the courtesan. After a temporary shock, he noticed the weapon in her grasp and where it was pointed. He didn’t appear to think as he lunged for the derringer.

Harriette was too stunned to do more than cry out as the momentum of Drake’s body sent her to the floor, the gun skittering across the floor out of reach. He held his hands at her throat and squeezed while she clawed at the hold he had on her. His eyes were deadly, his jaw set with the same intent. “I should kill you for daring to threaten Fleur.”

Fleur’s mouth went slack. She had never witnessed this side of Drake and it frightened her. She could fully believe that he could commit murder in that instant. Finally, she snapped out of her shock and went forward. Putting a gentle hand on his arms, she begged, “Drake, don’t do this. She knows where Flavian is.”

It took a moment for her words to penetrate his brain but when they did, he blinked and slowly released his grip. Harriette gasped and sputtered for air. Once she had taken several bracing gulps, her focus shifted to her. "Thank you." Closing her eyes, she seemed to gather herself and then she offered a courtesy in return. "He is in Greenwich with Elijah's brother, Daniel." She looked to Drake. "Daniel wasn't the only grenadier who fought in the war. Elijah did as well. He has struggled with adapting to the societal strictures ever since." Her eyes welled with moisture. "I am truly sorry for betraying you as I did but you have to understand I have been sadly neglected over the years and I am afraid my friendship skills are sadly lacking."

Fleur put a soft hand on the woman's shoulder where Drake still kept her pinned. There was a time she didn't think she could ever forgive this woman her treachery but with such humble words and the knowledge about her brother, she couldn't ignore such an entreaty. She took the letter and wrapped her hand around it. "Thank you."

* * *

Once they left Harriette's house, Drake decided that he needed some explanation. He couldn't seem to wrap his mind around Fleur's charitable nature.

He stopped abruptly in the middle of the sidewalk. Holding out a hand, he said, "I need to understand what I just saw."

She looked at him with those wide, green eyes and that innocent expression. "What do you mean?"

He gave a harsh bark of laughter. "I am referring to you . After all of the hardships you've endured with Flavian, myself, and Miss Wilson, you still find enough goodness in your heart to treat that blasted woman with kindness after she'd just pointed the barrel of a gun at your heart."

She looked at him curiously and then spread her arms wide. “I am uninjured, as you can see. What is the point of lashing out at someone hoping to make amends. I don’t intend to continue a relationship with Harriette but I will not deny her the forgiveness she sought. That would be blatantly cruel.”

He scrubbed a hand down his face. “Do you not understand that I still want to go back there and end her life for daring to threaten you in such a manner? Rage continues to pour through me even now. Can you not see that I died a thousand deaths at the prospect of you being taken from me?” His voice had turned raspy, as he attempted to keep the emotion swelling up inside of him from tearing him apart. Instead, he moved to her and captured her face with his hands. “I would be destroyed should something befall you.” He pressed his forehead against hers. “I have lived a life that is unworthy of most forgiveness of my own. I have acted without conscious thought, the only desire to find some benefit for myself. With you, the single thing I want is for your happiness. Most days I feel as though I should have bowed out of that auction in order for you to have discovered a peace that I can never possibly offer you. There are too many demons in my past to offer such a sanctuary. And yet, I am too selfish to let you go.”

She wrapped her arms around his waist and laid her head against his chest. He could feel the hardened shell inside start to slowly crack and break apart. “I’m not going anywhere, Drake. My place is with you. Now and always, so long as you’ll have me.”

He released a shuddering breath and he wondered if he wasn’t going to break down in the middle of Chelsea for everyone to observe. He suddenly realized that he didn’t care what anyone thought of him. He had long been known as the tumultuous Mr. Porter, a man others didn’t want to cross, but he cared not for anyone’s approval save that of Fleur. As long as she held him in the circle of her arms, he was content. At long last, he dared to open his heart again.

Stepping back, he took her hand and brought it to his lips. Kissing her knuckles, he

said the one thing sure to appease her. “Let’s get your brother.”

Keeping hold of her hand, he vowed that he wouldn’t let her out of his sight again. Where he went, she would be there as well.

As they entered the townhouse and found Devon standing and waiting for them, he confirmed what they’d just heard from Harriette. “He’s being held at the stables in Greenwich. Elijah is there too.” As he started to continue, there was a loud knock on the front door. “And one more thing?—”

The door burst open and Avalon stood there with several men from the Blue Boys, their identities noted by the fierce loyalty he saw in their eyes as they stood by their master.

“—Avalon is here.”

Devon’s statement faded into the air as Drake kept a firm hold about Fleur’s waist. He tensed, ready to fight to the death if need be, but Avalon lifted his hands into the air in supplication. “I come here in peace. At least, toward you. For Reynolds, I cannot claim the same. He has betrayed me in the worst fashion by daring to threaten our acquaintance and I do not take too kindly to such a slight from someone I was supposed to be able to trust.”

Drake relaxed slightly but he was still determined to remain on guard in case this was nothing more than a Trojan horse attempt to gain his ear.

“I know he absconded with you and I want to personally apologize for such a terrible action against an ally.” His lips twisted ironically. “I know we have not always seen eye-to-eye on everything, but women have a tendency to scramble a man’s common sense.”

He offered a brief nod of acknowledgement to Fleur.

Drake decided that since Avalon was being honest, he would do the same. “I didn’t steal Elina away from you. She told me things were over between the two of you and she was searching for another protector.”

Avalon jerked as if he’d been struck but then he appeared resolute. “I can’t say I’m surprised. She never seemed that steadfast when we were together. She was always wanting more, searching for more.”

“And in the end, she had nothing.”

Drake and Avalon’s focus turned to Fleur. She took a deep breath and said, “I found a letter Elina had written to Harriette with an entreaty. They were cousins. She claimed that she was with Elijah and that things were not going well. She was... unwell and wanted Harriette to... attend to her.”

Both Drake and Avalon stood silent for a few moments, as if they were both mourning a lost love, or at the very least, a woman that had been of temporary importance to them.

“All this time I believed Elijah was—” Avalon shook his head and moved forward to Drake. Holding out his hand as an offering, he said, “I am man enough to admit when I have done someone wrong. For the offenses I have laid at your door, allow me to atone for those now.” He snapped his fingers and Amos appeared in the foyer. Devon rushed to him, and father and son embraced, Fleur put a hand over her heart, obviously touched by what she observed.

Drake dared to admit to himself that the reunion was rather emotional. As his annoyance toward Avalon faded, he stared at the palm before him and found himself reaching for it. Other than Amos, he supposed that Avalon was the only other man he

might actually be able to respect.

After a brief grasp, they parted.

Drake lifted a brow. “Does this mean you’ve also decided to be a hero for the day?”

With a snort, Avalon said, “I much prefer being the villain, don’t you? Let’s retrieve young Flavian and show his captors what men of action actually do.”

Drake’s grin spread over his face. “I couldn’t have said it better myself.”

CHAPTER 22

Fleur had never been more thankful to be friends with so many cutthroat men as she was in this moment. If someone would have told her a few weeks ago when she'd implored Miss Wilson for assistance that she would find herself in the midst of so many menacing looking men and be glad for it, she would have believed them to be mad.

Perhaps now she was the one who was fit for Bedlam, and yet, she didn't care as Drake and Avalon bent over a map of Greenwich and devised a plan to free her brother while Devon and the rest of the Blue Boys looked on. She felt confident that they could easily usurp Elijah and Daniel, although a part of her heart was saddened that they had to resort to such drastic measures.

However, when she mentioned that perhaps she might be granted an audience with her former stable master and friend to speak some sense to him, Drake had firmly forbidden it. "You don't know what sort of lies his brother has filled into his head about me. About us. He could claim that you have been influenced by my radical ideals and are not the same girl he once knew. No doubt Flavian will agree to anything since he is in a precarious position at the moment. He might believe that he had found sanctuary with Daniel, but no doubt he has learned otherwise once Harriette spewed her poison to Elijah. Not only that, but we don't know if Elijah has managed to gain some sympathizers for his cause. We could be walking into a trap."

Fleur was sitting on a settee in the front parlor, although the room was still rather bereft of many other furnishings, and put her forehead in her palm. She was glad that Avalon had departed with the others for the moment, giving her time to breathe and

collect her thoughts before their return that evening when they would head out for the village that she had called home not so long ago. “I can’t believe how intertwined this has all become. I am not sure I will ever be able to comprehend it all although I know the truth as it has been proven to me.”

Drake bent down in front of her and took her chin in his thumb and forefinger. “I won’t let anything happen to your brother. You know that, don’t you?”

She swallowed hard over the lump in her throat. “I don’t want to find myself in a position where I must choose between you or Flavian, but I fear it shall be so.”

Those mesmerizing silver eyes were focused, intent on her face. “I don’t anticipate that with all of the men on our side but should that come to pass, I want you to choose your brother. Blood is thicker than water and you deserve to hold on to the last of the family you have left.”

She could feel a tear quivering at the edge of her vision, turning his handsome visage into a blur. “You are my family now too, Drake. I?—”

He pressed a finger over her lips. “Do not finish that sentence. Upon all that is holy, do not dare speak those words.”

“But why not?” she whispered.

“Because that would mean you anticipate the worst. We must think positive, that things will work out as they are meant to be.” His jaw clenched. “I have not lived this long and withstood all that I have to be cut down now.” She saw him swallow and then he said softly, “I have found something worth living for and I don’t intend to let it slip away.”

She wound her arms around his neck and while he wouldn’t allow her to speak her

feelings, the emotions that pulsed so firmly throughout her entire body, she showed him what he meant to her by the kiss she bestowed on his mouth. She was rewarded by the hand that slid up her back and lost itself in her chignon. Pins scattered but she didn't care. All she wanted was him—beside her, on top of her, inside of her. She didn't feel complete without him.

Silent tears slid down her face but they were ignored as she pulled Drake to her. He pressed her into the settee and she rejoiced at his weight. It made her feel safe, comforted, and she couldn't have asked for a more perfect moment.

When he slid his hand down to tease her womanly bud, she kept her focus on him. The pleasure started to grow and blossom, and when it washed over her, she arched her neck and slid her eyes closed. As soon as the tide passed, and he slipped his cock into her wet heat, she shuddered at the wondrous joining. She wrapped her legs around his hips as he thrust in and out of her with ruthless abandon. He'd never lost himself like this before and she was awestruck by the uninhibited way he released all that he had within her.

On a groan that she answered with a light moan, they found eternity in each other's arms.

Fleur held Drake close to her breast and allowed a single tear to slide down her cheek. It wasn't of despair or sadness but the feeling that everything was just as it should be. She finally felt as though Drake's heart had been unlocked for her and it was a moment worth celebrating.

After all was calm, he lifted his head and kissed the tip of her nose. "You are remarkable, Fleur." He released a breath as if he was reluctant to leave her but he moved away and set himself to rights as she swung her legs over the side of the settee and shook her skirts back down. Other than her hair in disarray and the flush that was likely still on her cheeks, it would have appeared that nothing untoward had occurred.

Drake certainly didn't look visibly changed but there was a marked difference in his demeanor. It was as if the harsh lines of his past had finally diminished and he might be able to smile a bit easier, certainly more genuine.

He reached out a hand to her and she took it without hesitation. "I know it will be futile to ask you to remain here?—"

"You're correct."

He smiled; a crooked sort that made her breath catch. "—So I'm not even going to try. I would, however, request that you wear the shroud one last time. It will ease my mind thinking that your presence won't be so easily noted."

She frowned slightly. "But Daniel knew our secrets."

"That may be," he concurred. "But I don't believe he will give you over so lightly. Seeing you attired thus, it might bring back some of his loyalty to you both and make him realize how irrational his brother is to punish Flavian for nothing more than the crime of being a man and one woman's need for vengeance against the entire male species."

She nodded her head. "Very well. Let's finish this."

* * *

When Avalon returned, he arrived with an unmarked carriage and several of his men on horseback. Drake could see the other man's dark gaze flicker over Fleur's black shroud, but since she had left off the hood, it must have satisfied him.

Drake lifted a brow at the fanfare. "I thought we were trying to be circumspect?"

“ We will.” He waved a hand at the carriage. “You and Fleur shall ride with me in style as proper travelers while my men shall arrive a short time later in various degrees. We shall have the Coach and Horses surrounded before the Reynolds’ brothers even know we’ve intercepted them.”

“I’m glad you think it’s going to be that easy.” Drake said dryly, once they had all settled into Avalon’s carriage. “They will be expecting us sooner rather than later. Don’t underestimate a pair of miliary men and their counterparts.”

Avalon’s smile was tight. “I underestimate no one. The same goes for you, Porter.”

Drake leaned back in his seat. “In that regard, I suppose you’re not a total loss.”

Rather than appearing offended, Avalon threw back his dark head and laughed richly. “I can always count on you to put me in my place but I suppose that sometimes I deserve it.”

“As do I,” Drake returned. He turned to look at the woman at his side. “Fleur does it so well.”

She rolled her eyes at him and he could feel his lips twitching, and then to his surprise, and apparently to that of the other occupants in the carriage, he started to laugh. And it wasn’t a slight, rusty chuckle, but a complete, stomach rolling amusement that almost brought tears to his eyes. He wasn’t even sure why he was acting like such a ninnyhammer except that, for the first time in his life, he was truly... happy.

“Amazing,” Avalon breathed.

Drake turned to him curiously as some of his merriment subsided. “What is?”

“I never thought I would live to see the day Mr. Drake Porter found true love.” Immediately, a hush fell around the carriage. Avalon lifted a brow. “Tell me I’m not the only one who sees it’s so obvious?”

Drake cleared his throat and glanced at Fleur who was doing everything in her power to keep from looking directly at him. Combined with the rosy color that appeared on her cheeks, he couldn’t decide if she was embarrassed—or he’d interpreted her devotion completely wrong earlier.

Turning his attention back to Avalon, he muttered, “Let’s just keep our focus on the upcoming confrontation.”

Avalon held his hands up in supplication, although he gave a light snort that belied his seriousness. As he turned to stare out the window and promptly fell into silence, Drake started to wonder if the words Fleur had been about to say earlier had been a declaration of love—or something else. Perhaps she was imploring him to release her, to let her free to chase after her dreams where he wasn’t a part of them. No doubt he still hadn’t fully earned her trust in him. He hoped that tonight’s escapades might prove his loyalty to her but perhaps he was mistaken on that score too.

He thought about what Amos had said, that it would come down to Fleur’s decision between him and her brother, and he knew which one she would choose. He wanted her to pick Flavian. The last thing he desired was any sort of discord between the siblings. He’d nearly ruined everything by his desire to have a bit of fun the moment he’d offered that card game in Greenwich, and now he was like a fool admitting his folly as he attempted to atone for those sins.

But he would walk over hot coals if it meant it might raise his regard in Fleur’s eyes. He never wanted her to view him with disdain or horror, as she had the day he’d found her in his secret room.

He hadn't yet told her that he was intending to clear out the space, wanting to dispose of everything that had been a part of his old life. He wanted no visible recollection, although the memories would remain to haunt him, long after he'd passed on to the next life. His transgressions were many but with Fleur, he could almost believe that he could be a good man, a better person. Someone he aspired to be. That one day, their children might aspire to be.

He couldn't dare to hope that Fleur might accept his hand but he'd thought many times of how he might propose in the romantic fashion that she deserved even if he wasn't sure where to begin. Surely, flowers and embellished prose didn't seem enough. She needed a grand gesture. Perhaps if he climbed to the top of Westminster Abbey and proclaimed his attentions to the entirety of London then he might feel as though he'd done his best efforts to win her.

He exhaled slowly. Whatever he decided he knew it would be the toughest battle he'd ever fought.

* * *

Had Drake found true love with her?

Fleur couldn't seem to stop replaying Avalon's accusation through her mind, although Drake had seemed rather reluctant to speak out in defense or denial of the claim. She wanted to believe that he loved her quite wholeheartedly, but now she was given to wonder if she had been the only one who was in danger of engaging in the foolish drivel of poets. She had nearly confessed her love for Drake just before he'd stopped her. Had he known she was about to make a terrible mistake? Perhaps once her brother was freed, he might ask her to leave. She knew that he didn't stay with anyone for long, so perhaps their time together had run its course. But then, why was she that surprised? Could a man such as Drake Porter truly change?

The silence in the carriage was deafening, so thick that Fleur nearly choked on it, but she nearly convinced herself it was due to the upcoming chaos that would surely ensue once they arrived in Greenwich. She yearned to see Flavian, to ensure that he was safe and unharmed, but she also feared for the danger Drake would surely put himself in to see it happen.

Her brother or the man she loved. She was terrified she would have to make that choice. Not only was it terribly unfair, but it would surely be impossible. She intended to do whatever she must to ensure that decision didn't come to pass.

She closed her eyes to gain her equilibrium, and they soon arrived in the village just across the Thames. They passed the familiar site of the orphanage where she had taught Latin. It seemed like a lifetime ago since she'd strode through those doors, and yet, she could still recall every minute detail as if it were some fantastical dream.

They continued on through the main thoroughfare until they finally drew to a halt at the Coach and Horses. As the conveyance shuddered to a halt, Fleur clenched the material of her dress in her fists. Her heart started to pound as the uncertainty of their arrival had finally struck her. She prayed that Daniel would see reason, but if it came to choosing his brother over her, she doubted she would come out victorious. Considering they had fought several battles together during the war, their bond was nearly unbreakable.

They remained in the coach as it came to a halt. Drake and Avalon glanced through the shadows and tried to ascertain any danger. As Fleur did the same, she saw that there was nothing to cause immediate concern. However, for a pub that was generally bustling with activity at this hour, it was particularly odd that it should be almost void of patrons. The stable looked practically deserted.

The fine hairs on the back of her neck started to prickle with warning. "Something's wrong," she whispered to Drake, who gave an imperceptible nod.

He glanced toward Avalon, as if an unspoken agreement had passed between them, and then he turned to her. “Stay here.”

She clutched his arm. “I don’t like this?—”

He lifted her chin lightly with his forefinger and spoke calmly. “Everything will be fine.”

“Are you sure about that?” she whispered back.

He glanced at Avalon, who was watching the exchange with a look of boredom. “I have him on my side. What could go wrong?”

Fleur closed her eyes. “Do you really want me to answer that?”

He offered her a consolatory wink and then he got out of the carriage, Avalon following close behind him.

Fleur sank back against the squabs of the carriage and blew out a breath. Once again, she was forced to cool her heels like a helpless female.

She glanced down at the shroud she was wearing and wondered why she was wearing the ridiculous thing when she wasn’t allowed to take part in the intrigue. She’d even brought along her rapier, although she wasn’t sure Drake knew about that last minute addition. She decided it might come in handy if things turned sour. But then, she didn’t imagine she would be stuck in the carriage waiting on pins and needles for something to happen either.

Minutes ticked by like hours and Fleur felt the slide of perspiration down her spine. She hated this. Her brother and the man she loved was out there while she was sitting there like a proper lady.

She'd had enough.

Fleur decided that she was putting an end to this nonsense once and for all. Surely Daniel could be reasoned with. She had always thought a lot of him. He had kept her secrets, which meant he had been an ally at one time. He could be acting on his brother's behalf and not understand the entirety of the situation.

She thought of Flavian and how he must have been so desperate for help, to come to the one place he thought he might find refuge, only to be disappointed yet again. It angered her that he didn't feel he could come to her, but after his gambling had put them in this situation to begin with, no doubt his shame wouldn't let him come back to her for assistance.

She had just grabbed the carriage door handle when it was yanked out of her hand. With a gasp, she relaxed slightly when she saw the stablemaster. "Daniel."

What she hadn't been prepared for was the pistol that glinted in the moonlight as he held it out for her to clearly see. "Miss Davies," he said evenly. "Step out of the carriage."

Her hand trembled but she managed to climb down without incident. She hadn't bothered to cover her face, so she faced her nemesis with her bare countenance. "Daniel, please. Surely there is no need for violence."

"I wish it were that easy, Miss Davies."

He almost sounded regretful and she attempted to appeal to his rational side. "There must be a way to talk about all this," she entreated. "Whatever occurred to make you act like this?—"

"It's too late for that," he sighed. "Nothing can bring Elina back. The men

responsible for her death must be punished.”

Fleur was taken aback by this. She hadn’t imagined that Daniel would be so fiercely protective of his brother’s paramour. However, if that were the case, then he should know that Elijah was the one at fault. “Elina was sick. Her demise had nothing to do with Avalon or Drake. I read a letter she had written to her cousin, Harriette. It explained everything.”

Daniel’s eyes flashed for a moment as if he were reconsidering his stance, but then he straightened. “She suffered greatly, but so have all of us at one time or another. I thought if anyone might understand the bond between twins it would be you. Elijah and Elina shared the same close relationship. But the war changed our brother just as her mistakes changed her. But when she dared to ask for help, she was refused. That is what we cannot forgive.”

Fleur stilled. She thought Elina was a fallen woman. She had no idea she was this man’s sibling, whereas the insatiable need for retribution was like a festering wound. The need for vengeance was prominent and to assuage the brother’s guilt over her death, they needed to find blame elsewhere. “I was supposed to protect them as their older brother,” he whispered harshly. “By the time I returned from the war, it was too late. Elina had succumbed to her illness and Elijah suffered from the precarious state of his mind. He should have never been allowed to fight on that field—” He appeared to pause to collect himself, the haunting recollections of the past overcoming his words. “I can finally see that justice is served tonight.” He looked hard at her. “I apologize for subjecting you to this turmoil, Miss Davies, but I had to keep Flavian here in order to lure Mr. Porter and Avalon away from London and to my doorstep. For years I’ve been planning my revenge and I regret that I have you to thank for it.”

CHAPTER 23

Fleur was going to be sick. It didn't matter if she had unwittingly acted in a manner that might send Drake and Avalon to their demise. She couldn't allow Daniel to enact his punishment upon two men who had done nothing wrong other than allow their desires to lead them down the wrong path.

"Daniel, you must listen to me. Elina was not the innocent victim you might believe. She used Avalon and Drake, pitting them against each other to cause strife. That is why Avalon refused to help her. He was afraid she would cause more harm."

Daniel shook his head. "It doesn't matter now. The trap has already been laid." He waved his gun at her. "Let's go."

She started to move, to hopefully stall for time until she could be assured the danger had passed. "Where are we going?" she asked.

"You'll see."

Fleur remained silent as they started to leave the main thoroughfare of the village. It didn't take long for her to understand where he was taking her.

The cottage looked just as it had the day she'd left it in such a rush for London. She truly had come full circle.

Tears stung her eyes but they didn't fall until Daniel led the way inside and she saw Flavian. When she entered, he was pacing the room restlessly, but upon spying her,

he suddenly froze. She promptly allowed emotion to propel her forward and into his arms. “Flav!”

He held her close and gave a shuddering breath. “Fleur.” He pulled back and tears clouded her vision as she looked him over to make sure he was unharmed. “I’m so sorry for everything,” he said miserably. “I was a selfish fool. Can you ever find it in your heart to forgive me?”

She embraced him again. “Of course. I love you. You’re my brother, the last family I have left.”

This time when they parted, he took her hand. “Let’s get out of here. We can start anew someplace else. I heard Whitby is quite nice and I have always thought about being a fisherman.” When he would have pulled her toward the door, she dug in her heels. “I can’t go with you. Not yet. Drake needs me.”

He frowned. “You don’t have to worry about him any longer. If you come with me you can be free of him.”

She glanced back at the stableman, who was standing by the door, arms crossed. He appeared to be at his ease, but she had no doubt that should she make a misstep he wouldn’t hesitate to bring forth his pistol again. “You don’t understand. I don’t want to be free of him.”

Understanding finally dawned, reflecting in his face. “You love him.”

She nodded. “God help me, but I do.”

He spun away from her and shoved a hand through his hair. “This is my fault. If I had been the brother you’d deserved and not a coward?—”

“It would have happened either way,” she noted. “He makes me happy.”

“He’s a cad!” Flavian sputtered angrily. “He purchased you at that auction like some damned horse!”

“He saved me from a worse fate,” she corrected firmly. “He might have been ruthless in the past, but he’s treated me with nothing but kindness and consideration. I won’t leave him.”

Flavian blinked, but then he blew out a heavy breath. “You are my sister and I can’t allow you to fight any more battles on your own.”

His willingness to turn the other cheek to Drake’s past humbled her. “Thank you.”

He grabbed her hand and headed for the door, but as Fleur suspected, Daniel moved into their path. “I’m afraid I can’t let you leave this cottage just yet.”

Flavian stepped in front of Fleur. “I held a lot of respect for you when we first came to Greenwich. Knowing your history as a grenadier, I thought you were brave and courageous, but if you are going to try to keep them here as a couple of prisoners, then that doesn’t make you any better than the worst sort of coward.”

Daniel’s eyes narrowed. “Call me what you will, but I have killed plenty of men on the battlefield. Don’t think I won’t do the same with you.”

As he was facing off with Flavian, it was the distraction that Fleur needed to whip up her sword and slice the hand that held the weapon. With a cry of pain, Daniel dropped the pistol. As it clattered to the floor, Flavian snatched it and then brought the hilt of the weapon down on Daniel’s temple. He instantly crumpled to the floor.

“Dear God, did you?—”

“He’ll live,” Flavian muttered. “But just have one helluva headache when he wakes up.”

Armed with their prospective weapons, they left the cottage.

* * *

“Do you think she stayed in the carriage?” Avalon whispered to Drake as they kept close to the wall of the pub and inched along the shadows, alert for danger.

“Not a chance.”

Drake would have been surprised if she had actually done one thing he’d ever told her, but other than obeying him in the bedchamber, she was sadly too stubborn to listen to him otherwise.

His jaw clenched as he thought of what she might be doing in that moment. He prayed it was nothing too bothersome that it might get her into trouble, but while his chest clutched with fear at the idea of anything befalling her, he had to admit that she had the fortitude to withstand most anything. She wasn’t some simpering miss who expected to be saved. She was quite capable of looking out for herself and he was grateful for her intelligence in strained situations. It was one reason he’d taken her to that fight the first night they were together in London. He wanted to see how she might handle herself and he had been pleasantly surprised to find that she hadn’t crumpled at the first sight of blood.

Lost to his thoughts, Drake made the worst mistake he could have done. He allowed inattention to distract him long enough to find himself in turmoil.

A brief scuffle behind him had Avalon lying on the ground and a pistol pointed at Drake’s head. Elijah’s lips curled in contempt as he faced off against him. “I don’t

know how you manage it, but you simply won't die .”

Elijah's blond hair was plastered to his head, his eyes flat. He had always had an air of insanity around him, but at that moment he looked completely mad. “Reynolds,” Drake drawled.

The other man spat at him. “I curse the day you were ever born for treating my sister the way you did. You killed her as surely as if you had pulled the trigger on this gun and ended her life.”

“I wasn't responsible for anything,” Drake said calmly. “She made her choices. Unfortunately, they were the wrong ones.”

Elijah's hand gripped his pistol tighter. “You're wrong!”

“I am sorry things ended the way they did,” Drake admitted. “But there was no one to blame for Elina's demise but herself. Her disease affected her mind. No one could have saved her from her fate.”

“Lies! It's your fault she's dead!” Elijah let out a roar of denial and took a step closer. He cocked the hammer and narrowed his eyes.

Looking up at the heaven full of twinkling stars, Drake exhaled slowly and thought of Fleur. He had already been convicted of a crime he hadn't committed, but his past actions had condemned him. He shouldn't be so calm as he faced the end of a barrel, but he had never really cared if he lived or died. He had made so many mistakes that he might never try to atone for them all. At least he could die knowing that Fleur was safe. The thought of losing her was too much to bear. It was as if someone was strangling him, slowly choking the air out of him whenever he imagined it. Death would be a blessing for him if she didn't live to see another sunrise.

“Drop it.”

He didn't have to turn his head to see who was addressing Reynolds. He would know that angelic voice anywhere.

He saw the sword aimed at Elijah from where he stood, the ominous silver blade prepared to run him through if he didn't comply with her demands.

As the pistol wavered, Drake murmured, “I would do as the lady says. She doesn't seem like the type to take such a warning lightly.”

He could tell that Elijah was reconsidering his odds but just as he was about to make the choice that would decide his fate, a pistol cocked behind Fleur. “I hate that it has come to this, but where I failed to protect my sister, I must protect our brother. Hand me your sword. Slowly .”

The new danger caused Drake to turn his head to look at the stablemaster. Daniel's head was trickling blood where he'd been struck in the temple. He would have chuckled had the situation not been so dire, considering the last time he'd seen this man he had just struck him a blow similar to the one he had now.

And then his attention turned to Fleur and what he saw in her gaze caused his blood to run cold. He shook his head slightly, a warning that he hoped she might heed. If she would give their reinforcements a bit more time to get into position...

“Now!”

He uttered a curse as she shouted the order and Flavian sprang into action. He tackled Daniel to the ground while she sliced her sword through the air. Elijah was taken off guard, but he had enough wherewithal to fire the weapon.

Something struck Drake with a searing pain that sent him to his knees.

Fleur screamed and suddenly, all hell broke loose.

As Drake blinked in an attempt to regain his equilibrium, Avalon abruptly put Reynolds in a headlock as the rest of the Blue Boys arrived with the local magistrate. While Flavian had done rather well in subduing the stablemaster, he was soon clapped in irons. The same went for Elijah once Avalon had released the chokehold he'd put on him.

As their comrades surrounded the two men, Avalon winced when he touched the side of his temple. "Bloody hell. And here I thought Drake and I would be the victors of the day. Well done, Miss Davies."

Drake noted that she didn't seem to be paying any attention to the leader of the Blue Boys because she had dropped to her knees beside him. "My God, you've been shot!"

Her voice sounded so panicked that he couldn't allow her to think he hadn't faced worse odds before. Then again, he hadn't found anything worth living for until recently and the idea that it had nearly been ripped from his grasp was enough to cling to her almost desperately. "It's nothing but a graze."

"I don't care. You need a doctor. Flavian! Go get some help!"

As she began to shout orders, he had to clench his jaw to keep her from blurring in his vision. "Listen to me!" he said gruffly. When she finally faced him again, he held on to her chin and kept her steady as he made his grand declaration. "I love you."

She laid a gentle hand on his arm and said, "Not to worry. You'll be patched up in no time."

He was confused. “Did you not hear what I said?” he demanded.

She looked at him in a consoling manner. “You aren’t thinking clearly. You’ve had a shock. It will pass?—”

Using the rest of his strength, he bellowed, “Dammit, woman! I LOVE YOU!”

Any commotion immediately halted as his announcement caught the assemblage standing about. Even Avalon’s eyebrows rose to his hairline.

At long last, Fleur ceased hovering over him like a wounded animal. “What did you say?” she whispered.

He laughed. “I love you. I love you. I love you . If I must say it a thousand times from this point forward until the end of eternity then that is what I shall do because it is the truth.” He exhaled heavily, the pain in his arm turning into a dull sting. “I thought I was in love once, but it is nothing compared to the crush of emotions that pull me every which way when you are near. There are times I don’t know if I should throttle you, like when I tell you to stay in the carriage, or hold on to you until you never leave my sight again.” He shook his head. “For anyone that has ever known me, they should understand that love is nothing I have ever taken lightly. I don’t speak it without due cause and thought I was incapable of the emotion until recently. But from the first moment I met you, something started to stir inside of me. All of those years I worked for myself I never dreamt that I would wish it all into oblivion, that you would come into my life and make me ashamed of the things I did. I always felt as though I was owed anything I took because I’d been given a tough hand in life and others had to understand the same misery. But not you. I didn’t care for revenge as I had so many others before. I just wanted... you. That’s what I want now and forever. Just you. And me.”

* * *

Fleur's throat had abruptly closed up on her and she couldn't seem to find the words that were clogging her windpipe. There were so many things she wanted to say at once, like I love you, too , but the only thing she could manage was a slight gasp. She hadn't expected such a declaration from Drake right then, in front of a crowd of people, but neither did she care. The fact was he felt the same way about her as she did for him and it was a moment worth rejoicing. For a man who had claimed he had a cold heart, it had certainly found a way to envelop enough warmth to open to her.

She opened her mouth, finally finding her voice, but the doctor suddenly appeared. She wanted to push him out of the way, to embrace Drake and kiss him until they were both senseless, but instead, she moved out of the way so the doctor could see to him. Standing by Flavian, she could see the question in Drake's eyes, but as Avalon knelt by him, he reluctantly turned his focus to the other man.

"I can't believe you didn't say anything."

As Avalon moved away with the rest of the assemblage to take care of the Reynolds' brothers, she turned to her twin. "What?"

He gestured to Drake. "I wasn't the biggest fan of Porter, but after what he just said in front of everyone without any sort of restraint, I have to admit that he seems sincere. You told me you felt the same way about him, and yet, you didn't say a single word in return."

She swallowed hard over the lump that threatened to choke her. "I was gathering my thoughts."

"Are you sure you're not having second thoughts about your feelings for him?"

For an instant, Fleur wondered if Flavian had spoken the truth but she quickly discounted the notion. "No. I love him with all of my heart."

As the doctor wound a bandage around Drake's arm and prepared to leave with a few whispered instructions to his patient, Flavian offered her a speaking glance and then parted ways with the physician.

Left alone in the courtyard together, Fleur looked at Drake who had risen to his feet. He glanced at the bandage on his arm. "I told you it was just a scratch."

She promptly burst into tears and ran into his arms. "Oh, Drake, I was so scared I was going to lose you! I was afraid that I would have to make the choice between you and Flavian and I refused to let that happen. I love you both dearly, but in completely different ways. He is my brother, while you are my heart." She lifted her face to him as the tears coursed down her cheeks. "You can't know the terror that went through me when I thought you'd been struck down. I thought I'd failed to protect you?—"

"Protect me?" He grinned broadly. "Sweetheart, the only thing I need from you is that sweet *derrière* pressing against my cock every night."

She stopped sobbing long enough to laugh at the glorious absurdity of his reply. "I might consider that if only you don't stop there."

His voice dropped an octave. "What a naughty girl you are."

"Indeed," she said in the same sultry tone. "But only with you." Any amusement faded as she slid a hand along his hairline. "I love you so much it hurts."

"Then you're not alone." His grip tightened slightly around her waist. "I can't breathe properly when you aren't near. Trust me when I say I never thought I would speak those words to anyone."

"That's what makes them even more special to me," she whispered.

His eyes caught the light from the moon and shone with the same remarkable silver hue. “Marry me.”

“Is that a question or a demand?” she teased.

“Both.”

“Then I wholeheartedly agree.”

With a scorching kiss, they made a promise for their future.

EPILOGUE

Two months later...

“What do you want to do with this painting?”

Drake had refused to wait for the banns to be read and paid an exorbitant sum to be granted a special license to marry Fleur before she had the chance to change her mind. After that, Drake had set about tying things up in London because it turned out that Flavian’s idea of living a quiet, quaint life in Whitby as a fisherman appealed greatly to Drake. Once he’d found a cottage near the sea for his new bride and Flavian had secured lodgings nearby, he’d set about leaving Mr. Porter to rest. He sold all of his holdings in the city and told Avalon that if he wished to visit, he might do so on holiday but they wouldn’t be coming back.

“Fleur has given me this opportunity to start over with a clean slate and that is what I intend to do.”

“But never to see London again?” Avalon countered with a lift of his dark brow. “I don’t see you doing that.”

“Perhaps not in the past, but as I’m to be a father in a few months, I will be using my expertise elsewhere.”

Avalon stared at him for a few moments and then he burst out in rich laughter. “By Jove! Mr. Porter is to be a father. Wonders never cease.”

His words had echoed in Drake's mind long after he'd left. He didn't know if Avalon intended to keep his position with the Blue Boys. He could tell that he was doing some thinking as they'd parted ways. While he might never see the king of the underground again, Drake wished him well. He was glad that they had found a way to work things out and could part on good terms. It was one more bridge that he had been able to repair with Fleur's help.

The townhouse on Chelsea was the last project that they had tackled before leaving the city for the coast. The secret room was the final chapter on the life Drake was glad to put behind him. He'd effectively cleared out all of the memorabilia he'd thought it necessary to keep and lit a fire under it all. He'd never felt a sense of relief as he had in watching the edges of those pages curl and turn black. It was as if he was set free, cleansed by their demise.

The last thing to come down was the painting he'd long admired. It had reminded him of a time in his life on another coast. In Burnham-On-Sea he'd been content for a time but this landscape had always reminded him of where he'd come from. Now, that no longer mattered. He wasn't going back, but moving forward.

"I think we can leave it with the British Museum. They will likely be overjoyed to have this piece in their gallery."

Fleur wound her arms around his neck. "I was afraid you might suggest we put it in the nursery."

He lifted a brow and brought her closer to him. "Heaven help me if I have a son that likes to pursue intrigue."

She scrunched up her nose. "Who says it's going to be a boy and that she won't do the same?"

With another groan, he decided the best way to silence her was a kiss.