



The Countess's Awakening

(The Lovers' Arch #3)

Author: *Lavinia Glen*

Category: Historical

Description: He healed her body

Esther Knightsbridge, the Dowager Countess of Hartfield, feels like a shadow of her former self. After a devastating accident left her wheelchair-bound, she watches in despair as her daughter makes her debut in society, knowing her disability renders her unable to be the mother her child deserves. Enter Mr Wang. The Chinese doctor's offer to help her walk again sparks cautious hope. What she doesn't expect is that his presence will awaken something even deeper in her heart.

She healed his heart

Wang has spent years using his knowledge of medicine to mend bodies and spirits. Haunted by loss, his life purpose is to help others. But his own past remains an unhealed wound. When he meets the spirited yet sorrowful Esther, her resilience and courage stir something he thought long dead. As he works to restore her mobility, their connection grows, kindling an undeniable attraction.

But as their love blossoms, they must face not only their own demons but also the rigid rules of a society that threatens to tear them apart. Between ancient Eastern wisdom and Victorian propriety lies a love that has the power to heal them both, but can it survive the world opposing their union? Or will their differences prove too great a chasm to bridge?

Total Pages (Source): 24

CHAPTER 1

May 1864

London

Esther was no stranger to grief, but she was discovering there were many ways a heart could break. She sat in the drawing room of her London home—or rather, what used to be her home. She was the dowager now. The house belonged to the new Earl of Hartfield, her late husband's son. As servants bustled about, preparing for her daughter's presentation tea, she fought to suppress the sting of tears.

Elizabeth was at court.

Her daughter was standing before the Queen at this very moment, taking her first steps into society, and Esther was here, sitting idly while the world moved on without her.

How many teas had she hosted in this very room? How many grand affairs had she overseen? She had once commanded these events with such ease, orchestrating them with the confidence of a woman whose place in her home was unquestioned. And yet, today, she was no hostess. She could say it was because that role now belonged to Abigail, the new Lady Hartfield. But the truth was, Esther had relinquished her place as Lady Hartfield long before now.

It happened six years ago, when a carriage accident stole the life she had once known. In the immediate aftermath, when she lay bedridden in agony, she had thought

nothing could be worse. But when the pain subsided, the crueler reality emerged—she was unable to walk. That was the true blow, the one that reshaped her world. The reason she withdrew from society to carve out a quiet existence in the country.

During that dark time, Abigail had been her biggest support. Recently widowed and in need of a position, she became Esther's companion, but over time, she had become far more—a confidante, a friend, and, eventually, the one to take on the duties Esther could no longer manage. Esther had been grateful to relinquish the responsibilities of Lady Hartfield into Abigail's capable hands, convinced she had found peace in her retreat.

Then, last year, her life had been upended once again with her husband's death. And if the sorrow of his passing was not enough, it was compounded by the revelation that he had left her penniless. Not a settlement, not security, not even the dignity of true independence. Theirs had never been a love match, but she had believed they had built something—affection, respect. How could he have thought so little of her? How could he leave her with nothing, forcing her to depend on his heir?

That heir, his son from his first marriage, was a stranger to her. For a year, she, her daughter, and Abigail, had lived in limbo, unsure of whether they would be cast out or forced to endure the rule of a cruel new master. It had been a time of fear, of waiting for the ax to fall. But when Colin had finally arrived to claim his title, she found he was not the heartless man she had dreaded. He was kind, generous. Not only had he taken care of her as his father's widow, providing the settlement her husband should have provided, but he had married Abigail, and had proven an indulgent older brother to Elizabeth.

All was well now. She had no reason to feel this anguish. Except everything was changing yet again. Her daughter had just left with Colin and Abigail for her presentation at court, radiant in her white gown, her eyes bright with dreams. Esther

had once been like that. But she had faded from the life she had once commanded, retreating until she had become little more than a shadow.

She clutched her chair's armrests with a white-knuckled grip as the bitter truth pressed in on her—she had become utterly useless. How could she be the mother her daughter needed if she remained locked away, an invalid with nothing to offer?

As if to underscore her thoughts, a shadow loomed beside her, and she glanced up to find a footman shifting awkwardly, his gloved hands clasped in front of him.

“Lady Hartfield, might I assist you to another location? We need to adjust the furniture.”

Esther forced a tight smile and inclined her head, allowing him to wheel her to a corner of the room. Out of the way. The footman murmured his apologies and disappeared, but she barely heard him. Her gaze had caught on a small, framed daguerreotype perched on the side table. A moment frozen in time.

Hartfield Park. Ten years ago.

The summer sunlight dappled the terrace, catching the gleam of silver teapots and the pale hues of ladies' gowns. In the foreground, Elizabeth stood next to her, a wide grin on her mischievous face, her dark curls in disarray. Her daughter had been so small, merely eight years old. Most mothers kept their children away from such affairs, but Esther had never subscribed to those notions. She had delighted in her daughter's presence and cherished every moment she could spend with her.

Elizabeth had been particularly restless that day, her boundless energy at odds with the decorum of a formal tea. To keep her entertained, Esther had devised a series of children's games on the lawn. She had joined them, much to the scandalized amusement of the other ladies, running and laughing with her daughter and the other

children. Skirts lifted just enough to keep from tangling.

Had that been only ten years ago?

It felt like another lifetime. As if the young matron in the photograph, full of life and laughter, was someone else entirely. She had gone from that woman to this—a dried-up, useless dowager, shunted into corners and moved about like a piece of furniture.

Her lungs constricted as a lump rose in her throat, but she swallowed it down. She seldom indulged in self-pity. It was a useless emotion. But even as she tried to squash the wave of despair that threatened to pull her under, a fat tear fell onto her hands, clasped tightly in her lap, as if the force of that grip was the only thing keeping her together.

“My lady? Are you well? May I be of assistance?” She froze and heat suffused her cheeks at the warm timbre of the familiar voice.

Oh, goodness! It was Mr. Wang. Colin’s friend had entered the room without her noticing. The man moved with the stealth of a ghost. And yet she knew the body under the layers of sober clothing was as solid as a rock. She had experienced his strength firsthand when he had carried her through Cremorne Gardens a mere few weeks ago.

As if it was not humiliating enough to be carried through Cremorne Gardens like a sack of potatoes, he also had to be the one who found her in such an emotional state. She turned her head away and tried to surreptitiously dab at her eyes.

“Perfectly fine, Mr. Wang.” The wobble in her voice belied that statement, and she knew she was unsuccessful at hiding her embarrassing tears. The man saw too much.

He crouched in front of her. Without a word, he extended a snow-white handkerchief.

Their eyes met for the briefest of moments. Hers, skittish and flooded; his, calm and reassuring.

She took the handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes, inhaling the faint sweet-and-spicy scent that lingered in the pristine square of fabric. “Thank you. You must think I’m a veritable watering pot.”

“I think nothing of the sort, my lady. I daresay it’s been an emotional day for you. Would you like to unburden yourself to someone? I am here.”

She would love to talk to someone, but her reasons seemed so trivial. So self-pitying and pathetic. And yet his calm demeanor reassured her. It promised a sympathetic ear.

“It’s silly.” She chuckled with self-deprecation.

He did not laugh. “It’s not if it makes you cry.”

“It’s just that I feel so useless. My daughter is being presented to the Queen today. I should be there by her side. Accompanying her to her presentation, advising her, guiding her in society through her first Season. Helping her secure a good husband who would love and cherish her. And yet, here I am. Useless in this chair. A burden everyone has to bear instead of being any kind of help.”

“You are not a burden, my lady. Your family loves you and enjoys having you be part of their lives.”

“How can they enjoy it when I ruin all the occasions? In Cremorne, I had to be carried around like an unwieldy sack of potatoes. Even here in the house, while everyone is working hard preparing for the presentation tea, I’m nothing but a piece of furniture standing in the way.”

The faintest of smiles curved Wang's lips, drawing her attention to his mouth. How could a face so severe that it seemed sculpted from stone turn almost sensual with such a small smile?

"Not a sack of potatoes. At most, a very pretty, very light, feather pillow. I'd gladly carry you whenever you require it."

His outrageous flattery had the power to penetrate her dark misery like the rays of the sun sifting through dark clouds.

"Thank you, Mr. Wang. At least your teasing has made me smile."

"I am teasing, yes. But I am very serious about the offer as well. Although..."

"What?"

"I would much rather attempt to rehabilitate you, so you can stand on your own two feet."

A bitter scoff escaped her. "That is very kind of you, but I've already tried without success and put myself through a lot of pain and disappointment in the process."

"But you haven't tried with me."

The simple statement hung in the air, daring her to hope. Taunting her with its double meaning. Or was she just imagining it? She would like to dismiss a certain energy that shimmered between them. She had felt it the first time Mr. Wang had lifted her in his arms, that day in Cremorne, when her wheelchair had gotten stuck. He had done it so effortlessly and with such reverence.

Esther had thought herself immune to desire. Dead. She certainly had felt that way

since her accident. But somehow, while held securely in this man's arms, the side of her breast pressed against his chest and her arm wound around his muscular shoulders, awareness of his strength and athleticism had caused flutters in her belly, accompanied by an awakening of desires long dormant.

That same desire still simmered now. Unacknowledged, but real.

She had the strange urge to skim her fingers over his high cheekbones, cup her hand over the sharp edges of his jawline, and brush her thumb over his lush lips. And oh, that lock of hair. Straight and thick, defying any effort to confine it, falling over his brow in such a provocative manner. It gave him a playful appearance, so at odds with his usual reserved expression. She wanted to discover if it was as silky as it appeared.

It taunted her until, of its own volition, her hand lifted and brushed it aside. It was an innocent enough gesture. But then Mr. Wang lifted his slanted eyes to hers, and awareness sizzled in his dark gaze.

His gaze which had surely singed her, judging by the heat that blossomed on her cheeks. Esther licked her suddenly dry lips, and his gaze homed in on her mouth. She knew at that moment that he was aware of her inappropriate thoughts. But more surprisingly, he appeared to reciprocate.

Surely not. She was reading too much into the situation. What could a vital, strong, and athletic man such as him want with an invalid like her? She was being ridiculous. His offer to help her walk again was a simple kindness on his part. Maybe it had even been Hartfield's idea. Her stepson was a doctor, and he had mentioned several times that he would like to help her. Regardless of the motive, maybe she should accept Mr. Wang's offer. But...

"I'm afraid."

She was not aware she had said it aloud until he replied in that same calm voice of his.

“If you do not enter the tiger’s den, how will you get the tiger’s cub?”

Esther frowned. “Why would I want a tiger’s cub?”

Wang smiled, this time fully, and the effect was dazzling. “It’s just an ancient Chinese saying. Tigers are valuable animals. They represent strength and power. To capture one means to face great odds and succeed. If you don’t take a chance, how will you achieve what you want?”

He didn’t boast, didn’t make outlandish promises. But there was something in his steady manner that inspired confidence. Esther frowned, biting her lips. She’d never hated her helplessness more than at this moment. Elizabeth needed her mother by her side to guide her through her Season, and she was a useless cripple. Her stepson and Abigail had been a godsend. They were taking on the responsibility of presenting her daughter and accompanying her to balls and other society events. Esther, however, knew that the duty was hers. That she was failing as a mother.

Colin and Abigail were a young couple. They needed to focus on themselves and their marriage. Abigail might conceive, and then they would have their own offspring to take care of. Esther couldn’t burden them anymore. She needed to become independent and fend for herself and her daughter. Colin had been very generous and offered to set her up in her own residence if she wished. It was more than what her own husband—Colin’s father—had provided.

But in order to become independent, she had to stand on her own two feet. Both in the literal and figurative sense. She looked at Wang, who had not moved. His gaze remained direct and patient. Supportive.

“Do you think it possible that I could walk again?”

“I don’t know yet, my lady. I will need to perform an examination. And much will depend on you. Do you trust me?”

“I do.”

And it was true. From the moment Mr. Wang had arrived with her stepson, he had been nothing but helpful, kind, respectful.

“Will you allow me to touch your feet? I will need to touch you often in the course of the therapies.”

A shiver ran through her. Not of fear or revulsion. Oh no. The exact opposite. It was unadulterated excitement.

“Very well.”

Slowly, with the utmost reverence, he cradled the back of her leg with one hand and removed her slipper. Then, while still holding the back of her heel, he pressed his thumb into the center of her sole, massaging it along the length of her foot. Her toes curled in. Was it her imagination that his fingers caressed with lingering touches? Molding her arch, enveloping her toes, learning the contours of her foot. It was almost...sensual.

“Do you feel my touch?”

To the very marrow of my being.

“Yes,” she said simply, her voice a little strained from holding back the scandalous thought.

He repeated the same procedure with the other foot, with the same result. Then he sat back on his haunches, and her eyes drank the sight of his trousers stretching over his thighs. But she was not prepared for her reaction when he placed her stockinged feet on his solid thighs.

“Are you able to curl your toes on your own?”

She very much wanted to. It surprised her how much she craved to dig her toes into his rock-hard thighs. Slide her feet up and down them. Her eagerness must have helped her complete the movement, for not only was she able to curl her toes, but her weak legs drew strength from somewhere to slide up his thighs, getting perilously close to—

His hands closed over her ankles, arresting the movement before her feet reached a sensitive area.

“I think there’s a very good chance you will recover. You have sensation in your feet, and you are capable of some movement. Your muscles are weak from disuse, but that’s what we are going to fix.”

He put her slippers back on and rearranged her skirts, rising to his feet in one smooth, controlled movement. What would it feel like to move with so much ease? To have such strength that every action appeared effortless?

“Indeed.” She forced out of a throat gone dry.

Jesus, she was shameless. The man had been focused on helping her. Meanwhile, her mind—and her morals—had gone straight to the gutter at the marvelous sensation of having his hands upon her feet and legs.

“Would you like to start tomorrow, then?” he asked.

“So soon?” She heard the note of panic in her voice. She wasn’t ready.

“Why wait? The sooner you start, the sooner you might be able to walk again.”

“You are right, of course. Tomorrow then.”

“Do you know how to swim, Countess?”

Her eyes widened in alarm. “Swim? No, of course not!”

“Relax.” His hand came to rest on top of hers, warm, solid. Safe. It settled her alarm. And caused a fresh set of nerves to tingle all along her skin. “Don’t worry about any of it. I will be right by you. I shall see you through this, my lady.”

She looked into his eyes. Apprehension warred with hope inside her. But she must go forward. Because retreating into the shadows was no longer an option.

CHAPTER 2

Wang couldn't claim to be an expert in British aristocratic etiquette. But he felt quite confident that lusting after his best friend's stepmother would be frowned upon. Especially when said lady was incapacitated and practically a recluse. When she inhabited the same residence where he was staying as a guest. But most of all, his feelings were particularly inappropriate because he was reasonably sure the lady did not return them. Would never do so. She was a member of the aristocracy. A countess, for goodness' sake.

While Wang did not consider himself less than any man, and was proud of his heritage, he was acutely aware society did not see him as the countess's social equal. He was a Chinese immigrant. A member of the working class, and those two things alone placed her as far above his station as the stars were from Earth.

Knowing all this, he was hard-pressed to determine when his feelings had grown so out of control. Something had sparked the first time he saw her. But it hadn't been lust. She had looked so delicate. A beautiful flower battered by the elements and yet still clinging tenaciously to a sliver of earth to avoid being swept up in a storm.

He had recognized her fragility, and her quiet strength, and they had called forth every protective instinct he had. He had quelled those impulses, of course. Had avoided her as much as he could. Even when he suspected he could help her with her infirmity, he still had resisted. When his friend Lord Hartfield had suggested he help her, he had demurred, proclaiming himself incapable of helping her. Not because of a lack of expertise. But because the interaction required for the treatment would batter the restraints he had placed on those inappropriate feelings.

So he had waited, knowing full well it was time to return to America, yet lingering because some instinct called him to remain close to her. To find her help through another means if necessary. To be nearby and ready to assist if she ever asked for it.

That moment had come today. He had been unable to withstand the lady's tears. They had scoured his heart and propelled him to act, to offer his help, to bring her hope. Her need obliterated every other consideration. He would make it work. He would help her achieve her dream. Even if it meant tying his impulses with iron chains. After all, he wasn't an impulsive youngster. He had been on this earth for almost half a century, and was well-practiced in the art of restraint.

Wang descended the front stairs of the elegant townhouse of the Earl of Hartfield and turned left, toward the street they called The Strand. He didn't hail a cab. The distance was not great, and he needed to think.

Now that he had her agreement, Wang realized what he had agreed to. What he had promised. And what it would cost him to deliver the help she needed while staying professional and detached.

Good God, merely touching her feet, holding her delicate calves in his hands, had affected him to a degree he had not thought himself capable of. And he would have to do much more touching during her therapy. Her back, her legs. He may need to uncover more of her body. Massage her in a way that might upset her modesty.

It would be something if he could assure her that his touch was that of a medical professional. Detached. Impersonal. But he feared that with her, with Esther, it would be a lie.

Esther? No, no, no. He had to stop thinking of her in those terms. She was the Dowager Countess of Hartfield. Lady Hartfield. A lady. Far above his station. And a patient in need of help.

These urges she awakened in him were a nuisance. They would impede helping her as she needed. He had to control them. Snuff them out. Already he had let her see too much.

He had been trying to avoid her since the day they had visited Cremorne Gardens, when he had carried her in his arms. She had felt so right there... Her light body reclining against his chest, her slender arm around his shoulders, her soft perfume caressing his senses, and her face so close he imagined he could brush his lips across her forehead if he only dipped his head. The urge had been so powerful that he had forced himself to keep his eyes forward. Never looking at her.

He had betrayed nothing that day. And had done a great job of keeping his distance since then. Avoiding being alone with her or even crossing paths with her. Which had been easy, because Esther—no, Lady Hartfield—rarely left her bedchamber these days.

He frowned at the reminder of her seclusion. It worried him, but it was not his place to intervene.

Except today. When he saw her crying, he could not stay away. And when she confessed the depths of her despair... Well, nothing could have prevented him from offering his help. Not only with a handkerchief to dry her tears, but to use his knowledge and skills to help her heal.

Would he be able to deliver on his promise? He would do his utmost. Even if the effort to hide his attraction to her killed him.

But first, he needed to secure the place in which to hold her therapies.

His fast strides had brought him to the establishment he sought. He had come across Essex Baths while searching for a place in which to set up a clinic in London. Colin

wanted to open a hospital similar to the one they had established in New York. A place that blended Eastern and Western medicine techniques to perform orthopedic treatments and surgeries, rehabilitate the infirm, and employ the latest technology and medical advances to treat the patients. Although unconvinced about staying in England, Wang agreed to help his friend. Colin had a lot on his mind, and Wang was glad for something to occupy his time.

The locale next to the baths was available for leasing, and they had considered it a suitable location for their clinic. Especially if they could convince the owner of the baths to sell them part of that establishment to use as hydrotherapy pools.

He strode into the baths and was immediately greeted—or maybe the more apt description would have been intercepted—by the clerk.

“May I help you?” the ferret-like man inquired, looking him up and down. Not hostile, but not exactly welcoming either.

“Good afternoon, sir. May I speak to the owner of the establishment? I’m looking to hire the baths for private use.”

“I am the owner, but we cannot accommodate you. Perhaps you would have better luck in Limehouse. There are public bathhouses there.”

Wang smiled, ignoring the slight. Limehouse was a predominantly Asian neighborhood in London, and this man’s mention of it was a not-so-subtle reminder of his place in this society. As a friend of the Earl of Hartfield, no one had been openly hostile to him. But neither had they been friendly. People’s reactions ranged from curiosity at best to thinly veiled suspicion at worst.

At one point in his life, it would have bothered him. He would have fought over it. In fact, he had. Many times. Until he realized that people’s reactions were nothing but

fear of the unknown. Of anything or anyone who looked different. That his own people held deep prejudice against the westerners as well. And that the best way to combat prejudice was not by fighting, but by fostering connection and understanding.

“The bath is not for my use. It’s for the Countess of Hartfield. She wishes to enjoy the pool in solitude.”

As he expected, the mention of aristocracy softened the other man’s attitude.

“A countess, you say? Very well then. But if she wishes to reserve the entire women’s baths for her private use, it’ll need to be at night. After we are closed to the public. And then only for an hour.”

“That is acceptable. What time?”

“Seven. The price will be three guineas. We will provide a servant to attend to her.”

Wang extracted some coins from his pocket to pay the exorbitant price, three times that of a regular admission to the baths, but it was well worth it to have a private pool in which to hold her therapies.

“That won’t be necessary. I will attend the countess myself.”

This time undisguised suspicion sharpened the clerk’s eyes, and Wang wondered if he was going to withdraw the deal.

“Men and women’s baths are separate. Highly irregular to have a male servant attending a lady in her bath.”

“It’s a good thing that I am not her servant, then, but her doctor.”

“You are a doctor?”

“Indeed, I am. The countess is infirm. She suffered an accident that rendered her unable to walk. It is my hope that with hydrotherapy, she will regain the use of her legs.”

“Never heard of that. Once a cripple, always a cripple.”

Wang clenched his jaw so hard it ached. The effort needed to prevent himself from issuing a cutting retort was almost unbearable. Apparently, he could tolerate personal insults much better than hearing this weasel man call Esther a cripple.

“It’s a new form of treatment. The Earl of Hartfield himself is a doctor and has used it with some success. Just imagine, if the countess recovers after using your baths, how much more popular they will become.”

As he had expected, the lure of money was an effective antidote to the man’s ignorance.

“Fine then. Tomorrow at seven. You shall enter through the women’s baths. And whether or not the countess needs a maid, there will be a female attendant present the entire time.” That last seemed to be added to discourage any sort of untoward behavior.

Wang smiled. “Thank you.”

With a nod, he departed the establishment. He had sorted out the use of the facilities. If only he could sort his feelings with as much ease.

CHAPTER 3

“Where are you taking me, Mr Wang?”

The countess, sitting across from him in the forward-facing seat of the carriage, peeked nervously through the drawn drapes that covered the windows to protect her privacy. He was gratified she had at least trusted him enough to allow him to carry her out of the house and into the coach. Her maid also accompanied her. The stout woman sat next to her mistress with quiet solicitude.

Night had fallen, but London bustled with activity. Carriages crawled here and there amid the clip-clopping of the horses' hoofs as the city dwellers prepared for a night of entertainment. The Season was in full swing, and every night there was a ball, musicale, theater performance, or any sort of entertainment one could imagine.

He would have preferred to hold the therapies in the mornings, but this was the only time offered by the bath's owner.

“I'm taking you to the Roman Baths on The Strand.”

She gasped. “A Roman bath? Aren't they more like swimming pools? I couldn't possibly. Besides, I don't have swimming attire.”

“Are you wearing the garments I provided?”

Even within the shadowy confines of the carriage, her blush was more than evident.

“I am. Although I fail to see...”

“That is your bathing attire.”

Her eyes widened in alarm. “But I couldn’t possibly wear those in your presence. They are scandalous.”

“My lady.” Wang placed her hand on top of hers.

The contact was meant to reassure her, but he instantly had misgivings about the wisdom of touching her. Awareness seemed to radiate from the place they touched. Ridiculous, of course. He would have to touch her a lot more, and he was not a callow youth to be experiencing these uncontrollable urges.

Clearing his throat, he went on. “These garments are made from heavy satin. They will keep you modestly covered but are not as heavy as a fashionable bathing suit. I was afraid those would be too cumbersome, especially when wet.”

She opened her mouth, no doubt to ask more questions or voice more objections, but the carriage slowed to a halt in front of an unassuming door on a street off The Strand. The footman jumped from his perch at the back of the carriage and knocked on the door as instructed. The door immediately opened, and Wang jumped out, then reached in for the countess.

She looked from the door to him, with a frown, and for several heartbeats, hesitated. Was she going to lose her nerve and turn back now? But then her chin lifted, and she gave the briefest of nods, indicating she was ready. He wasted no time placing an arm behind her back and another under her legs. Her arm came around his shoulders with gratifying familiarity, and she leaned trustingly against his chest when he lifted her out of the carriage and carried her through the dimly lit doorway.

Esther had never swum. In fact, she had never been in water deeper than a regular bath, where the water barely reached her chest while lying in it. Therefore, she found it really upsetting to enter what amounted to a small swimming pool in Wang's arms. This amount of water would completely submerge her if she sat in it. What if she couldn't stand? It was a terrifying thought.

Only the secure hold Wang had on her prevented her from going into an outright panic. He had walked a few steps down into the bath and now lowered her into the water.

She clung tighter to the only safety in a liquid world that wanted to swallow her.

"Relax, my lady. I will not let go."

"Are you sure this will help, Mr. Wang?"

"While I can never guarantee a result, I've seen excellent results using hydrotherapy in injuries such as yours."

"Oh, have you treated others?"

"Yes. Once in Canton. And more recently, the War for the Union going on in America has resulted in many soldiers with injuries. We have treated several of them. Most of them achieved some measure of recovery."

She noticed that while distracting her with his talk, he slowly moved her back and forth. As if she were a babe he was rocking to sleep in his arms. Except she was no babe, and the movement was having a completely different effect. It was not inducing a stupor, but was rather energizing, although in a relaxing way, if that made any sense. Or maybe that was all the effect of the man holding her in his arms.

“I will lower your legs now, and I want you to stand.”

Panic seized her again, and she held on tighter, shaking her head.

“I won’t let go. I’ll still be holding you the entire time, my lady.” At her still wide-eyed gaze, he continued. “Do you trust me to keep you safe?”

Yes, she did. She wouldn’t be here if she didn’t trust him. But she didn’t trust herself. She would flounder and fail.

“I do, Mr. Wang. But I can’t stand just yet.”

“The water creates buoyancy. That means you weigh less, making it easier for your legs to support you. I’ll provide extra support. Just give it a go.”

“If you insist.”

He suddenly grinned, and the expression transformed his severe face into something so dazzling, her breath suddenly locked in her lungs.

“I do, my lady. And you will do just great.”

Saying that, he lowered her feet, until she felt the smooth tile of the bath under her soles. Just as promised, his hold on her upper body didn’t falter. He still had an arm around her torso, holding her securely against his solid body.

“Try to walk. The water will provide gentle resistance, but it will also make you weigh less.”

She did, marveling at the novel sensation. Her legs were drifting. She was sure that even with the water’s help, they wouldn’t hold her up without his support, but she

was standing. And she was doing an impression of walking. A motion she had taken for granted until a few years ago and thought she would never experience again.

It was hard. Even with Wang's support, and the buoyancy provided by the water, she had to put a great effort into moving her legs. But she was doing it. She was upright, and she was moving her legs. It was a huge step forward. Both literally and figuratively.

She was a fighter, his Esther. The signs of exhaustion were plain to see in her face, but she did not complain once. She performed every exercise he asked of her to the best of her capability. And she was doing fantastic. Today's results bolstered his confidence that she would make a full recovery.

That outcome became more important to him than any other. He had helped countless people in almost three decades of practicing medicine. But this woman, here and now, was special to him.

"I think that's enough for today, my lady."

She exhaled with relief, looked straight at him, and smiled brightly. "I did it. I walked Mr. Wang."

He couldn't look away. He had seen her pensive, sad, devastated with tears. At times, he had spied a gentle smile when she looked at her daughter with love and pride in her gaze. But he had never seen a smile of pure joy, hope, and pride. It made her eyes sparkle and lit up her face. If she was beautiful before, when she smiled, she was dazzling. And he was mesmerized by her spell.

"Yes, you did, my lady." He returned her smile, because he couldn't contain his joy in her accomplishment. It warmed his heart. More like set it on fire. "But we haven't finished the treatment."

“Oh? Is there more?”

“Yes. But the next part will require very little effort on your part.” He once again took hold of her legs and lifted her out of the bath. Every time he lifted her, he sensed how she became more and more comfortable with his touch. It was gratifying. No, it was so much more than that. Her trust meant everything to him. But he was about to test it. Striding out of the bathing chamber, he took her to the dry heat room.

“This is nice and toasty,” Esther said upon entering.

“Yes, and all you have to do here is lie down and enjoy being pampered. This room is what they call the Turkish Bath.” He set her down on a pallet of soft blankets on a ledge. “I’ll now send for your maid to help you get dry and remove these wet garments. Then lie on the pallet, face down, and have her cover you with this blanket.”

Her eyes almost popped out of her face.

“Do you mean unclothed?”

“Yes, my lady. I need access to your back and legs. I’m afraid garments would impede the massage and the acupuncture.”

“But I can’t lie naked in front of you!”

A pity, that. No! He must stop these inappropriate thoughts. She was a patient. A lady in need of help. What kind of doctor would he be if he took advantage of his patient’s vulnerabilities? A degenerate, that’s what. In order to help her, he must stop seeing her as a desirable woman. But that proved more and more difficult every moment he spent in her company.

Drawing in a deep breath to summon the inner calm he needed, he replied, “You won’t be exposed. A blanket will cover you. I shall only uncover the area I’m working at that moment. Your maid can remain in the room if that will put you more at ease.”

She frowned. “I don’t know. Is that considered normal and appropriate in your culture?”

His lips twitched. She had him there. “No. Most Chinese women wouldn’t even go to a male doctor. But they have female doctors who can see to their needs. You don’t have female doctors in England.”

“English women go to male doctors. But in this instance, it seems very...intimate.”

“Don’t think of me as a man.” He had to put her at ease. Even if he wasn’t fully at ease with touching her naked body himself. But this part of the treatment was important. He recalled another tradition of his people. “If it helps, think of me as a eunuch.” He cringed inwardly as he said it.

Her eyes widened until they resembled full moons. “Are you?” She immediately clapped a hand over her mouth. “Oh, please forgive me. I can’t believe I asked...” She shook her head. “That’s none of my business.”

Wang burst out laughing. He never thought he would laugh about his manhood. But her expression of horror was too much to bear.

“No. I am not.” He most definitely—most emphatically—was not. Especially not around this woman.

She frowned playfully at him. “That’s terrible of you to tease me so, Mr. Wang.”

“It was not my intention to tease. I merely sought to put you at ease. This part of the treatment is important.”

“What will it involve?”

“I will massage your back and legs. And also use acupuncture to stimulate your qi .”

“What is ‘qi’ , and what does this acupuncture involve?”

He could see the curiosity in her eyes. It wasn’t mistrust, but genuine interest in the therapies that motivated all her questions. He liked an inquisitive mind.

“ Qi is the life force. Vital energy. It needs to be balanced and flow unrestricted through channels in the body called meridians. For that purpose, I will insert needles into specific points. They will stimulate your nerves and enhance the blood flow, promoting healing while reducing inflammation and pain. It can even help the mind find calm, and restore movement. That is what acupuncture is about.”

“Needles! That sounds painful.”

“It’s not. I promise. These needles are very thin, and I will place them gently. You may feel a tingling sensation. And that is good. Means it’s working. But there should be no pain.”

He glanced at her, watching for skepticism, for hesitation. But she only nodded slowly, thoughtful. Perhaps, he dared to hope, she was beginning to trust in what he could offer—not only as a doctor, but as a man who wished to see her well and whole again.

“Very well, then. Give me a few minutes. I will call you when I’m ready.”

Bowing at the waist, he retired and sent the maid in to help her mistress. He could use these few minutes to bring himself under control and remember, she was just a patient.

Except that not even a few hours, even years, would be enough to convince himself of that.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:39 am

CHAPTER 4

E sther lay in the pleasantly warm room, under Wang's skilled ministrations, and she couldn't remember ever being so comfortable, or so relaxed.

He started on her legs, massaging the calves, sliding up her oiled skin with exquisite pressure. His hands kneaded, rolled, and pressed, dragging little moans of pleasure from her lips. Sounds she unsuccessfully tried to bury in the towel she was using as a pillow. Why had she hesitated so much to allow this? It felt divine.

When his hands slid upward past her knees, her womanly core clenched in anticipation. But of course, he didn't go there. His hands reversed their course and slid downward again. Toward her calves and feet. Shameless woman that she was, she almost groaned in frustration. But everything he was doing felt too good for her to complain.

He spent quite some time on her feet. Pressing certain points on her sole, then bending her knees and rolling her feet while supporting her ankles.

The blanket settled over her legs, covering her lower body. She had a moment of disappointment that the delicious massage had ended, before he grabbed the upper edge of the blanket and his voice, low and intimate, murmured.

"May I?"

"Yes," she said, and nodded her head for good measure.

Wang lowered the blanket to her waist, exposing her back. She felt a moment of vulnerability before his warm, oiled hands descended on her. Gliding, kneading. Finding aching points and working them with gentle pressure until she felt as soft as warmed honey. His thumbs glided the entire length of her spine, and then his hands fanned out to her sides over her shoulder blades. She could not contain the groan of pure pleasure that emanated from deep in her soul.

His hands paused. “Are you well, my lady?”

“Yes. Oh, yes. Please, don’t stop. That feels”—another moan of pure, unadulterated pleasure momentarily interrupted her speech—“amazing.”

She heard his low chuckle but was too relaxed to care. This almost felt like imbibing too much wine. Inhibitions lowered, cares and worries melted away until only this ecstasy mattered.

When he had reduced her to the pliancy of warm wax, she felt his fingers focusing on specific points along her spine, her hips, the back of her knees. They felt like butterfly touches. She imagined him placing the tiny needles he had spoken about, and she remained unnaturally still, not wanting to disrupt the process. So far it had not hurt, just as he promised, but she feared if she moved, they would poke her.

“That’s it,” he said, stepping back from her body. “Now we wait for a few minutes. To allow the needles to do their job.”

“Hmm. If they are supposed to give me strength, I don’t think it will work,” she murmured, turning her head to the side to watch Wang, who had taken a seat on a nearby bench set against the wall.

He frowned. “Why? Do you feel any discomfort? Weakness?”

“I’m certainly weak.” She smiled. “I feel like I’m floating on a cloud. My limbs are the consistency of molten wax.”

A warm, gentle chuckle escaped his lips. “I’m glad I could bring you relief, my lady.”

“You brought more than relief. You brought absolute pleasure.”

Goodness gracious. Had she really said that? Her tongue had loosened along with her limbs and her inhibitions. Despite the heat of the room that warmed her entire body, an additional flush rose to her face. She hoped he attributed her rising color to the surrounding heat rather than her embarrassment.

He said nothing, merely inclined his head in acknowledgment. But was it her imagination that his gaze seemed to smolder as he contemplated her? The moment became charged. Awareness tingled along her naked body, and her heartbeat accelerated. She needed a distraction.

“So, tell me, Mr. Wang, are these traditional medical treatments in China?”

“Yes. Along with acupressure, moxibustion, certain exercises, and herbal medicines and poultices.”

“And do you only practice Chinese medicine, or have you adopted some of our Western practices as well?”

“In New York, while working with Colin, I learned about traditional western medicine as well. We used both in the hospital we founded and achieved much success treating patients with a mix of the two.”

“How long have you known Lord Hartfield?”

“Going on sixteen years now.”

“How did you two meet?” It seemed like an unlikely friendship. And yet she could see the genuine affection and respect between the two men.

Wang smiled, reminiscing. “During a riot, if you can believe it.”

Esther gasped, her interest piqued. If she could, she would have sat up to hear the tale.

“Oh, do tell. That sounds like an extremely interesting story.”

“It was outside the Astor Place Opera House. Apparently, there was some rivalry between two actors, which spilled onto their followers and sparked tension between the upper and lower classes. We learned this later. At the time, I was walking by when I heard the angry shouts and sounds of a brawl. I almost turned around and went another way to avoid the mob, but then I spotted this young man and a lady being accosted by a group of men.”

“Colin and his mother, I assume,” Esther interjected into the pause.

Wang nodded. “The lad’s fighting skills were non-existent, but he fought with great courage, attempting to defend the lady, who was also trying to fight off the attackers with an umbrella. I thought that four grown men against one lad and a lady were uneven odds, so I jumped into the fight. Within seconds, the men were retreating, the fight almost over. That would have been the end of it. Then shots rang out. At that moment, Colin barreled into me from behind and would have tumbled me to the ground if not for my training. As it was, I still felt the impact of the bullet when it hit him.”

Esther gasped. “Colin was shot?”

“Yes. He saw the guard aiming at me and jumped in front of the bullet. Probably saved my life that night.”

She really wished she could move now. But not only was she pinned in place by her infirmity and the needles, she was also naked and standing from her prone position would have exposed her. So she stayed put.

“So he took the bullet instead? What happened to him? Did you heal him?”

Wang shook his head. “He wasn’t harmed. He was wearing a brace for his back, and the leather and metal contraption around his torso stopped the bullet. Still, it was mighty courageous on his part to step into the path of a bullet. Especially to save a stranger. It proved my initial assessment of his bravery.”

“You had stepped in to help him as well,” Esther suggested softly.

“Still, few Englishmen would have risked his life for a Chinese person.”

She thought she detected an edge to his words. Had he suffered discrimination because of his origins? As soon as the question formed, she knew the answer. Of course he had. Her own class discriminated against people for the unfortunate circumstance of not having a title attached to their names, even when they had been born in the same land. How much more would they hold prejudice against a foreigner? Someone who looked different and whose language and culture they couldn’t understand. People often let fear of the unknown overshadow what they should celebrate and share.

“I’m glad he did,” she breathed, but with true conviction.

If Colin hadn’t, this incredible man might have perished that day. She might have never met him, and all their lives might have been poorer for it. It would have been a

terrible waste.

“And then you became friends?”

A corner of Wang’s mouth hitched up. “Something like that. He brushed away my gratitude and instead thanked me for coming to their aid. My fighting style impressed him, so he pestered me until I agreed to teach him to fight.”

“So you taught him how to fight and about medicine, too?”

“No. He was already a student at the College of Physicians and Surgeons. I suspect his own medical challenges gave him an interest in medicine and surgery. He didn’t even find out I was a doctor until several months into our acquaintance.”

“How so? Did you not want him to find out?”

A small shrug. “I wasn’t practicing medicine at the time. Hadn’t been for a few years. Ever since I left my country. There was no point in talking about it.”

“Why were you not practicing? You obviously love helping people. I’m proof of it.”

“It’s time to remove the needles and return home,” he said, standing. “The owner was adamant that we only had the use of this place for one hour.”

That might be true, but his face had shuttered. She had touched on a sensitive subject, and she had no right to pry. For now, at least. Now that she had caught a glimpse of his past, she couldn’t wait to peer more closely into his hidden depths.

CHAPTER 5

They had been holding daily therapies for two weeks now, coming to the baths every other day, and performing other types of therapies at home, while the rest of the family was otherwise engaged.

He would have preferred to speak about their endeavors with Colin, even seek his opinion and share their progress, but Esther wanted to keep everything secret, at least until she felt confident she could recover. She claimed she didn't want to raise false hopes, nor burden the family with her troubles. He understood and respected her wishes. Colin had his hands full with his wife expecting their first child and escorting Lady Elizabeth to society events.

But although keeping their therapies secret, everything was going so well, Wang had grown complacent. Esther's progress was better than even he had expected. Even if she sometimes despaired of ever achieving her goal of walking again, he felt very optimistic about her success.

Yet, as soon as they arrived in the baths this evening, he knew they would face trouble.

No sooner had they crossed the door of the establishment than the owner himself came out to meet them. He had not seen the man since the first day when he arranged for the use of the baths. Usually, a dour-faced maid opened the door and then disappeared for the entire hour.

"Mr. Wang, I'd have a word with you, if you please."

Wang transferred his attention from the countess in his arms to the impertinent man.

“In a moment. First, I need to take the lady to the dressing room.”

“That’s precisely what I want to talk about. We won’t be able to accommodate your request any longer.”

Maybe there was a legitimate reason the man couldn’t continue to collect the extortionate amount he was charging for the use of the facilities. But he doubted it.

“May I ask the reason?” Esther inquired. She was not haughty, but her voice was one hundred percent aristocratic.

He would have preferred to spare her any unpleasantness, but it appeared this man was determined to air the conflict now and in front of her.

Mr. Fisk didn’t even look at Esther. Instead, keeping his eyes trained on a point beyond Wang’s head, he declared through stiff lips.

“My maid has informed me there have been strange goings on here during your visits. The last time, she heard some moans and groans. So she peered through the door and saw the lady here naked on a pallet while you had your hands on her. This is not that type of establishment.”

He gestured towards the countess, and the way he said the word ‘lady’ sounded more like an epithet. Wang could have wrung this unpleasant little weasel of a man’s neck for insulting her.

“What your maid saw was part of the therapy; not anything salacious as you are implying.”

“Never heard of that type of therapy,” the odious man uttered.

“I daresay you know little about any sort of therapy, since you are not a trained physician.”

“And are you? Are you licensed by the Royal College of Physicians? Are you registered with the General Medical Council to practice medicine in Britain?”

His teeth ground together. No, he was not. Even though he possessed more than enough qualifications for both. But the exalted British institutions would not recognize a Chinese trained doctor. Even if he also had training in Western medicine.

“No, I do not. I was trained in the healing traditions of China and have also studied Western methods. I have worked closely with Lord Hartfield, who is himself a trained physician.”

Wang wasn't sure why he was explaining himself to Mr. Fisk. The man didn't care about his credentials or qualifications. He had already made a judgement and was only interested in getting rid of them.

But the treatment was going so well. In just a few weeks, Esther had stood in the pool on her own and had taken a few steps unassisted. If there was any way to convince this man to allow them to continue using the baths, it was worth a try.

“It is as I thought. You are no actual doctor. What you are doing is using these baths for illicit assignments. I shall not have it.”

“Are you sure you wish to incur the displeasure of the Earl of Hartfield? Not to mention my own. If you deny us access to the facilities, I shall discourage all my acquaintances from frequenting this establishment,” Esther said pleasantly enough, but there was an edge to her words.

“I don’t think you’d want to speak ill of my establishment and let people know that you use it for secret assignations with your foreign lover,” Mr. Fisk said, his lip curled up in an unpleasant snarl.

“You breathe one word of slander against the countess, and I will personally come back and beat you to within an inch of your life. Remember that.”

The unmistakable menace in his voice gave Mr. Fink pause, and he wisely stepped back. Wang wasn’t sure that if he hadn’t been holding the countess in his arms, he could have refrained from beating some sense into the man.

Old demons he thought long conquered were resurfacing with a strength that surprised and dismayed him. He didn’t want to fall into that pit of anger and violence again. So, turning on his heel, he focused all his training on walking out of the establishment with calm, even strides. He carried the countess with the utmost care and deposited her on the squabs of the carriage. By the time he handed the maid in and climbed into the carriage himself, the black fury that had wanted to swallow him whole was back under control.

It was not the fact that Mr. Fink had questioned his credentials as a doctor. It wasn’t even the obvious prejudice and bigotry barely disguised as moral superiority displayed by the man. What had ignited his rage had been the way the despicable man had spoken about Esther. How dare that worm speak in such a way about the countess, who was a kind and gentle soul? And how dare he deny treatment to a woman in need who was displaying enormous tenacity to get well in order to be there for her daughter?

A cool, soft hand alighted on his arm, like a gentle bird resting on a branch. “Don’t fret about that man’s words. I consider you a very competent doctor. From the first moment, your method of treatment helped me more than any other doctor in Britain.”

Heavens above, Esther was so kind that she was trying to comfort him, when it was she who had suffered the biggest insult and the biggest loss.

He covered her hand with his, where it rested on his forearm. “That is not what concerns me, my lady. I’m upset about the insult he paid you, and because now we need to find another place to hold the therapies. You were doing so well. I wouldn’t want to stunt the progress made so far by interrupting the treatment.”

“Surely a delay of a few days while we find another suitable facility won’t signify much of a difference in the grand scheme of things.”

“You are right, of course. Tomorrow I shall start looking for another bath or public swimming pool we could use.”

“What about the spring at Hartfield Park?”

He shook his head. “Colin showed me the spring. I went swimming in it once. It wouldn’t do. For one, it’s too deep, and second, it’s too cold.”

“I see.” She frowned for a moment, before another idea brightened her face. “Do you think Lord Hartfield would be amenable to building a pool either here in the London house or at the estate? He seems fond of swimming himself, and that would save him from having to swim in a cold stream.”

“He might be. In fact, I think he has plans to do just that. But that takes time. Months, even. I wouldn’t want to wait that long.”

“You are right. What about going to Bath? They have more Roman Baths there.”

“I don’t know. I’ll have to make some inquiries about that. But first, I want to find another place here in London. It would be the most convenient. Tomorrow morning,

I'll start searching."

"Where will you search?"

"I'll start in Limehouse. The establishments may not be as luxurious, but at least I don't think we will face as much opposition there."

"Isn't Limehouse a predominantly Asian neighborhood?"

"That is my understanding, yes."

Her eyes lit up with interest. "Would you take me with you? I'd like to visit there."

"Why, my lady? It's not as nice as Mayfair."

"Because I want to learn as much as I can about Chinese culture."

The unspoken declaration was that she wanted to learn as much as she could about him. He didn't want to analyze the warm emotion her veiled declaration inspired in him.

CHAPTER 6

Although he promised Esther he would take her to Limehouse, Wang had no intention of taking her there before he did a thorough reconnaissance of the area by himself. He knew there were many hardworking Chinese immigrants living there, and he even hoped to obtain some herbs and medicines from his homeland.

But he wasn't naïve. The neighbourhood was in the East End. Poverty and crime were not the same thing, but they often went hand in hand. Gangs operated on those streets, and multiple opium dens flourished beyond the reach of the law.

If he found adequate facilities they could use, he then had to ascertain if it was safe to bring Esther here. She had shown an interest in his culture, and it touched him. Even Hartfield had expressed little interest beyond the medical field. But Esther wanted to learn about everything. The food, the customs, the music, the religion. Her curiosity knew no bounds. He appreciated it and wanted to share everything that had shaped him with her. But he didn't want her experience of his culture to be one of violence and crime.

Therefore, after locating a newly constructed bathhouse in the neighborhood, he went in for a visit. This was not nearly as luxurious as the facilities on The Strand. Those catered to a wealthy clientele and were designed for a pampering experience. In contrast, the one in Limehouse was purely utilitarian. It featured private bath cubicles and laundry facilities. This was not for pampering the elites, but for working-class people who couldn't afford running water in their homes to get clean and wash their clothes.

But it also featured a pool, and that was exactly what he needed. Alas, the water was cold. And it wouldn't be private. The best they could do was to go when the bathhouse saw less traffic. Which was midmorning. At that time, the working-class patrons were at their jobs and only a few elderly people visited the baths. Although it wouldn't be as comfortable as the previous baths, it was the best option they had found at the moment, and he felt inclined to take it, as he didn't want to interrupt the treatment. The morning time was also safer. He was perfectly capable of defending himself in even worse neighborhoods, but he wouldn't put Esther in danger.

To his surprise, Esther showed absolutely no reluctance about the new accommodations. It could even be said she was enthusiastic about them. She got into the pool without a complaint, even though goosebumps rose on her arms, and her breath caught as the cold water enveloped her.

But her determination to perform the exercises warmed her soon enough. She had donned a heavier and more proper bathing garment, but by now her legs had regained enough strength that she could manage the heavier pieces.

"I shall need sustenance after all these exercises, Mr. Wang," she announced as their session drew to an end and he carried her out of the pool and towards the women's dressing room where her maid awaited to help her get dressed. "I have not broken my fast yet."

"Of course, my lady. We shall not dally in here, for the establishment has no private room in which I could perform the acupuncture and massage. We shall go straight home so that you can partake of breakfast with your family."

"Oh, that is not what I had in mind. In any case, they would have finished breakfast by now. What I meant is that I would like to sample Chinese cuisine. Isn't there an establishment nearby where you could take me for luncheon?"

“Oh... I don’t know, my lady. You may not like it.”

She smiled, and it felt as if the sun was shining on him, warming places in his soul that had long been cold and desolate.

“I trust you to introduce me to the culinary delights of your people.”

There were many delights he would like to introduce her to, and none of them were culinary in nature. Perhaps the delight of his lips dancing upon hers? Skimming along her elegant spine and lower still, over the gentle slope of her backside that he had never seen uncovered, but had nevertheless featured in his fantasies from the first moment he had her unclothed under his hands. After he feasted on the luscious mounds, maybe then he would turn her about and start by kissing the arch of her foot, and proceed up her leg to the center of her... He wasn’t sure if he was completely successful in containing the groan that image tore from his chest.

He hurried over to the entrance of the dressing room, where the maid waited with her wheelchair and placed her delicately on it. She looked at him with a puzzled expression, as if she was trying to decipher what he was thinking. Pray she never found out. If she did, she would lose all trust in him, and then he wouldn’t be able to continue helping her.

“I will see what I can arrange, my lady,” he said succinctly as her maid wheeled her away.

Half an hour later, Wang wheeled her into a small Chinese dining room. Tucked into a narrow, cobbled street near the baths, with a red lacquered signboard adorned with elegant golden Chinese characters hanging above the doorway, the place appeared to be a cozy establishment. Her wheelchair just fit through the door, but inside, there was nowhere to move. Tables and stools occupied most of the space.

This had been a bad idea. Her cumbersome wheelchair could never navigate the cramped space, and even if Wang carried her inside, she could never sit without support in one of the stools. At least not for long.

An older man wearing a simple tunic and trousers greeted them in what she assumed was Chinese language, and Wang responded in the same tongue. A lively exchange started between the two men. Esther didn't even try to hide her fascination as she listened to the musical lilt of their conversation, even if she couldn't understand a word of it.

Wang spoke English flawlessly, but there was an ease to him when he spoke his native tongue. She would be hard-pressed to define it, but it was sort of like a sense of fitting. Like wearing a comfortable garment. Even the timbre of his voice seemed to change, flowing and ebbing with the cadence of the words.

She looked around her, taking in the walls adorned with silk scrolls depicting Chinese landscapes, calligraphy, and mythological creatures. A small shrine with incense sticks, fresh fruit, and a gilded statue of some deity occupied one corner, and red paper lanterns hung from the ceiling beams, their warm glow creating a cozy, intimate atmosphere. The aromas of ginger and other spices she could not identify floated to her nose, making her mouth water and her stomach protest with hunger.

As a young girl, distant lands and cultures had fascinated her, and she had avidly read the stories of adventurers and explorers, entranced by their descriptions of faraway places. Now, this was the closest she could ever get to those places. Like traveling a thousand miles without leaving London.

A shame she would probably not be able to stay. There was no room for her wheelchair. At least, at this hour, there were no other patrons to gawk at her. Someday soon, she promised herself. One day, she would return to this place on Wang's arm, walking on her own two feet. Not being pushed around in a wheelchair.

Her legs were already getting stronger, and she felt confident she would be able to walk again. Swallowing her disappointment, she turned towards Wang to let him know she understood if it was not possible to accommodate her, but at that moment, two younger men approached from the back of the shop and removed two stools from a nearby table, right by the window that overlooked the street, and Wang pushed her towards it.

“Thank you,” she told him softly. “For arranging this.”

“It was no trouble at all, my lady.”

The older man who had greeted them upon entering came back bearing a lacquered tray from which he took two bowls of steaming soup and placed them in front of them, along with a pot of what she assumed was tea and several small teacups.

“This smells delicious. What is it?”

“This is a type of noodle soup. It contains thinly sliced meats and vegetables in a broth base.”

“And what are these stringy things?”

“Those are the noodles.”

Esther peered at them with curiosity. A small porcelain spoon lay beside the soup bowl. She dipped it in, attempting to scoop up the elusive noodles, but they escaped. Instead, she lifted a spoonful of clear broth with just a few vegetables.

“How do you eat them?”

“With this,” Wang said, holding two wooden sticks in his hands. “They are called

chopsticks.”

“You jest.”

He laughed softly and dipped the sticks into his bowl, using them like pincers to grab a knot of the noodles and bring them to his mouth.

“Hmm, the soup is very good. Brings me back to my youth. Try it.”

Esther picked up the sticks resting beside her bowl and tried to imitate the way Wang was holding them, but when she attempted to pick up the noodles, they slipped from her sticks.

“Let me help you.”

Wang reached over and took hold of her hand, repositioning the sticks and then molding his hand over hers to show her how she should move them to pick up the food.

It was stupid to be flustered by the brush of his hands upon hers. He had touched her much more intimately in the course of the therapies. But this innocent touch seemed much more personal. He was not touching her as a doctor; he was touching her as a man. Here in this small corner, there were only the two of them. With no other purpose than to share a meal and maybe something of themselves.

“Try it by yourself now.” Was it her imagination that his voice sounded lower?

She tried it again, with partial success. Some noodles fell, but she managed to bring a couple to her mouth, but then the slippery strings were falling off. Instinctively, she sucked them in, making a slurping sound. She brought her hand to her mouth, appalled by her lack of manners, but he simply laughed.

“I’m sorry. This is more difficult than I imagined,” she murmured, chagrined.

“Don’t be sorry, my lady. Slurping one’s soup is perfectly acceptable. Chinese culture considers it good manners, and a compliment to the chef.”

“Is that so?” She looked at him in disbelief.

To prove his point, he dipped his spoon in his soup, brought it to his mouth, and slurped its contents, smiling with satisfaction.

“Well, it is an excellent soup,” Esther conceded.

“Yes, it is.”

“I definitely want to compliment the chef.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

His eyes, crinkled at the corner with humor, dared her to follow his example.

So she dipped her spoon and delicately slurped the contents into her mouth, smiling conspiratorially at Wang.

Next came a cylindrical wooden box that, when uncovered, revealed an assortment of dumplings.

“You should dip those in the soy sauce or the chili sauce and eat them. They are like pies, filled with meat, pork, shrimp or vegetables,” Wang instructed.

She tried to lift one dumpling using the chopsticks, but she couldn’t achieve a good grip. The process was trickier than she expected and highly frustrating. Instead of

gaining proficiency, her fingers tired of the unusual exercise, and she became clumsier with each attempt. She feared that if she had to feed herself with chopsticks, she would go hungry today.

“Drat!” she exclaimed after the dumpling had fallen from her weak grip for the third time.

“Here.” A dumpling appeared in front of her mouth, dripping with sauce and held expertly between Wang’s chopsticks.

Her eyes widened. “Oh, you would feed it to me?”

His gaze was steady as it pinned her with an indecipherable emotion.

“Yes. Take the dumpling, my lady.”

Mesmerized by his gaze, she closed her mouth around the dumpling and had the satisfaction of seeing him dip his gaze to her lips and swallow hard as his nostrils flared.

There was something between them. An undeniable awareness. Was it merely the result of their close interactions? Perhaps that gave it the opportunity to flourish, but her attraction to him was all because of his own personal magnetism.

“Hmm,” she hummed as the flavorful filling exploded in her mouth. She swallowed and licked her lips before declaring. “That was delicious. But I’m afraid I am in a predicament now.”

Wang raised an eyebrow. “What predicament?”

“I want more, but I’m reliant on you to provide it, for I am useless with the

chopsticks.”

One corner of his mouth hitched in a slow smile. “It will be my pleasure to put my chopsticks at your service, my lady.”

Good God, were they flirting? She didn’t flirt. She was too timid for that. And yet, it had come so naturally when talking to him.

Time seemed to still. She couldn’t force her lungs to draw breath. His words ensnared her in a sensual web. Pleasure. Your service. They had her feeling wicked and daring, qualities she had never possessed. But this man seemed to draw forth a different version of herself. Made her feel things she had never felt before. There was something in his warm brown eyes that told her he wasn’t indifferent to her, either. That he would like to make her feel a lot more if only she had the courage to reach for it.

Did she? With anyone else, the answer would be no. She had never possessed the boldness that some women had to engage in a dalliance. And she had not felt desirable in a very long time. But she felt comfortable with him. And now she realized why. He never judged, demeaned, or made her feel inadequate.

With him, she was at her most vulnerable, all her infirmity on display. If anyone knew the weaknesses of her body, it was him. And he still touched her as if she were something precious, with the utmost reverence. She didn’t have to pretend with him.

“How are you so patient and understanding?”

He didn’t answer immediately. Instead, he transferred his attention to the basket of dumplings and deliberately removed the top piece from the cylindrical basket, revealing another layer of dumplings underneath. Making it look deceptively easy, he grabbed another dumpling with his chopsticks, dipped it in one of the sauces that

came with the dish, and offered it to her.

“Try this one now. I believe this one is filled with meat.”

She captured the dumpling, much as she had done with the first one. Savoring the way he fed her even more than the tasty morsel.

She thought he wouldn't answer, but he finally did.

“I wasn't always. At one point, I was angry and bitter. Life has shown me the error of my ways, I suppose. I wouldn't say I'm wise, but I've learned from my mistakes.”

“Is that related to the reason you left your country?”

“You could say that.”

And she sensed he didn't wish to talk about it. “How long ago did you leave?”

“Over twenty years.”

“And you never returned?”

He shook his head.

“Do you wish to?”

Another shake. “No. There's nothing there for me anymore. There hasn't been in a long time. The place where I grew up has changed so much that I suspect I would find it unrecognizable.”

“And yet you appear so at ease here, among your people. Speaking your native

language.”

“I am at ease. I share a bond with these people. We come from the same place, have the same customs, speak the same language, sometimes, have similar life experiences. That creates a sense of familiarity. I’ve learned to adapt to my new homeland, but among my people, I feel... understood. But I’m not looking back. I’ve always lived my life looking forward.”

She leaned forward in her chair, placed her hand over his where it rested on the table. “What are you looking forward to?”

“Right now? I’m looking forward to helping you recover.”

That was a mighty amount of expectation to place upon her.

“What if I don’t?”

His hand turned to embrace hers. “You will. You are.”

“I still have a long way to go,” she said softly.

“And I’ll be there every step of the way.”

His eyes were so earnest. “Why is it so important to you?”

Instead of answering, he replied with a question of his own. “What about you, Esther? What are you looking forward to when you recover?”

Once again, he stole her breath. Not only with the use of her name, but by asking about her hopes and dreams. She hadn’t had any in so long. For years now, her existence had been about survival. Even now, all her focus was on simply getting

better. She forgot about dreaming. Forgot about living.

Esther wished she could think of something profound or fun to say. But as silly as it was, the image that came to mind was that of a hot-air balloon soaring. She had seen one as a child, and had been fascinated by the sight, the possibilities. What would it be like to float? To rise over the city and the fields?

“I look forward to riding in a hot-air balloon,” she declared and had the satisfaction of seeing his eyes widen and his brows rise in surprise. Esther couldn’t help it. She burst out laughing. She had surprised, even shocked, the unflappable Wang.

He joined in her laughter, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

“I thought you would say something like dancing at a ball. But a hot-air balloon? You are adventuresome.”

“I’ve never been. But after being stuck and confined for so long, without even being able to walk, now I would like to fly.”

“And so you shall, my lady.”

“Esther,” she corrected softly, smiling at him. Now that she had heard her name on his lips, she couldn’t go back to him calling her the impersonal ‘my lady’.

He nodded, smiling back at her. “Kaiwen.”

“Pardon me?”

“My given name is Kaiwen. If I am to call you Esther, you must call me Kai, the way my family used to.”

“Kai,” she repeated. Savoring the name. It was simple and elegant. But also playful and youthful. It evoked a little boy running through a meadow laughing with joy. “It suits you.”

He tilted his head. “How so? Do you know its meaning?”

“No, I like it just by the sound of it. But now I’m curious. What does it mean?”

His lips twisted in self-deprecation. “Triumph or victory, especially in scholarly pursuits.”

Esther nodded, a satisfied smile breaking over her face. “Just as I thought, it suits you, for I have no doubt you will triumph in anything you set your mind to.”

CHAPTER 7

Despite Esther's unflinching faith in him, he was not triumphant in everything. In fact, his failings were greater than his victories. Wang only had to look around him in this neighborhood to see reminders of his biggest failure of all.

He was also failing miserably at controlling his feelings for her.

As he pushed her wheelchair out of the tearoom they had visited today, he almost regretted having to leave the cozy atmosphere. And it wasn't because of the food, although it had been excellent. It was her company. Something had blossomed between them, nourished by the way Esther savored every dish, her curiosity about his culture, about him, and his unquenchable attraction to her.

At some point between the therapies and these intimate meals that had become customary over the past few days, they had reached a new level of intimacy.

Being here was bittersweet, the joy of speaking his native Cantonese and being among his people overshadowed by the signs of opium addiction he saw in many of the faces.

Opium dens abounded in this part of town, stealing the lives of the poor souls who fell victim to the deceiving lure of the devilish substance.

He tried to help them. While he waited for Esther to change after being in the pool, he used the time to speak to people. Gave them medical advice when needed. Prescribed herbs and treatments. He also spoke to them about how to break opium addiction if he

observed it was a problem. The latter advice wasn't always welcome, regardless of his offer to help, and his reassurances that, once the first few terrible days passed, there was light and hope on the other side.

He had even made a few house visits, returning in the afternoons and evenings, to treat those who needed more help. Had he been successful? Most likely not. Those addicted needed a lot more help than he could provide during a few brief visits.

He turned the corner toward their parked carriage, and three men stepped from a doorway's shadows into their path. They wore low hats that obscured their eyes and unfriendly snarls on their faces.

Every protective instinct Wang possessed went into high alert, preparing him for a fight.

"Well, if it isn't the good doctor and his aristocratic cripple," the one in front, who appeared to be the leader, said in Cantonese.

"I don't want any trouble. Just let us through, and we'll be on our way," Wang replied in the same language.

"Thinks he's better than us, hobnobbing with the aristocracy, bringing a white lady to our neighborhood, talking to people about opium. Trying to take our business away," said the second one.

"I have nothing to do with you or your business," Wang said in the calm voice used to pacify a feral animal.

"Probably talking to the police as well," the third one in the group said. "He's probably a rat, scurrying in here to ferret out our secrets and then bring the coppers down on us."

“I am certainly not going to talk to the police,” Wang replied with conviction.

“Of course not. Because we won’t let you,” the leader said.

While the man still spoke, the other two charged.

Even as he cursed himself for a fool, not realizing that bringing Esther here would put her in the path of danger, Wang’s trained reflexes took over. He jumped in front of her to protect her. Muscles tensed, mind cleared and focused, his body centered and ready.

Fighting multiple combatants at the same time was the ultimate challenge. Doing it while also protecting someone made it all the more difficult, but he would prevail. He had no choice but to do so, for he wouldn’t let these ruffians harm a hair on Esther’s head.

Esther barely had time to cry out before the ruffians lunged toward them. She didn’t understand a word of the preceding conversation, but it wasn’t difficult to deduce by the tone that it wasn’t a friendly one.

Wang had valiantly stepped forward, placing himself firmly between her and the advancing men. A glint of steel flashed in the light, freezing the blood in her veins. Good God, they had a knife.

But Wang moved like a liquid shadow, twisting away from the blade with a speed that defied belief. His arm shot out, a single strike sending the attacker staggering back, clutching his ribs with a strangled grunt. After that, everything was a blur of fists, kicks, seemingly impossible acrobatics and fluid movement. This was the fighting technique he had talked about. It was beautiful and deadly. A lethal dance. The attackers knew it, too. But Wang was faster, surer. He met them with an elegance that was almost hypnotic.

The fight was swift and brutal, and yet Wang remained in control. He caught a wrist mid-strike, twisting it with a sickening crack, sending its owner to his knees with a pained cry. Another came at him from behind—she tried to shout a warning, but Wang had already ducked, sweeping his leg in a clean arc that sent his foe sprawling onto the cobbles.

Within moments, it was over. The three men groaned on the ground, beaten, broken, but alive. Wang stood above them, breath steady, his eyes sharp as flint.

Esther's heart pounded as if she had been the one fighting. She stared at Wang, her voice trembling. "They...they knew what they were doing, didn't they?"

Wang turned to her, his dark eyes softening slightly. "Yes," he said simply. "But arrogance is their weakness. The first rule of fighting is never underestimate your opponent. We should leave before they recover."

He stepped behind her once again, grabbed the handles of the wheelchair and pulled her away from the fray, towards the relative safety of the carriage, standing farther down the alley.

By the time they arrived home, and Wang reached in to carry her inside, her heartbeat had returned to a semblance of normalcy. But when she draped her arm around his shoulder, she touched a wet spot on his jacket.

Lifting the hand, it came away bloodied. "Kai, you're injured!"

"Just a scratch. One of the ruffians had a blade."

"We need to clean and close the wound," she stated.

"I know." He gave her a small smile that melted her heart. "I'll ask Colin to patch me

up.”

“No, don’t. If you ask Colin, then you’ll have to explain where we were and what we were doing. I can do it.”

“They’ll have to learn soon enough, Esther,” he said.

“I know. But not just yet. I-I’m not ready. Let me do it. Please. Let me take care of you as you did of me.”

He studied her with that steady, penetrating gaze, and whatever he saw on her face satisfied him, for he agreed. “Very well. My bedchamber or yours?”

She sucked in a breath and stared at him wide-eyed. Had he really said something as suggestive as that? Did he mean to fluster her? The humor dancing in his eyes and the way his lips twitched, as if to contain a smile, told her he was perfectly aware of the double entendre of his words, and her reaction amused him. She narrowed her eyes at him in mock outrage.

“You are naughtier than you appear, Mr. Wang.”

He started climbing the staircase, still holding her in his arms. She felt more than heard his husky laugh as it rumbled through his chest, and a gentle puff of air grazed the hairs at her temples.

“My bedchamber, please. It’s where I have my sewing kit.”

Seated at the comfortable armchair by the fireplace, she watched as he walked out and returned shortly with a small bag, then walked around, gathering the supplies needed to clean and stitch his wound. He brought the basin from the washstand and placed it on a table in front of her.

“For washing your hands. It’s important to do that before treating wounds. It prevents infection,” he explained.

Handing her the soap bar, he lifted the ewer and poured water over her hands. She washed thoroughly, not wanting to risk his wellbeing.

But when he removed his shirt and stood in front of her bare-chested, her mouth went dry and she stared dumbstruck.

Good God, his body was beautiful. All corded muscle and sinew. He was not a big man. His height and bulk appeared no more than average when clothed. It revealed nothing of the strength and sculpted beauty underneath. But when the layers were peeled away and the chiseled strength of his chest and arms was revealed, he was breathtaking.

She wished she could study every contour of his torso, run her hands over his shoulders and arms, skim her fingers over the ridges of his abdomen, but he only gave her a second before he sat on the footstool by her chair and turned his back to her, exposing the wound on the back of his left shoulder. She suspected that if it were in a different location, where he could easily access it, he would have tended to it himself.

She started cleaning the wound gently with water and soap, following his instructions, then applying the antiseptic solution. And then it was time to stitch it.

“Are you sure you are comfortable doing that?” he asked gently.

She smiled. “If there’s something I’m perfectly able to do, it is to place a stitch. Don’t worry, you’ll have the prettiest wound in all of England.”

He offered a grin before he settled back against her legs. She had to give him credit

for not flinching when the needle punctured his skin.

“Those men, why did they attack us?” she asked to distract him, but also wanting to know what that had been all about.

“I suspect they are gang members and probably control some opium dens in Limehouse. They took exception to my trying to dissuade some people from consuming opium.”

“I see. When did you do that? I never saw you talk to anyone.”

“During the times you were changing after being in the pool. I tried to advise people of the dangers of opium, offered solutions and encouragement to overcome the addiction. I should have known that would upset the people who profit from it.”

“Why did you do it, then?” she asked quietly, placing another careful stitch.

“I see all those poor souls enslaved to that dreadful vice, being led to their death. I couldn’t not do something.”

“This issue is personal to you.” She didn’t know how she knew, but she was certain. There was a sort of bleakness, a sense of desperation and vehemence when he spoke about opium addiction.

“I saw this vile vice poison and humiliate my city and my entire country. As a doctor in Canton, I treated numerous people afflicted by this addiction. I did my best to help them, but in the end, it was like drawing water with a bamboo basket. No matter how hard I strived, I seemed to get nowhere.”

She sensed there was more, but she didn’t want to pry. Besides, she was all done with the stitches.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, placing her palm on the center of his back. She wasn’t sure if the need to offer comfort or the urge to touch him motivated the gesture. “There, you are all sewn up.”

He stilled under her touch, his breathing halting for a few heartbeats. She relished the warmth of his skin. The smooth expanse invited her to touch, glide her hand outward, caress the supple flesh covering steel muscles. For a heart-stopping moment, he relaxed into the caress, then he shot out of the stool as if scalded.

“Thank you, my lady,” he said, snatching his shirt and punching his right arm into the sleeve.

“Don’t you want to examine the wound? See if I did it properly?”

“I’m sure it’s fine.”

“I would feel better if you looked at it.”

“As you wish.” He strode to her dressing table, his shirt still half off, and twisted to look backwards over his shoulder to see the wound in the mirror. “Looks great. Just as you said, the prettiest little stitches. I believe they won’t even leave a mark. Although I hope they do, to have the memory of the time you embroidered upon me.”

A chuckle bubbled from her at his fancy. “Oh, be serious. Although... I did embroider something for you.”

“You did?” He turned to face her, his face tilted in inquiry. Thankfully, or maybe regrettably, he put his shirt back on, so that magnificent chest was out of sight.

“Yes. I noticed the embroidered tapestries in the establishments we visited, and I loved the designs. I wanted to make something like that for you, to show my

appreciation for all you are doing for me.”

She reached down into the embroidery basket she kept by her chair and pulled a piece of midnight blue silk from it. “I saw this tunic in a store window and thought it would be perfect for you. I embroidered the design on the back myself.”

He reached for the cloth, seeming at a loss for words. “You didn’t have to,” he finally croaked.

“It’s nothing, really, a mere trifle. Do you like it?”

He spread the tunic, peering at the design of a leafy tree with a flowering vine twining around its mighty trunk. The design was in the style of Chinese embroidery. All stylized shapes and mixed vibrant colors. She saw him swallow hard, as if trying to push down some emotion.

“It’s brilliant. A work of art. Esther, you are so talented. Thank you.”

“It’s just embroidery. Every lady learns to do it.”

“I doubt that’s the case. At least not as well as this. I shall always treasure it.”

Her cheeks heated with embarrassment and elation.

“I also got a gift for you,” he said. “Although it’s not an object, but rather, an experience.”

“Oh?” She was immediately intrigued. “What is it?”

He shook his head. “It’s a surprise. Can you be ready tomorrow at sunrise?”

Her eyes widened with excitement, and she clapped her hands together in front of her. “Oh, this sounds like an adventure. How exciting! Anything in particular I should wear or avoid wearing?”

“Just something comfortable and warm.” His eyes danced with merriment and a tender, almost indulgent emotion.

“Very well then. I shall be ready and waiting for you.”

CHAPTER 8

“Why are we going to Hyde Park?”

Esther peered through the edge of the drawn carriage windows at the gaslit darkness outside, no doubt trying to guess the surprise he had in store for her. She wouldn't be able to guess it, but that didn't stop her from trying. He had never seen her so enthusiastic about something. It made her eyes sparkle and her whole face glow. And she hadn't even seen the surprise. When she did, would she recoil in fear or jump ahead full of excitement? He hoped it was the latter.

She had changed so much in the few short weeks they had been working together. He doubted she noticed the changes, but he could see them plain as day. She was bolder, more daring. A youthful exuberance bubbled in her, ignited perhaps by the hope of regaining her mobility. He prayed to God he'd be able to help her achieve her goal, because he couldn't bear for that light that glowed in her eyes to be extinguished.

“You'll see soon enough,” he replied to her earlier question.

“You are the most vexing man, did you know that? I'm perishing with curiosity here, and you give nothing away.”

He chuckled. She was so adorable when miffed.

“It won't be long now, Esther. I promise. In fact...” He peered through the curtains himself.

“What?” She leaned forward, bracing a hand on his knee to place her face next to his by the window, attempting to see what he was seeing. Did she realize how comfortable she was touching him? She did it with the absentmindedness of long familiarity, whereas for him, the innocent touch had him hardening all over.

“If you look farther down that lane, you’ll see the object in question.”

The huge round shape was barely visible, a darker shadow amid the predawn darkness, illuminated by the fire used to make it fly.

She looked in that direction and then gasped at the mammoth balloon perched in the middle of an open field. “Oh! Is that a hot-air balloon?”

“Indeed, it is, my lady.”

“How marvelous!” She exclaimed, clapping her hands. “You brought me to witness a balloon ascent, since we missed the one at Cremorne the day we visited.”

His smile avoided correcting her. He hadn’t brought her here to see a balloon ascent, but to ascend in said balloon. He wanted her to experience flight and see the world unfurl at her feet. She wanted her to have the exhilaration of soaring.

The coachman turned down the lane, heading towards the balloon. Wang jumped out as soon as the coach stopped, a mere few yards from the balloon, and reached in to help Esther descend.

“Oh, I can watch it from here. My wheelchair is going to get stuck in the lawn.”

“That is why I’m going to carry you,” he replied smoothly, still extending his arm.

“I know, Kai. You have carried me everywhere my clunky wheelchair cannot

navigate. But there's no need to inconvenience you further. I have a pretty good view from here."

"The thing is, I did not bring you here so you could watch. I arranged for us to ride in the balloon."

If her eyes opened any wider, they would pop out of her face. Her mouth moved, but no words came out, as if the faculty of speech had deserted her.

"Kai... You can't be serious."

"I am. You said you wanted to ride in a hot-air balloon. You said that's what you looked forward to the most."

"But... I was only half jesting. It's not like I had thought it through. Besides, I said when I regained my ability to walk. That hasn't happened yet. I couldn't possibly."

"You don't need to walk to fly in the balloon. I'll carry you there, and I arranged for a chair to be placed inside the basket. I'll be there with you to hold you and protect you. Don't you want to fly?"

She didn't respond, but her gaze shifted towards the balloon, observing it with longing apprehension.

"Is it safe?"

"Nothing is entirely safe, my lady. Accidents happen every day while doing the most mundane things. But I made inquiries and found the balloonist to be experienced and reliable. He's never had an accident or mishap."

"Are you sure I will be able to ride? With my limitations?"

“Mr. Coxwell, the balloonist, said he doesn’t see why not. As long as you can hold on to the basket.”

She contemplated the balloon again for the space of several heartbeats, while he waited patiently. He had done all he could to reassure her. Now it was up to her, and he wouldn’t pressure her to ride if she wasn’t ready.

Her chin came up in that way he had learned to recognize as determination, and she declared.

“Very well then. Let us soar together, Kai.”

His joy at her answer spread all the way to his heart. Lifting her in his arms, he carried her towards the looming shape of the balloon.

“We’ll be ready to lift in a few minutes, sir,” the balloonist called out, not even lifting his gaze from his preparations. A couple of younger men scurried about, assisting him.

“That’s quite all right, Mr. Coxwell. Just let us know when you are ready,” Wang replied. Looking down at Esther, he offered her a small smile. “Shall we find a place to sit while we wait?”

She looked around. “We could go back to the carriage or... Oh, would you look at that arch over there?” She pointed towards a point to his left and he turned his head in that direction.

Sure enough, an ancient-looking, massive stone arch stood there in the middle of the park, almost hidden away by vegetation and illuminated by the timid glow of sunrise.

“Would you take me there? There might be a bench or somewhere to sit nearby.”

“Certainly.” He would take her anywhere she wanted. Helping her explore and expand her horizons was one of the greatest pleasures of his life.

“I can’t believe I’ve been coming to Hyde Park for years and never knew this was here. Never heard anyone mention it, either.”

“And yet it seems as if it’s been here forever,” he observed.

Esther peered at the top of the arch, where some characters were visible.

“If I read the date correctly, it’s been here since Roman times.” She transferred her gaze to him and pinned him with those beautiful hazel eyes. “Put me down.”

“Where?”

“Right here, under the arch.”

He looked around. “There’s nowhere to sit.”

“No, I mean, let me stand on my own, Kai. I think I’m ready.”

His brave, indomitable little kitten. He wouldn’t have recommended it yet, but her eyes sparkled with enthusiasm and the thirst for adventure. If she insisted she wanted to stand, who was he to curtail her wings? He would be here beside her to make sure she didn’t come to harm.

With the utmost care, he bent his knees and lowered her legs to the ground, supporting her with his arm around her waist while she transferred her weight to her legs.

She leaned heavily against him, tightened the grip of her arm around his shoulders.

He relished the feeling of having her be so comfortable with him that she would lean against him without a second thought, seeking his aid as she tested her legs. They were a little wobbly at first but soon firmed with her determination. The weight he supported became lighter as she transferred it to her own two legs.

Her face turned to him, radiant with joy, her eyes bright with unshed tears. “I’m standing, Kai. I’m standing again.”

He was sure his face reflected her joy, for his cheeks ached from smiling. He was so proud of her. She had worked tirelessly and made more progress than he had thought possible in the short amount of time they had been holding the therapies.

“Yes, you are. You are doing great. I’m so proud of you.”

The smile she gave him stole his breath. “It’s only thanks to you. You made this possible.”

He shook his head. “It’s all you. Your determination, your tenacity. I merely showed you the way.”

Esther opened her mouth as if to protest but then closed it. No doubt surmising her effort was better channeled towards standing. She transferred one of her hands to the arch.

“Isn’t this amazing? This arch seems to have been here for over a thousand years. Can you imagine how many people have seen it, touched it, walked through it? The history that it has witnessed?”

He contemplated the impressive structure. “It makes one think about time, permanence, and legacy,” he mused. “And about how limited our time on this world is, that a structure made of stone has seen several generations of us fragile mortals

come and go.”

A shadow passed over her eyes, and he wondered if she was thinking about her late husband. The previous earl had been dead for only a year. His death was what precipitated Colin’s return to England, and Wang had accompanied him for moral support, and also because he had been curious about this country. Now he regretted his words. He had been reflecting on his own life, but Esther was just out of mourning. Did she still grieve for her husband? His own losses had taken place much longer ago, over two decades, but were no less painful for the time passed.

“What is this?”

While he was lost in the past, she had leaned forward to scrutinize a set of faint characters. The slide of her delicate fingers over the grooves in the stone made him jealous of the inert material.

“There’s an inscription. ‘Sub arcu amor fulget, sussurri dulces, cor evolat’ “

Wang shook his head at the strange words. “Do you know what it means?”

“It’s in Latin. I’m not an expert, but I think it says something about love shining under the arch, and the heart taking flight.”

“Interesting. Is it a love inscription, then?”

“It would appear so,” Esther said as she straightened, one of her hands still holding onto the wall, while the other one was safe in his grasp.

“I would have thought that if the arch was part of a fortification, it would proclaim a message of power and might. And if it was part of a religious building, such as a church or temple, it would have a divine message or a warning against wickedness.”

“That’s true. I wonder what type of building it belonged to,” she said, her head tilted to the side.

She started to turn. He wasn’t sure if she tripped or if one of her legs gave out, but suddenly she was falling forward. He reacted without conscious thought. His arms hugged her to him with such speed that it was as if they had been designed for the sole purpose of catching her. The next instant she was flush against him, held securely in his arms.

It was not the first time he had held her against his body. He had carried her innumerable times, but this time was different. She remained upright, and something about the way her entire body fitted so snugly against him ratcheted his desire to dangerous levels. His arm circled her slim waist. Supporting her to prevent her from falling, he told himself. In truth, his arms never wanted to let go.

Not that she was trying to escape his embrace. With one arm draped around his shoulders, her hand cupped the back of his neck. While her other hand came up and settled against his cheek, her fingers sliding up to brush a lock of hair from his forehead. The butterfly caress of her fingers on his brow was more sensual than an intimate caress, her touch a balm and a brand at the same time. He had to force himself not to lean into her hand, to rub his face into her palm like a cat.

Her eyes flared, the hazel depths shining green with the reflection of the vegetation. Her rosebud lips were a feast he longed to taste. He had deprived himself of the pleasure until now, but the temptation had become greater than he could withstand. There were solid reasons not to go down this path with her, but at the moment, he couldn’t remember a single one.

He wasn’t sure who moved first, or maybe they both moved at once and met in the middle, but in the end, it didn’t matter. Their lips melded with exquisite relief, and he was sampling the sweet nectar of her mouth.

They had been hurtling toward this moment from the time they first met. Since then, every gaze, every touch, every shared word and secret whisper had been a step towards this. Na?ve of him to think he could avoid this outcome.

So he had been right about his lips. They were soft. Pliant. Delicious. But that alone did not account for the warm waves of sensation his kiss was sending through her body. It was the way those lips moved on hers, gliding, sucking, molding, and possessing. It was the intensity behind his actions, as if he was pouring a lifetime of desire into their kiss.

Esther was breathless and didn't care to draw breath. It was less urgent than savoring him. She was breathing through him. He was the rhythm of her heart, the life force in her veins. The structure that supported her.

Her legs had gone weak, but she suspected her infirmity had nothing to do with it. She would have crumbled to the ground if it weren't for his unflinching support. He would never let her fall, she was sure of that. As her limbs had become the consistency of warm wax, his legs had braced on either side of hers, anchoring them to the earth, while his arms had become a sanctuary of steel and velvet. Strong and unmovable, yet cradling her so gently.

Within the protection of his embrace, she was free. Free of fear. Free of limitations. Who said one needed a hot-air balloon to soar? She was soaring right now. She could reach up and twine her arms around his neck, tunnel her fingers into the warm silkiness of his hair, devour his mouth as she had been craving to do for so long.

Needy sounds floated around them like skittish butterflies. Her light moans and mewls mixed with his deeper groans. She loved the strength of the body pressed to hers. They fit together so well.

"Sir, madam, we are ready to go now," Mr. Coxwell called out, puncturing their

pleasure bubble.

Sunrise was only a promise, a glow outlining the top of the trees. But a different kind of awakening was dawning in her heart, its power as unstoppable as the rising sun. And just like the sun, bringing warmth and life to long dead places.

The world transformed the moment the balloon lifted from the ground. Suddenly they were rising above the treetops, Hyde Park at their feet.

The basket swayed beneath her, the sensation unlike anything she had ever known, but not unpleasant—weightless, yet steady, as though the air itself had reached up and was tugging the balloon hither and yon. She clutched the edge of the basket until her knuckles turned white, but still she peered down and around, fascinated by the sights of the awakening city.

How to describe the feeling of flying? Esther couldn't find the words. For years, she had been bound to her chair, viewing life from a single, unchanging perspective. Her world had reduced until it became the four walls of a room. Now, for the first time, the world was open, limitless, lying at her feet as she rose above it.

She was glad Kai had warned her to wear something warm, for the air up here was cool, carrying the faint scent of smoke from the balloon's burner. The flame roared above, a stark contrast to the serene silence that surrounded them. It was a curious thing—being so high up, away from the noise of daily life, feeling entirely at peace.

The basket jolted slightly as a gust of wind caught them. Esther laughed, a little nervous, but exhilarated. She leaned back and found the solid presence of Kai at her back. His hands clutched the basket's edge on either side of her, creating a protective cocoon with his body. Cradling her in safety and warmth, grounding her even as they floated higher.

The narrow streets and magnificent buildings of London gave way to open fields spread out beneath them like a patchwork quilt, stitched with hedgerows and streams that glittered in the rising sun. Villages appeared as miniature models, their tiny rooftops glinting like jewels.

This was pure, unbridled joy. Even seated, she was flying, untethered from the limitations that had defined her life for so long.

He pointed to the horizon, where the sun was rising, casting golden light over the landscape. “Look. The world is awakening. Isn’t it magnificent?” he murmured against her ear, his voice carrying the awe she felt but could not yet put into words.

Esther looked, but not towards the rising sun. She was looking at Kai’s face next to hers. So close that she could lean in and brush a kiss on his cheek. For a moment, she forgot the chair, the pain, the years of longing. Up here, none of it mattered. Up here, she was free.

Lured by the need to be closer to him, she leaned in. At that moment, he turned his head. Their gazes collided, and she sucked in her breath at the desire she saw in the brown depths of his eyes. Was he remembering their kiss as she was? Was he wanting to repeat the experience?

Or maybe it was just her own desire reflected back at her? No, he was about to kiss her, she was sure of it. His austere features seemed carved out of granite. The high cheekbones, the square jaw. His was the face of a warrior, no softness except for his lips. Those lips seemed more suited to love than to war. She parted her own lips, hungry for another taste of his mouth. His face dipped—

A loud throat clearing interrupted them, reminding them that although above it all, they were not alone. “We are about to begin our descent. I advise you to hold on tightly. It can get a little rough,” the balloonist said without looking at them, busy as

he was handling the balloon.

“Of course, Mr. Coxwell,” Wang said, loud enough to be heard over the roaring of the fire, and then more softly to her. “Are you ready? I’ll hold you and protect you from any impact.”

“I’m not worried, Kai. How could I when I have you here beside me?”

CHAPTER 9

The balloon adventure had gone as well as one could have hoped. He had held Esther and braced for any impact, ready to absorb the shock and make sure nothing harmed her. But the landing had been smooth. Mr. Coxwell had controlled the descent, and his ground crew had followed the balloon on a wagon and caught the ropes, stabilizing the basket as it touched down with the softness of a bird perching on the branch of a tree.

Now they were in an open field, somewhere on the outskirts of London. This wasn't unexpected, and he had prepared for it. Mr. Coxwell and his crew would take them to the nearest inn, and from there, they would hire a coach to take them back to Mayfair.

Everything was going according to plan, except some clouds had rolled in and, with a crack of thunder, the skies opened, and rain poured down on all of them. The balloonist and crew shouted as they redoubled the efforts to fold and put away the balloon.

He had sat Esther in the wagon, but the conveyance did not have a roof, designed more for carrying cargo than for the comfort of humans.

"If you want, I can help you sit under the wagon to protect you from the rain," Wang shouted over the clamor of the summer storm.

She laughed, lifting her face. A carefree, musical laugh that curled around his heart. "Don't be silly. The rain feels wonderful against my skin. I haven't experienced rain in such a long time."

A hint of longing colored her voice, a fondness for the memory.

“Well, in all fairness, it’s an experience most people avoid.”

That laugh again. “True. But when one hasn’t felt it in so long, it becomes precious. Today it’s been a day of experiencing new things and rekindling long-forgotten experiences.”

He wondered to which of those categories their kiss belonged but was afraid to ask. He still had not recovered from that kiss. His usually leveled mind reeled from the feelings it had unleashed. He needed time to process what had happened. What it meant, and how to go on.

“Will you manage if I leave you for a few moments to go offer my help to pack the balloon? The sooner they can put it away, the sooner we can get on our way and out of this rain.”

“Please do. I’ll be fine, Kai.”

His name had never sounded so sweet as when uttered by those lips he had thoroughly kissed.

By the time they reached the nearest inn, they were all soaked to the skin. At least it wasn’t overly cold, being this close to summer. Even so, the chill of the wet garments penetrated to the bones.

The rain had been fun at first, but after half an hour of the unrelenting downpour, she had been more than ready to go inside and sit by a roaring fire. Maybe she was too old for adventures that involved discomfort.

She had brought her cloak, and the hood covered her head as Kai lifted her from the

wagon and ushered her into the inn. She thought he was going to request a carriage, but his words to the innkeeper surprised her.

“A room for the lady, if you please. And a hot bath. Please send a maid to help her.”

“Kai, that’s not necessary. I can wait to get home to take a bath,” she whispered.

His eyes turned to her. “It will take us over an hour to get you home. Even longer to prepare a bath. You need to get out of those wet clothes immediately. I won’t risk your health.”

“I have a room available and can have a hot bath ready in twenty minutes,” the innkeeper suggested, reluctant to lose the business.

“We’ll take it,” Kai replied, his eyes still on her.

They followed the innkeeper down a candlelit corridor to a room on the ground floor. The man opened the door and invited them inside.

“Thank you.” Wang walked into the room and deposited her on a chair near the fireplace where the innkeeper was lighting a fire. “I would also like to arrange for transportation back to London.” “Not a problem. We have some cabbies hanging around in the taproom.”

“Excellent.” Wang turned to her and bowed. “My lady, I’ll arrange for our transportation. A maid will be in shortly with the bath.”

What on earth? Was he just going to leave her here in the care of an unknown maid? “Wait.” She grabbed Kai’s sleeve. He turned back toward her with a question in his eyes. And what did he mean by that formal tone? She waited until the innkeeper had finished lighting the fire and was exiting the room to speak.

“I’ll need help to get into the bath,” she whispered.

His eyes slammed closed, and he pinched the bridge of his nose. “I didn’t think of that. Can’t the maid help you?”

“Not unless she is extraordinarily strong and able to carry me like you do. At home, two maids are required to lower me into my bath,” Esther replied, her eyes wide. “I stood today, but my legs are still shaky. I don’t think I’ll have the strength to lift them in order to climb into the bath. And if I were to fall…”

“Right. Of course, we can’t risk that. I’ll be back soon.” He strode from the room as if chased by dogs.

CHAPTER 10

His fortitude was being tested. There was no doubt in his mind. He would have to lower Esther into the bath while she wore nothing more than her shift. Her shift which would turn transparent when wet.

How could he resist that? Especially after that kiss. His lips still tingled, and his blood hummed with desire for her.

He had arranged for transportation quickly enough, and now he lingered in the corridor, waiting for the maid to exit Esther's room.

When the girl departed, he approached the door and knocked.

"Enter!" Esther called, and he turned the knob and slid into the room.

He thought he had braced for the task, but nothing could have prepared him for the sight of Esther covered by a towel and wearing absolutely nothing underneath.

He swallowed hard. "You are naked under that towel."

"I couldn't very well get in the bath wearing my shift. I need it to be dry so I can wear it again." She pointed toward the fireplace, where presumably the maid had laid out her garments in front of the fire.

"Right, of course. Let's get you into the bath then, before it gets cold or you catch a chill."

He removed his sodden coat and placed it by the fire, then rolled up his sleeves as he went to her. Placing his arms under her legs and behind her back, he lifted her. The same way he had done countless times. Except now he was painfully aware of her nakedness. He walked the couple of steps toward the bath and lowered her into the steaming water.

He intended to place her in the bath and turn his back. Leave the room while she bathed. He would not look. No matter how tempted he was, he would not—

She dropped the towel that covered her.

He froze. Unable to stop himself from staring at her beautiful, round, soft breasts. Milky white with rosy-pink areolas. They beckoned him. His hands fisted to prevent themselves from reaching out and molding the pliant mounds.

“Esther,” he croaked, her name a plea. “What are you doing?”

“I can hardly bathe while covered with the towel, can I?” she replied innocently.

He finally tore his gaze from her breasts to meet her eyes. “You are torturing me.” The confession seemed torn out of him.

Her hand came up to cradle his face, brushed back the unruly lock of hair that continually fell over his brow.

“It’s not my intention to torture you. In fact, the opposite is true. Maybe we can find solace together.”

He scrunched his eyes. Her offer was the most generous, tempting, miraculous... and he couldn’t accept it.

He made a last desperate attempt at honor. “I don’t want to take advantage.”

“You are not, Kai. You have done nothing to take advantage. In fact, I am doing the seducing. Although I’m not very good at it. But I’m not an innocent girl with a reputation to protect. I’m a widow of advanced years. We enjoy a lot more freedom. Society wouldn’t raise a brow if I took a lover.”

His hand surrendered to the temptation, skimming softly up her arm, over her shoulder. “Have you ever taken a lover?”

She frowned. “Well, no. I was married before. You would be the first. In fact, you are the only one I would consider because we are friends, and I trust you.” Her gaze lowered in the last word, and she lifted the washcloth to cover her breasts, as if suddenly bashful. “But perhaps I am the one who is taking advantage. Perhaps I misjudged—”

“No.” The single word exploded out of his chest. Nothing could be crueler than to let her think, even for a moment, that he didn’t want her. “Esther, I want you so much I can barely breathe, let alone think.”

She still looked doubtful and embarrassed. Her earlier bravado had deserted her.

“Do you need proof of my desire? Here.”

Taking her hand in his, he skimmed it down his body. Slowly, so that she could halt the movement, snatch her hand back, utter a protest, if she so wished. She did none of those things as he guided her hand towards his crotch, where it closed over his hard-as-iron rod.

A small moan escaped her lips, sealing their fate. There was nothing that could stop him from making love to this woman.***She already knew his hands were

wonderful. His touch had always produced profound relief and forbidden pleasure. But when he touched her as a lover, with the intention to arouse, she thought her mind might melt from the wonderful sensations. He had moved behind her. Her head rested on his chest as he used the soap to lather his hands. When he had worked a good lather, his slippery palms wandered along her chest, drawing circles around her breasts, avoiding the aching peaks until she was arching into his touch, grasping his wrists to guide him over her tightly furled nipples that begged for stimulation. Her ragged moan when his palms rubbed over her nipples drew a low, wicked chuckle from him. Confirming what she already knew; he had known all along what she craved and was tormenting her by delaying her pleasure.

The rhythmic circles he rubbed against her aching peaks sent tendrils of sensation to her core, making her intimate flesh throb with want. She squirmed, begging for more even as she feared the storm of desire that was brewing inside her.

And still he rubbed her nipples, in no apparent hurry to move.

“Kai, please...” she moaned. Unsure what to ask for. She never wanted this wonderful teasing to end, but didn’t know how much longer she could take it. She would self-combust at this rate.

“You have such beautiful breasts, Esther. And they are so sensitive,” he murmured against her ear, his hot breath caressing her and raising goosebumps along her nape. “I wonder if I could make you come just from touching your breasts.”

“No,” she pleaded. “This is too much... I need more.”

Even in her delirious state, she knew her words were contradictory, but he seemed to understand what she wanted. His hands increased the rhythm, rubbing over her over-sensitized peaks with increased speed, and her breathing became fractured. Her head thrashed from side to side against his hard chest.

“Touch your pussy,” he commanded. When she didn’t immediately obey, too lost in the sensations to discern his meaning, he bit the rim of her ear. “Now.”

In a daze, she slid her hand down, parted her folds that felt swollen and sensitive, even though he had not touched them yet. Using only one finger, she slid up to tease her pearl. The moment she rubbed that place of excruciating pleasure, everything in her tensed and a warm tide of pleasure flooded her. She was rising, rising on that glorious feeling... Her nipples, her pearl, everything was feeding the conflagration inside her, winding her tighter, lifting her higher.

Kai pinched both her nipples with exquisite pressure while biting on the rim of her ear.

She shattered.

And then shattered again. Waves of pleasure kept buffeting her relentlessly. Sparkling spots danced behind her closed eyelids while she gasped and thrashed in the water. She heard her own moans and keening cries as if from a distance, her ears buzzed. Then she was flying...

No, not flying. Kai had hoisted her from the tub in a swift motion, bringing her to the bed and depositing her in the middle of the mattress. Then a soft towel, warm from the fire, descended over her. His hands, efficient and practiced, ran over her body, rubbing her dry, and eliciting more sensation everywhere they touched.

When he was satisfied that she was dry enough, he covered her with his body, warming her with his heat, kissing her so deeply, as if he wanted to possess her soul.

She savored his desire, his passion, and reveled in it. She tugged his shirt free of his trousers, slid her hands under the fabric to caress his naked back. The muscles there shifted as if her touch had the power to arouse them to life.

His lips left her mouth, painting a trail of fire down her neck, along the center of her chest, detouring briefly to flick one exhausted nipple that nevertheless stood in readiness at his attention. He had the power to command her body, to play it at his will like a virtuoso musician drew music from his favorite instrument.

But he didn't dally on her breast. His mouth continued lower, skating over her belly, nuzzling the dark fuzz at the juncture of her thighs. He parted her legs with a decisive movement and then settled in the cradle he had created.

His warm breath wafted over her sensitized flesh, eliciting tingles of excitement even before his mouth, hot and humid, descended on her eager flesh. The first swipe of his tongue had her crying out in surprised pleasure. Climbing again towards that peak from where he had already made her jump.

"Such a delicious quim," he muttered between the licks and sucks of his mouth. "You cannot know how much I've fantasized about having you like this." Another lick, a deep suckle. "Tasting your arousal right from your fountain."

Oh, good God, how could she be ready to climax again so soon after such an intense orgasm? But his mouth was relentless. He licked, sucked, kissed. Tormented. While his fingers parted her folds to give himself better access to her flesh, he penetrated her with his tongue, tearing a gasp from her throat. Her hands tangled in his hair, grasping handfuls, scratching his scalp as he continued his relentless ministrations.

Once again, she felt the delicious tingles of an approaching climax, felt her womanly parts tightening, winding, eager for the explosion of pleasure that would follow. She chased it this time, greedy for more. Reassured that he would catch her in his powerful arms.

A series of rapid flicks over her button, followed by a languorous swirl, catapulted her over the edge. She almost laughed with the sheer joy of flying unfettered, but it

came out as a strangled cry.

In the aftermath of desire, she lay trembling and spent. His head pillowed on her belly, her hands lazily tunneling through his locks.

But no amount of languor could make her forget that her selfless lover was still aroused and unsatisfied. Tugging on his hair, she urged him to look up.

“Your turn now. Come here.”

He shook his head. “I’m fine. We don’t need to... This is enough for me.”

“Absolutely not!” She rose on one elbow, pulling at his shirt. “Remove this. Remove all your clothes. I want you naked. On top of me. Skin to skin.”

***A shudder of desire went through him at her words. He could do nothing but comply. Standing from the bed, he removed his shirt, trousers, and smalls with alacrity, then stood naked in front of her. Her gaze roved over him, and she licked her lips. Her unabashed perusal fanned the flames of his already inflamed desire.

“I don’t want to hurt you.” His voice was a tortured rasp.

“You won’t. No one has ever touched me with more gentleness and care than you.”

He shook his head. “That was as a doctor. As a man, my passion is raw, primitive, all-consuming.”

Her eyes flared as her lips parted. “Is that supposed to deter me? Because it’s having the opposite effect.”

The blatant arousal in her gaze had him growling. The beast in him strained its fragile

tether. “I want you rather violently, Esther.”

Her arms extended towards him, inviting him to join her. It was an invitation he couldn't refuse. He slid into the bed, his body settling gently on top of hers. But Esther would allow no hesitation. Her hands skated down his back, pushed down on his backside, bringing their pelvises together with exquisite heat. Unable to stop himself, he rubbed his aching cock in the ample moisture of her cleft. Hooking a hand behind her knees, he opened her legs farther and was rewarded by her moan of pleasure.

“Take me, Kai. Hold nothing back. I'm not a fragile flower. I'm a woman. A woman who hasn't felt like one in a very long time. Until now. Until you. Please make me feel.”

With a guttural groan that seemed to emanate from his heart, he notched his cock at her entrance and slid in. Inch by wonderful inch, he sank his aching rod into her. Her slick flesh received him eagerly, enveloping him like a well-fitted glove, surrounding him in heat and mind-numbing pleasure.

Then he moved. Slowly at first. Deep, measured strokes designed to allow her flesh to mold to his. But soon passion took over, demanding urgency. Craving completion.

He took her mouth, intent on claiming all of hers at once. He wanted to drown in her. They were as close as two human beings could be, joined in the most intimate of ways, his flesh within her flesh, their mouths fusing, sliding, tongues dueling and then caressing. And it still wasn't enough. He wanted to meld their bodies, become one.

Her hands at his arse pressed him tighter, urged him deeper, before they slid up his back again, and pulled him closer. He had been holding the weight of his body on his elbows, but at her urging, he couldn't resist. He lowered his chest to lie fully on top

of her, her soft breasts the perfect cushion to his hardness. His arms circled her torso, snaking between her back and the mattress, holding her to him with a force just short of bruising, while his hips pistoned a constant, punishing rhythm into her body. But she didn't retreat. Didn't ask for mercy. Her cries in between kisses were of more, yes, and the best of all, his name, which she said like an incantation.

When one of his hands lowered, slid under her bottom, and raised her, changing the angle of his penetration, her mouth tore from his in a surprised gasp, then a low, keening sound emanated from her, her hands at his backside digging into his flesh. He captured her gaze, letting her see the storm, inviting her to get swept away with it.

And she did.

"Kai," she panted. "I think I'm going... it's coming, I'm coming. It's too strong..."

"Yes! Shatter in my arms, Esther. I'll catch you. I'll hold you..."

The powerful contractions of her pussy around his cock made his eyes roll back with pleasure, almost squeezed his seed out of him. He held back by sheer force of will, every muscle in his body tensed against the climax that was crashing upon him like a tsunami. Only after the last of her contractions faded, and she went limp with satisfaction beneath him, did he rip himself from the heaven of her body to spill against her stomach. The spasms of his cock made his entire frame shake as he muffled his groans of release against her neck.

He forced his arms to relax from the bruising grip he had on her. Not that she was complaining. She was calmly stroking his back, carefully avoiding his wound, looking at him with the soft expression of a woman well-pleasured. And yet he had been too forceful.

"Are you all right?" he rasped.

Her smile was soft, dreamy. “Never better.” She brushed his hair off his forehead. “You look deliciously rumpled.”

He chuckled. “I feel rumpled. Like I’ve been tossed about by a storm.”

“I know what you mean, but it was a storm of our own making.”

He gave her one last, lingering kiss before he turned and jumped out of bed. Walking to the bath, he retrieved the washing cloth and, after dipping it into the still warm water, came back to the bed to clean her belly.

She lay passive under his ministrations, observing him as if pondering something before saying. “That was very considerate of you, but you needn’t have bothered...leaving.”

His mind was still sluggish, for he frowned in incomprehension as he quickly washed himself before returning to the bed.

“Withdrawing. Before spilling. I know why you did it. To protect me from pregnancy. But there’s no need. I’m too old to conceive.”

He stared at her for two seconds. “I don’t know your age, but you don’t appear old enough for that.”

“I’m two and forty,” she insisted.

He slid into the bed, drew the covers over their bodies, and hooking an arm around her waist, pulled her against him. She turned on her side to face him.

“Some women can still bear children well into their fourth decade,” he explained calmly.

“Well, I’m not one of them. I’m past my childbearing years.”

She looked away, and high color bloomed on her cheeks. With her shiny brown hair mused by their vigorous lovemaking, her rosy cheeks, and lips swollen by his kisses, she looked adorable, and younger than her age. Was she saying...?

“When did you last have your courses?”

She turned a violent red and threw an arm over her face to cover it. “That’s an intimate matter!”

Her reaction was answer enough, but he needed confirmation. This was too important. “More intimate than what we just did?”

She peered at him from under her arm. “That’s different. What we did was sublime. My...situation is just mortifying.”

He gently picked up her arm and lowered it from her face. “It’s not. It’s a fact of life and part of a woman’s life cycle. I don’t wish to embarrass you, but you are actually young to not have your menses. Each woman is different, of course, but it usually happens a few years later.”

Her smile was strained. “There you have it, then. I’m aging ahead of my time. Before long, I shall be an old hag.”

This time she turned away from him and buried her face in the pillow. He caressed her shoulder, her delicate arm. Leaned in to place a kiss on her neck. “You are not. In your case, your injury may have caused the early cessation. Did it happen after your accident?”

“Shortly after,” she muttered.

“So you haven’t had your courses for years.”

“No.”

“And do you feel well otherwise?”

She nodded her head.

Intense relief flooded him. For him, it was the best possible scenario. But how could he reassure her and make her feel as the vibrant woman that she was? How to convince her that this was for the best? His biggest worry was the possibility of a pregnancy. The danger that would put her in... No, better not think about that.

“Regardless of the cause, it doesn’t define you. Look at it this way: you are still a young and beautiful woman. Capable of feeling and inspiring desire. Now you are free to enjoy sex without having to worry about pregnancy or the risks of childbirth.”

“I was never beautiful. Not even in my younger years,” she mumbled against her pillow.

He smiled against her shoulder. “Fishing for compliments?”

She gasped, outrage at the accusation making her turn to face him. “I was not! I’m merely stating a fact.”

“It’s not a fact. It’s your opinion, with which I wholeheartedly disagree. Not only me.” He rubbed into her hip, making her aware of his renewed arousal. “My rod seems to find you irresistible. Esther, I’m almost fifty years of age, and you have me as randy as a lad of eighteen.”

Her eyes widened as he pulled her against him, insinuating one of his thighs between

hers.

“You want to do it again?” she asked.

She didn’t sound horrified at the prospect. More like intrigued. He dotted kisses along her shoulder, up the side of her neck, nibbled her ear. His hardening cock turned to iron.

“Only if you wish. I’m more than up to the task.”

She giggled. “I can see that.” She reached down and wrapped her fingers around him, making him groan with desire. “What do you call this in Chinese?”

She wanted a linguistic lesson now? He could barely think straight with her wonderful fingers squeezing him.

“It has several names,” he croaked. “ Lóng g?n. ”

“Hmm, long.” She wiggled her eyebrows. “It’s definitely fitting.”

He could not believe he could laugh at a moment like this, but a bark of laughter surprised him at her naughtiness.

“It means Dragon’s Root.”

Now it was her turn to laugh. “Rather grandiose, don’t you think?”

“Maybe you would prefer to call it my j?,” he whispered against her ear. “That means chicken.”

“Definitely not a chicken. Perhaps a cock,” Esther suggested with a smirk.

He grinned back at her. “What about yù zhàng? Jade Staff.”

Another squeeze, another tug. She was caressing him with a rhythmic motion that was driving him insane. “I like that. It does look like a staff.”

He groaned and sealed her mouth with a kiss, determined to prove how desirable she was, and how much his cock wanted to become more acquainted with her kitty .

CHAPTER 11

By the time they made it back to the house, the family was still abed. The sun rose so early this time of year that in order to catch the sunrise, they had left the house by four in the morning, less than an hour after the time Esther heard Elizabeth trudge to her bedchamber, after returning from a ball with Colin and Abigail.

The irony of the role reversal was not lost on Esther. She was the mother, the one who was supposed to set the example, be the role model. And yet, she was the one sneaking out of the house in the middle of the night, going on secret expeditions, and even taking a lover. The memory of that last part still had her blushing like a girl.

Kai looked at her and smirked, as if he could read her thoughts. She narrowed her eyes at him, attempting a quelling glance, but the effect was ruined when a corner of her lip lifted. It seemed like she couldn't stop smiling. They were having breakfast in the family parlor, both of them putting away a good amount of food after the morning's rigors.

Rigors... She giggled at her own choice of word and the wicked direction her mind was going.

Kai looked at her. "May I ask what is funny?"

She shook her head. "I am just happy."

"I'm glad." He leaned closer, reached out and grasped her hand, the contact sending warmth and another tingly sensation along her arm and all the way to her womanly

core. “I was thinking that we’ll need to find another place for your hydrotherapy.”

She had forgotten about that. Was it only yesterday they had been assaulted on the streets of Limehouse? They’d had packed a month’s worth of experiences in the past twenty-four hours.

“We could go to Bath,” she said, trying to think fast. “They have several facilities. In fact, other doctors recommended I go there.”

Wang nodded, pensive. “We could try that. Although I suspect we will encounter the same problem we faced at the baths on The Strand. They will see us with suspicion. It might be difficult to keep our activities private in such baths.”

Esther leaned closer. “Do you mean the therapeutic activities or...a different kind?”

Wang smiled with such provocation that heat flooded her face once again. “Both.”

Esther smiled back, but a frown marred her brow. “What do you suggest we do, then?”

“I know a place. It has a hydrotherapy pool and other equipment designed to help patients achieve physical rehabilitation. Equipment that I would like you to start using soon. And best of all, I’m known and respected there, so we won’t face any opposition. The facilities would be at our disposal.”

“That sounds great! Why didn’t you say so before? We should have gone there from the beginning.”

“There’s only one problem. That place is in New York. It’s the hospital Colin and I founded. Where I’ve worked with him for the past five years.”

“New York! No, that’s impossible. I can’t leave Elizabeth alone for so long during her season. And it’s so far away!”

“The voyage only takes about ten days. And once there, we could stay for as long or as little as you need for your recovery.”

“Is this really necessary?”

“I will abide by your wishes, my dear heart. We could keep trying here, but in the end, I think we’ll face fewer obstacles in New York, and the recovery will be faster.”

“I would like to try Bath first. It’s not that I don’t trust your judgment, but I’m afraid of going so far away.”

“I understand.” He lifted her hand and placed a kiss on her palm.

A rush of warmth spread up her arm, but before she could respond, the sound of the door opening made her snatch her hand away. She turned quickly, only to see Elizabeth standing in the doorway, a knowing smile tugging at her lips.

“Good morning, Mama,” Elizabeth said, arching a delicate brow as she walked toward the table. “Am I interrupting?”

“Of course not, dearest,” Esther replied, willing the heat in her cheeks to fade. “Come, join us. Did you sleep well?”

Elizabeth poured herself a cup of tea before settling into a chair beside her mother. “I did, though I woke to find you already gone. Where have you been so early?”

Esther hesitated for half a moment before answering. “Mr. Wang and I took a balloon ride at sunrise. It was...exhilarating.”

Elizabeth's eyes widened with delight. "A balloon ride? Mama, how daring of you! And without me?" She feigned a pout.

Esther chuckled, relieved at her daughter's lighthearted response. "You wouldn't have enjoyed waking up before sunrise. We left not long after you arrived from the ball."

Elizabeth chuckled. "True. I was exhausted last night." Then the girl reached out and squeezed her mother's hand, her expression turning gentle. "But I'm glad you are going out. If these adventures bring those roses to your cheeks, that is all I want. As long as you are happy, I'm happy, Mama."

Esther felt her throat tighten. "I am, my love," she whispered, giving Elizabeth's hand a squeeze in return.

Elizabeth smiled, then turned her gaze playfully to Wang. "And you, sir, are you leading my mother into mischief?"

Wang inclined his head, his expression entirely solemn. "On the contrary, Lady Elizabeth. She is leading me."

"That I can believe. Don't let her ladylike demeanor fool you. My mother is a hoyden at heart."

Laughter bubbled between them, Esther looked at her daughter and Wang, their easy camaraderie warming her as the morning sun. The three of them, here at the breakfast table, talking and teasing as a family. The portrait of a life she had once dreamed of.

CHAPTER 12

Wang had been right. As usual. They had taken the first train out of London that morning and arrived in Bath just a few hours ago.

After securing lodgings near the famous baths that gave the city its name, they had gone into the thermal spas in search of a place where she could have her therapies. So far, they had visited several establishments, The King's and Queen's Baths and the Royal Bath Hospital. The facilities were adequate, but they wouldn't allow Wang to be with her while she used the pools. In the case of the King's and Queen's baths, they had strict rules regarding male and female bathers not mixing. In the hospital's case, the use of the baths had to be under one of their physicians. And they would not recognize Wang as a medical doctor.

As night fell, they returned to the hotel and ordered the meal to be brought to her room. She was tired, deflated, and not up to attending the hotel's drawing room.

"We could keep trying tomorrow," Wang suggested. "There's the Cross Bath. I learned it's smaller. Maybe they will allow private bathing and would not oppose—"

"No. You were right. It's futile. Even if we secure a bath for private use, there will be gossip if we go into the bath together. And we can be sure it will reach society. Bath is the aristocracy's premier spa town. The rumors will be all over London the next day. I can't risk causing a scandal during my daughter's first season. Bad enough that I had to leave her."

"There's always America," he reminded her.

“But how will I manage? Where would I live?” The notion was so daunting. She desperately needed to resume her therapies. She could feel her muscles tightening and cramping. The water exercises did wonders to alleviate that.

“My home in New York is near the hospital, so it’s convenient for the therapies. It’s not as grand as your house, but it’s adequate. You may stay there for as long as you need or want.”

Oh, his offer was so tempting. “How will I explain this to Elizabeth? When I spoke to her this morning, I told her I was coming to Bath for a few days to take the waters. Leaving for America for months is a different matter altogether. I will miss her entire first season.”

“You are missing it now, anyway, Esther. You don’t accompany them to any events.”

“But at least I’m there if she needs me.”

Wang’s warm hand settled on top of hers, the warmth infusing calm. “Write to her. Ask her opinion. Your daughter is a kind and intelligent young woman.”

“I’m not sure my maid would be able to travel with us.” It was a weak excuse. Her maid had been with her for over twenty years. The woman was steadfast and loyal. “I can’t manage without my maid. I need her help to get dressed and undressed, getting in and out of a bed, a bath—”

A corner of his mouth hitched up in a provocative grin. “I’ll do the honors if your maid can’t accompany us.”

“Oh?” Warmth suffused her face at the memory of what had transpired the last time he had lowered her into a bath. She offered a seductive smile. “Are you as adept at removing my clothing as you are at getting me into a bath?”

“Only one way to find out. It seems I will have to prove my prowess.” Wang shrugged out of his coat and unbuttoned his waistcoat as he advanced on her. With deft fingers, he untied the knot of his tie and let the material slither to the floor. There was no doubting the dexterity of his fingers. Those long, well-shaped fingers that had caressed her with such masterful skill.

“Will you remove all your clothes before removing mine?” Her voice was a little breathless.

He smirked, confident of the effect he was having on her.

“If my lady desires.”

He started on the buttons of his shirt, the parting material offering a glimpse of the sculpted muscles that made her quiver like aspic, before he discarded the shirt and stood bare-chested in front of her.

“Come here.” Her mouth had gone dry, and her heartbeat accelerated as he stepped right up to her chair. With a not-quite-steady hand, she reached out and caressed the ridged abdomen, sliding her hand up the smooth chest that resembled slabs of stone.

His hands came up to cradle her head, tilting her chin upwards, positioning her for his devourment. He bent down and took possession of her lips, commanding her mouth and extracting exquisite pleasure with consummate skill. His lips sucked, slid, pressed. Her own lips parted in welcome, yearning for more of him, of his flavor, his texture. He took advantage of the opening, and his tongue slid into her mouth, where it slid sensuously against hers. So engrossed was she in the kiss that it was a surprise when her bodice sagged and his warm hands cupped her naked shoulders, dislodging the sleeves, then following them down her arms to let them pool at her waist.

“Oh!” she breathed, unable to comprehend how he had undone her bodice without her

noticing. “Your fingers are nimble.”

He grinned. “You should know that already.” Saying so, he tangled his fingers in her hair, causing the entire mass to cascade down her back in a mahogany mantle.

“And you removed my pins without pulling my hair.” She purred as he massaged her scalp with delicious strokes. “I think you are better than my lady’s maid.”

“Shhh, don’t tell her, or she might get jealous.”

This playful side of him, one he didn’t reveal often, was irresistible. Her hands came to rest on the waistband of his trousers, and she ran her fingers along it, causing his muscles to tense and harden under her light touch.

And talking about hardness...

She cupped the bulge in his trousers, testing and molding her hand along his hard-as-iron rod. He drew a ragged breath, but didn’t pull away. On the contrary, he leaned against her hand. She wanted to touch him. Skin to skin. A smile tugged at the corner of her lips. Two could play this game.

While her corset distracted him, she worked on the buttons of his fly, massaged his rod, and dotted kisses and little licks along his stomach. His dexterous hands faltered and became less so, struggling with the laces.

It was a heady feeling to have this strong, vital man under her power. She popped the last button, and his member sprang into her waiting hand. What had he called it? A staff? It certainly resembled one. She closed her fist and slid her hand up and down the length of it. Marveling at the slide of soft skin over rock hardness. The tip was the softest skin of all, shiny and glistening. It beckoned her to taste it.

Without doubting her impulse, she leaned forward and closed her lips over the engorged crown.

The groan that escaped his mouth seemed torn from his chest. His hands abandoned her corset to once again tangle in her hair, cupping her head, massaging, fisting on the strands, combing them away from her face, holding back the mass of her hair with a fist as her head bobbed on his cock.

She explored, emboldened by his enthusiastic enjoyment. Cupped his heavy sack, rolling his stones in her palm, rubbing them softly while her mouth sucked and her other hand pumped the base of his rod.

“Esther.” Her name was a ragged groan. Tortured and needy. “Easy now. Wait.”

When she didn’t heed his warning, his hold on her hair tightened, and he pulled her off him. She looked up at him, licked her lips, and his fist tightened even more on her hair. It didn’t hurt. It exerted just enough tension to let her know he was in charge. His features seemed carved out of stone, and with his muscular arm stretched, holding her captive, he looked like a conqueror.

“You are being naughty. Trying to distract me from my task.” He leaned down, licked her lips, then bit the lower one. “Do you want me to fail?”

A small shake of her head was all his hold of her allowed, but she found she rather enjoyed being dominated by him.

“Good. Because now it’s my turn to drive you to distraction.”

So saying, he released her hair, but only to bend down and lift her from her chair. He brought her to the bed and laid her down on the soft comforter. Her bodice pulled around her waist, while her corset remained on, but half askew. He rolled her onto her

stomach.

“Stay like that, while I finish divesting you of your clothes.”

Her corset loosened and then fell away. Her skirt and pantalets offered no resistance at all. He stripped them away with exhilarating ease. Then his hands were on her thighs, inching higher and higher, to her private place, which felt slippery. Wet. He had touched her thighs before. During the therapeutic massages. But this was different. He was now touching her as a lover.

His hands mapped her body with possession, exploring places he had never gone before. Sliding between her thighs to rub her pearl. Cupping her backside, then spreading her before one of his fingers traced her crevice with shocking familiarity.

“So pretty. So wet,” he murmured.

One of his fingers dipped into her core, sliding easily in the abundant moisture. She buried her moan in the pillow while her hands fisted in the sheets.

“You are so ready for me, aren’t you?”

She nodded, desperate for the fullness his rod could offer.

“Tell me,” he whispered in her ear, his rod nestled in the cleft between her buttocks.

“I am. I am ready,” she moaned, hoping it would be enough to satisfy him. She was almost insensible with need.

He grabbed her left leg and slid it up, bending it at the knee. Opening her and turning her slightly on her side. When his staff slid into her from behind, she gave a little yelp of surprise at the novel position.

“Are you all right?” he whispered in her ear, immediately halting his movement.

“Never better,” was all she managed, and he slid all the way in.

Their sounds of pleasure melded in a perfect symphony.

“You feel so good, Xi?o Lù.”

“You as well,” she managed before her voice dissolved in a moan when he tongued her ear and slid his hand up her torso to pluck and torment her nipples.

“Kai...”

She needed the release. The sensations were too much. She was wound tight, so tight. At any moment, she was going to snap. And still his wonderful cock pumped into her, winding her tighter. His hand crept down between her legs. It found the bud where all sensation coalesced and pressed on it, sliding over it, rolling it in small circles.

“Is this what you want? What you need?”

“Yes,” she panted. “Right there. Oh God, it feels so good. Kai...”

“Come for me, my darling. Let me feel your pleasure exploding around my cock.”

How could she do anything else? The twin efforts of his finger on her bud and his cock stroking inside set off the explosion inside her as she muffled her cries in the pillow.

He followed her soon after, the deep throbbing of his flesh inside her letting her know he had stayed with her until the end.

CHAPTER 13

“Have we received word from Elizabeth?” Esther asked as soon as Wang strode into her room after going to the reception for the third time that day to inquire about their correspondence. When she had not received word from Elizabeth by the second night after she posted the letter, she had begun to fret. Now it was the third night, and still no word. She knew the letter must have reached Elizabeth by the next morning.

There was a ship departing from Liverpool to New York in four days, but Wang was waiting until she received word from Elizabeth to purchase the tickets. Esther wouldn’t leave English shores without her daughter’s blessing. If Elizabeth had the slightest objection, she would remain and attempt her rehabilitation by whatever other means they had available.

The letters to her banker and solicitor had been easy and quick to write. But writing this letter to Elizabeth had been harder than saying goodbye the first time. Before, she only intended to leave for a few days. To a city that was just a few hours away by train. Her daughter could visit her easily, and she could go to London on a whim. Now she was saying goodbye for months. Going to another continent. How will her daughter receive the news? Would she feel abandoned? Betrayed? Hurt?

Although she was doing this for Elizabeth—to be able to better support her—she couldn’t escape the feeling that she was being a terrible mother. Had been for the past six years, since her accident. And now she was planning to leave for an indeterminate amount of time to achieve an uncertain outcome.

“Nothing yet. But it hasn’t been that long.”

“You can go to bed now, Margaret,” Esther said to her maid, and the woman left with a single nod.

“You are upset.” It wasn’t a question. Wang knew her enough by now.

Upset was an understatement. Her body felt tight with pain, mirroring the tension of her anxious mind.

“Elizabeth hasn’t replied. I don’t know if she is upset with me or if there’s something else going on. If we don’t receive a reply by tomorrow, we shall have to go back to London. I should have never left—”

“I’m sure everything is fine, Esther. We would have received notice from Colin or Abigail if something was amiss. Most likely she is busy with her Season’s entertainments and left the letter writing for later, not realizing you would fret.”

Esther shook her head. “I told her to write back at once. That I was waiting for her letter to make a decision. This can only mean that she doesn’t want me to go.”

“It could mean a host of other things. But we shall wait and see. If we miss this ship, there will be others. We won’t leave unless you are thoroughly reassured.”

Esther smiled at him. “Thank you. You are so rational and calm. Whereas I am a ball of nerves.”

She rubbed her neck and stretched her back, trying to ease the tension. But it didn’t help. More proof that she needed Wang’s expertise to get better. At his urging, she had been going to the baths every day with her maid. He said even if he couldn’t be there, she should do the exercises. But without his direction, she was obviously doing it wrong, because her back had not bothered her like this before. Or perhaps her discomfort was due to the tension she had felt these past three days.

“Is your back troubling you?” Wang asked with a frown.

“My back, my neck, my head. Everything aches today.”

“I’ll give you another massage.”

“No, I think I need something more today. Would you be so kind as to hand me my medicine?”

“Your medicine? What medicine?”

“It’s over there, inside the wardrobe. I was going to ask my maid to give it to me, but I forgot.”

Wang crossed over to the wardrobe. “I didn’t know you took any medicine. Why have you not told me this before?”

“It didn’t seem important. I don’t take it often. Only when needed.”

“I have been treating you for weeks. You should have told me.”

Wang’s frown revealed his displeasure. Was she losing his approval, too? Him, her most steadfast champion? Maybe it had been an oversight not to tell him, but she had not thought anything of it.

Then he unstopped the bottle, smelled the contents, and froze. His gaze snapped to her, and in the brown depths she saw several emotions flash all at once, and none of them good. Alarm, horror, hurt. Devastation.

Oh, the devil take it. What had she done now?

“What is this?” His voice sounded strangled and much too sharp, but there was not a single thing he could do about it. His emotions were in turmoil. Fear and desperation drove him. Not this. Not again.

“Laudanum?”

“And do you know the ingredients of laudanum?”

“Oh!”

He saw the understanding down in her eyes. Esther wasn’t ignorant.

“Oh, indeed. Opium.” God, he sounded like an accuser. When in truth she was a victim. Another victim of this devilish substance.

Why hadn’t it occurred to him she might use it? She had suffered a major accident. Had endured pain without therapy for years. Doctors prescribed laudanum for much less serious conditions.

“But surely it’s not the same,” she explained. “I mean, the doctors prescribed it. It’s a medicine. It’s not as if I’m an opium addict visiting opium dens to get intoxicated.”

“And how do you think most of those addicted to opium started?” At her wide-eyed stare, he continued. “With a dose. In most cases, prescribed by a doctor for a legitimate reason. But then they couldn’t stop.”

“Well, I can stop. I have all but stopped completely. These days I seldom take it.”

He very much doubted it. That’s not how opium consumption worked. “How long have you been taking it?”

“Since my accident. Almost six years ago.”

The answer was like a dagger in his heart. If it had been that long, she was most certainly addicted. He turned away so that she couldn't see his expression. Couldn't read in his features how panicked he was.

“In the beginning, I needed it, Kai.” Her placating tone floated from behind him. “It was the only thing that provided relief from unbearable pain. But as the pain decreased, I also started taking less laudanum. I didn't like the way it made me feel, all drowsy and dazed. I felt like I was fading away, and I feared nothing of myself would remain.”

He had never seen in Esther the symptoms of opium addiction. The constricted pupils, the nervousness, tremors, and erratic behavior. The obsession and vacant gaze of those intoxicated. If she had weaned herself from opium all by herself, while still suffering from pain, she was the strongest woman he had ever known.

“How often do you take it nowadays?”

“Only when needed, when my body is aching and nothing else helps, like today.”

“How often is that?” He turned back to her, pinning her with his stare. He needed precise figures. Frequency. Dosage. Concentration.

“It's not a regular schedule. Maybe two or three times a month,” she replied, her eyes wide, her shoulders bobbing in a helpless shrug.

“When was the last time you took it?” he shot back.

“I-I don't remember. It was before we started the therapies. Why all this questioning, Kai? You are acting as if I have committed a crime.”

His eyes slammed shut in shame, and he pinched the bridge of his nose. Esther was in pain and already worried about her daughter and the trip to America. Meanwhile, he was acting like an arse and raising her anxiety. But her answer provided a measure of relief. If she had gone for almost a month without taking it, she may not be addicted. Still, some dependency still existed. If possible, he would like to wean her completely of the evil stuff.

“I didn’t mean to upset you, Xi?o Lù. Please forgive me. It’s no excuse, but you know how I feel about opium. To think that you, someone so dear to me, might have fallen victim to it... I was worried.” What a lame word. He had been terrified.

Her eyes softened, and she raised her arms to invite him to go to her. Which he did. After setting the vial of the odious stuff on the dresser, he went to her and kneeled at her feet, embracing her about the waist. He rested his head on her lap, and her fingers combed gently through his hair, each stroke soothing as though it had the power to brush away his anguish. Why was she comforting him instead of the other way around? He had revealed too much. She had seen the darkness and despair inside him.

“Your feelings about opium, they are more personal than you led me to believe.”

“Yes.” It was useless to deny it now.

“Did you lose a loved one to opium?”

God, how had she known? Like an expert surgeon, she had taken the scalpel and lanced the wound. A wound that had been festering for over twenty years.

He nodded without lifting his head from her lap. “My wife.”

He heard her sharp intake of breath. But her wonderful fingers never stopped their caress.

“Tell me.”

Her soft, compassionate voice must have put a spell on him, for the painful story he had kept locked inside spilled forth with the strength of a volcanic eruption.

“My wife had suffered a miscarriage, and it was so hard on her. I never wanted her to go through that again. I vowed to prevent her from conceiving, and for two years, I was successful. But then she started cajoling and pleading with me to give her another chance. I refused at first, but she insisted. Said the only way for her to get over her loss would be to have a baby. And I gave in. Disregarded every instinct that told me she shouldn’t get pregnant again.

“When she lost her second pregnancy, it was even worse than the first time. She was in so much pain. She cried and begged me to do something. I couldn’t stand to see her suffering. Couldn’t stand her pain. So I gave her some opium. Against my better judgment. I knew the addictive power of the substance. Saw it every day in some of the patients I treated. But full of hubris, I thought I could control her doses. Give her pain relief while preventing her from getting addicted.”

“But that’s not what happened, was it?” Esther asked.

“No. The opium eased her pain—both her physical pain and the pain of loss. But she started craving more after the first dose. As soon as the effect wore off, she demanded more. If I refused, she would go into fits. Crying, cajoling, threatening. When she physically recovered and I tried to wean her, she started going out to obtain it by herself, sometimes through shady means. No matter what I did, how much I tried to help her, she kept using opium in ever-increasing quantities. I decided to take her away from the city. My father had a house in the countryside. There, far from the opium, and with my help, she might have recovered. But I was too slow to act.”

He raised his head, looking at her eyes for a moment.

“I couldn’t just leave and abandon all my patients. I had to transfer them to another doctor. I took a few days to settle my practice. But one day...”

His voice broke, and he took a deep breath, looking away. Unsure if he could tell this part of the story. Esther waited patiently for him to continue. Her hands on him lent him the strength he needed.

“One day, I arrived home and found her dead. I couldn’t revive her. If I had been there... if I had taken her away sooner...” Every muscle in his body tensed, as if to protect him from the memory of his wife lying lifeless in front of him. He re-lived every awful second of the devastating moment.

“I’m so sorry, Kai. I can only imagine how difficult the entire situation must have been for both of you. How painful. I think the emotional pain might have been greater than the physical. But you mustn’t blame yourself.”

He lifted his head from her lap to stare at her.

“Who else am I going to blame? I was the one who got her pregnant. I was the one who gave her the opium. Everything was my fault.”

“She had some say in those decisions. She was an adult.”

He shook his head. “As a doctor, I should have known better. And as a husband, I should have done better. She was mine to protect and care for. And I failed miserably.”

“Oh, Kai. I wish you could see it the way I see it. Wish I could take away your pain. But you won’t believe any words of absolution, will you?”

“I don’t deserve absolution, Esther. Some mistakes are so enormous one must carry

them to the grave.”

Compassion shone in her eyes. Looking at him with such sympathy that a knot formed in his throat.

“Is that the reason you left China?”

“Among other things.” He stood and paced to the window, to stare at the dark street outside. “Another reason was the consequences of the war with Britain.”

“Oh, the China War. I read about it in the papers. Something about trade disputes, if I remember correctly.”

Wang gave a dry chuckle. “It was about opium. At least on the Chinese side. The British wanted to abolish the Cohong System. And they got their wish. No matter how much opium they had to smuggle into China, or how many lives they had to ruin.”

“I’m sorry,” Esther said again, apologizing for something that was not her fault. “Oh, how you must hate the British.”

He spun, his gaze colliding with hers. “I don’t. At least not anymore. At the time, I was crazed with anger. I hated the English, yes. But I also came to hate the Chinese government. The Emperor. That’s why I had to leave.”

“I don’t understand.”

“My father was the Hoppo appointed to Canton. That’s the person in charge of enforcing the Cohong System. He oversaw Canton’s foreign trade and reported directly to the emperor. It was a position of great prestige, and he had served faithfully his entire life. But he could not prevent or contain the opium trade. After

the war, the Emperor blamed him for China's loss, even though it wasn't his fault. They punished him. Stripped him of his position. He fell ill and died in a matter of months. I believe the humiliation killed him. That happened soon after I lost my wife. In a matter of months, I lost...everyone."

"Oh, good God, Kai. You had no more family? What about your mother? Do you have any siblings?"

"No. My mother passed away when I was little." He met her gaze square on. "In childbirth. She never had a successful pregnancy besides me. My father didn't remarry, so for most of my life it was just him and me, until I married."

She said nothing. And really, what was there to say? But her eyes were glassy with unshed tears, and she covered her mouth with her hand. He wanted to comfort her—or take comfort; he wasn't sure—but refrained. She didn't need the extra burden of his crazed emotions.

"No wonder you looked relieved when I told you I was past my childbearing years."

He nodded. "That was the best news you could have given me. I never want to put another woman through that, Esther. There must be something wrong with my seed. Maybe I inherited it from my father. My mother died in childbirth. And I visited a similar fate upon my wife. I don't want to be responsible for the death of another woman."

Another woman he loved.

The air seemed to freeze in his lungs as the words whispered through his brain. Was he in love with her? He thought himself incapable of the emotion any longer. Had successfully avoided it for over two decades. And yet... He checked. Tested it in his heart. It felt right. Inevitable. He had been falling in love with Esther, a bit at a time,

from the moment he had met her. Her delicate beauty that bore pain with such stoicism and grace had captivated him.

The truth of his feelings was so big, burned so clear, that he almost declared it, but caught himself just in time. He couldn't burden her with his feelings. She might not reciprocate them. Her priority was—as should be—getting well to help her daughter. And she was a countess, for goodness' sake. Even if she had feelings for him, what could he possibly offer her? No, his feelings must remain a secret. The best gift he could give her was to help her recover and then fade out of her life so she could fly unfettered.

And him? He would have the memory of this time with her—the best time of his life—to warm his heart for the rest of his life.

“Take me to bed, Kai. Please.” Her soft voice almost startled him, as lost as he was in his thoughts.

He strode towards her, lifting her in his arms, and carried her the few steps to her bed. But when he would have turned away, she held onto his hand. “Lie with me.”

He shook his head. “You are in pain, and I...”

He was in pain as well, although of a different kind.

“Not to make love. Just to hold each other. I think we both need comfort.”

Unable to resist the invitation, he removed his coat, waistcoat, and tie, then slid next to her. She turned to him, placing a hand on his chest, and something snapped inside, a need to hold her so deep it was almost violent.

Turning to her, he hooked an arm around her waist, pulling her to him across the

expanse of the bed that separated them, inserting his leg between hers, hooking her leg over his hip, sliding his hands over her back as he buried his face in the sweetness of her neck.

She responded in kind, sliding her hand under his shirt to map his back with possessive caresses. The warmth of her touch on his bare skin was a balm that seeped all the way to his soul.

For the moment, desire was banked. Never entirely gone around her, just biding its time. But this closeness, the sheer wonder of her acceptance, the solace she offered, was as sublime as the throes of passion.

CHAPTER 14

E sther had never slept an entire night with another person before. One of the many wonderful experiences she had been missing out on. Although she couldn't imagine that sleeping next to anybody else could feel as wonderful as sleeping with Kai. His body lay nestled behind her, his arms embracing her, cocooning her in warmth and protection.

Even her aches from the previous night had vanished with no need for laudanum, as if his mere presence was a balm that healed her.

“Good morning,” he said with a slow smile as she turned within his embrace. “How do you feel?”

She returned his smile. “Much better. What about you?”

“Saner. Slept much better than I expected.” He brushed a lock of her hair off her face with featherlike gentleness. “Thanks to you.”

She stroked his cheek, and he closed his eyes as he leaned into her caress. “I’m glad I could be of help, after all you have done for me.”

He shook his head. “We are not keeping score. Helping you is good for me as well.”

“You don’t need to save me, Kai.”

“Is that what I’m doing?” he asked, looking away.

“In a way. Isn’t that what you have been doing all your life? Trying desperately to help people? Colin, myself. Countless others as well, I’m sure. Atoning.”

He sucked in a breath, cutting a quick glance at her, but didn’t protest her assessment.

“I want you to know something. As it pertains to me, whether or not I am able to walk again, it is not your fault. Nor your failure. I already consider the progress we have made a success.”

A corner of his mouth hitched in a sad half smile. “So do I, my little deer. But you will recover completely. And you know how I know?”

She shook her head.

“Because you are strong and courageous.”

“Me, strong and courageous?” She shook her head again. “I’m fearful and weak. Given to worrying and fretting.”

“You are a woman who has suffered great losses and has endured it all with grace and dignity. You dared to take a chance on my treatment, without guarantee of success, but you are working relentlessly to overcome your circumstances. You may have escaped opium addiction, when many others with less need for pain relief have succumbed to its lure. I still don’t know how you did it. I already admired you before Esther. Now I’m in awe of you.”

“Don’t.” She placed a finger on his lips. “Don’t put me on a pedestal.”

His lips opened under her finger, but before he could speak, a soft knock at the door interrupted their conversation. Kai jumped out of bed. “I can’t be found here. It could ruin your reputation.”

Esther laughed. “It’s probably just my maid. Besides, I’m not a girl fresh out of the schoolroom. I’m a widow of a certain age, and an invalid. Who is going to suspect me, or even believe me capable of misbehaving?” She smirked. “If you are found in my room in the morning, they are more likely to assume I fell ill during the night and needed medical attention.”

He laughed as he finished fixing his clothes and crossed the room to open the door. “And how wrong they would be. I know you are fully capable of misbehaving.”

At least the morning caller—one of the inn’s maids—had brought the news she anxiously awaited. A letter from Elizabeth had arrived, and as requested, the hotel had sent it to her immediately.

Esther almost ripped the paper in her haste to read her daughter’s words. She read the entire missive. Then, with eyes that prickled as they became flooded, read it again for good measure.

Wang was at her side in a thrice. “What is it, Xi?o Lù ? Bad news? Is your daughter well?”

She smiled through her tears to reassure him. “Everything is fine. Elizabeth explains they are planning to cut the season short and retire to the country because of Abigail’s pregnancy. And she says she will miss me, but if there’s any hope I could get better, I should pursue it to the ends of the earth if need be. She encourages me to go to New York and promises to write often.” Esther held the letter against her chest. “My darling daughter. She has a heart of gold.”

“Takes after her mother.” He smiled, wiping a tear from her cheek. “Shall I purchase the tickets, then?”

Her gaze flew to him. This was it. Time to make a decision. There were no more

excuses. Either she embarked on this voyage and took a chance at healing, or she remained where she was and accepted a partial recovery.

She nodded her head. “Yes, buy the tickets.”

“Excellent. I’m going to go out immediately to talk to the agent.” He jumped up to finish dressing. “There were only two first class suites left available on the ship, and I’d like to get them.”

“Wait!” she called after him.

First class suites were expensive. Even she knew that. She couldn’t expect him to pay for the trip. Could he even afford that? She had funds now, thanks to the settlement Colin had given her as his father’s widow. But how to approach the subject of money?

If she mentioned paying him now, after they had become lovers, would he be offended? Knowing his innate dignity, most likely. How did one navigate these tricky situations? With a regular doctor, the fee was paid, and that was the end of it. But he was more than a doctor, wasn’t he? He was her friend, her lover. And now the man offered to take her across the Atlantic, host her in his home in New York. Even act as her lady’s maid if needed... Was she taking advantage?

She offered a small smile. “I’ll pay for the ship’s tickets...”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll take care of all the travel expenses,” he said while buttoning his waistcoat.

Her eyes widened at that. “I can’t let you do that! It wouldn’t be fair. You are already doing so much for me. I can’t accept—”

His eyes met hers through the mirror where he was standing to comb his hair. “Of course you can. I am offering of my own free will. Even though I’m not as rich as a lord, neither am I without means. I can well afford it, Esther.”

“But you shouldn’t.”

“But I want to. Let us not speak of this further. I’ll help you arrange access to your funds in case you need them. But I’ll be paying for the travel expenses, and that’s the end of the discussion.”

The Port of Liverpool was a bustling beehive of activity. From her perch in the carriage that brought them from the train station, Esther took in her chaotic surroundings, marveling at the cacophony of shouted orders, the screech of gulls circling overhead, and the salty tang of the sea. And then she spotted it. The SS China loomed in the distance, its sleek black hull gleaming in the morning light.

“The SS China ?” she exclaimed as the ship came into view, turning to glance at Wang. “Did you do this on purpose?”

Wang laughed. “Not at all. It was entirely a coincidence. This just happened to be the next ship departing for New York.”

“How fitting, then. It’s almost like a sign, I’m sure.”

“Don’t overthink it. It’s just the ship’s name.”

As the carriage drew next to the gangway of the ship, Wang was the first to jump out. He took her wheelchair out of the carriage in preparation to help her settle in it. She cast her gaze over the throng of passengers as he lifted her in his arms and deposited

her in the chair, dismayed to find their arrival turned more than a few heads.

At one point, she had welcomed the wheelchair, as it allowed her to have some mobility. Of late, she had begun to hate the cumbersome contraption. It always garnered attention, made her feel like she was on display. People stared. Some with curiosity, some with pity. She tried to hide her mortification, but it was embarrassing to have to be carted around.

Soon.

This was the very reason she was making this trip. She vowed she would do all in her power so that, on the return trip, she would walk up the gangplank on her own two feet.

Wang handled all their arrangements with the calm efficiency that seemed to define him, always appearing at ease. Unaware or uncaring of people's stares. It must be amazing to possess such unshakeable self-confidence. At the base of the gangway, he produced their tickets, presenting them to the shipping agent.

The agent, a stout man with a florid complexion, adjusted his spectacles and frowned.

"There appears to be an issue, sir," he said, his voice tinged with regret. "While two first-class cabins were booked, I'm afraid only one remains available. The other has been double-booked." He spread his hands in an apologetic gesture. "We deeply regret the error. We can offer a second-class cabin instead. And will, of course, refund the price difference."

Wang's dark eyes narrowed, but his tone remained measured. "This is unacceptable. Both suites were reserved and confirmed in advance. A refund does not address the inconvenience."

Before the agent could stammer out another excuse, Esther placed a hand on Wang's arm, her voice cutting through the tension with gentle authority. "There's no need for us to quarrel, Kai. You'll simply stay with me in the first-class cabin." She turned to her maid, who had agreed to go with them to America, after all. "Margaret, would you like to take the second-class cabin? I'm certain you'll manage admirably."

Margaret nodded, a faint smile playing on her lips. "Of course, my lady. It'll be no trouble at all. Would rather enjoy having a whole cabin to myself."

Esther smiled, and the agent looked relieved at the resolution, though Wang's lips pressed into a thin line.

"Are you sure this arrangement is satisfactory to you, Esther?" he asked.

"Of course. Isn't it to you?" she replied in the same soft tone.

Something rich and possessive flickered in his eyes. "You know it is. I just don't want to inconvenience you."

"It's no inconvenience at all. In fact, I prefer it this way." She leaned closer to whisper for his ears only. "My maid snores. Sharing a cabin with you will be far more...pleasurable. Come, wheel me onto the ship."

His gaze promised a world of pleasure as he grabbed the handles of her wheelchair and, together, they ascended the gangway and boarded the SS China .

The first-class cabin was as lavish as promised, with a plush bed, elegant furnishings, and a window offering a view of the bustling harbor. It even had a small parlor adjacent to the bedchamber. Her maid unpacked her trunks with the practiced efficiency of one who had performed the task hundreds of times. Then disappeared to settle into her second-class quarters without complaint, leaving Wang and Esther to

survey their temporary home.

Wang paced around the cabin like a caged lion. “You’re remarkably adaptable, Esther.”

“And you’re remarkably protective. Let us not let this minor mishap ruin the excitement of this trip. I’ve never been out of England, you know? It’s my first time on a ship. I’m quite looking forward to this experience with you.” She gave him a wry smile. “But perhaps you are not as excited with this arrangement. Did I make a mistake in suggesting we share a cabin?”

He came to her, crouching next to her chair to be at eye level with her. “I just don’t want to cause gossip. An Asian man and a white woman sharing a cabin is unusual enough to be noticed.”

“Nobody on this ship is likely to know us or care what we do. Did you use my title on the ship’s manifesto?”

“No, only your name and last name. But that may be enough for someone to identify you.”

She shrugged. “If someone identifies me, and if that someone finds out we are sharing a cabin, we will just explain that you are my doctor, and I need your services at all hours.” She smirked before adding. “That’s not even a lie. We just won’t say what type of services.”

His face split in an unexpected grin, the shift in his mood as swift as the sun breaking through gray clouds. “You are a naughty girl, aren’t you? I can’t conceive anyone would look at you and not see the sensual, vibrant woman you are.”

“Trust me, they will believe it. People look at me and see only half a person,

incapable of experiencing, or inspiring, passion. They seldom look beyond the surface. And as much as I hate my infirmity, I'm not above using it to my advantage."

"Need my services at all hours, do you?" he teased, his tone turning from playful to intimate.

"I absolutely do." She smiled at him with what she hoped was a sultry invitation.

"I'm at my lady's service. Always."

With that, he carried her to the bed, followed her down to lie on top of her, claiming her mouth in a possessive kiss. He removed her clothes slowly, unwrapping her like a precious gift, savoring every part of her body he uncovered.

They both settled into the rhythm of the ship's departure. The hum of the engines and the call of the crew covered their moans and groans of pleasure. The rocking of the sea added to the motion of their bodies entwining, grabbing, straining. Desire rose, swelled, then crashed through them. Demanding their complete surrender.

CHAPTER 15

The wonderful sight of Kai's naked buttocks greeted Esther as she opened her eyes. His muscular, well-formed buttocks. A wash of heat swept through her at the memory of how they had flexed and contracted as he thrust into her. It was her favorite spot to place her hands when they made love. The powerful muscles of his back were a staunch competitor for the honor, and she loved to map the flared contours that narrowed down to slim hips. But once he started moving inside her, the buttocks called to her. It was as if, with their flexing, she could anticipate the exhilarating slide of his flesh into her.

The pearly light of dawn caressed the outline of his body as he stood in the small tin tub, washing his body with quick, efficient movements. The soapy washcloth left a glistening trail of foam over his back, his arms. His body was so beautiful. All sleek muscles and feline grace. She wished he would turn around so she could see the front. Imagined the bubbles sliding down this chest, over his abdomen, and down below, to his rod. She would love to help him wash. The soapy water would provide slickness for her hands to slide over his body, providing just enough friction to drive them both to distraction.

She enjoyed these intimate moments of domesticity. In the week since they departed, she had discovered that sharing accommodations differed greatly from just sleeping with someone. It gave her the opportunity to observe all these little habits of daily life that you don't get to see when your partner has somewhere else he can go to get ready. In almost two decades of marriage, she had never seen her husband perform these daily rituals.

Kai rose very early. The man moved with the stealth of a shadow, and most days, she wasn't aware of him leaving the bed. But she often saw him on his return, entering the room with the same stealth, sweaty, and carrying a bucket of hot water. He had explained that he liked to exercise in the mornings, practice his kung fu. To avoid disturbing her sleep, he went to the parlor, where the room steward set up a cot for him every night for appearance's sake, even though he had not used it once.

She had almost called good morning when he came in this morning, but then he set the bucket down and started stripping. It didn't take long for him to be naked, for he wore only a loose belted tunic and wide pants.

As soon as his chest was exposed, she had lost the desire to speak or even think. It was so much better to indulge her sight.

So she lay, not daring to move, controlling her breathing so as to not disturb the fascinating activities of her lover getting ready for the day. Her lover...the word felt right. Sensual, wicked. She rather liked the idea of having a lover. Of being loved. Wanted. Desired. Lusted after. It was something she had not felt in such a long time. Perhaps ever. At least not with this intensity.

His arms moved as he scrubbed his front. She watched, fascinated, as the muscles of his legs bunched when he crouched to grab a little tin cup. He used it to sluice water over his body, rinsing away the soap that slid down his body with reluctance, as if wanting to cling to him.

She was sorry when he wrapped a towel around his waist after a brisk rubdown. Small droplets of water clung to his back, like dew on leaves. Still undressed, he went to the washstand where his shaving supplies were laid out and performed the manly ritual of taking a razor to his face.

His shaving concluded, Kai moved beyond her sight, to the other side of the room

where the wardrobe stood. Now he would dress, ensuring he was properly attired for when her maid arrived to help her dress. He was always so circumspect she was sure even the steward who came in every morning to tend to the room believed that he slept on the cot.

She sighed and started to turn, only to feel the mattress dip and his naked body slide next to her, embracing her from behind.

“Got a nice eyeful?” he whispered. The fresh and spicy scent of his shaving soap washed over her as he nibbled her ear.

She mewled like a kitten, melting into him. The sensations cascading through her body were too wonderful to articulate.

“You knew I was looking?”

“Mm-hmm. Felt your gaze like a caress, touching me everywhere.”

Just as he was touching her right now, sneaking his hands under her chemise, gliding them up her torso to cup her breasts.

“Why didn’t you say something?” she breathed.

“What, and ruin your fun?” She heard the smile on his tone.

“Then why didn’t you turn around and gave me a proper look?” Oh, she was feeling quite naughty this morning.

“Because I was hard as iron.” He tweaked her nipples, tearing a moan from her lips. “It took a good scrubbing, and all my mental discipline, to get my cockstand to subside, knowing you were watching me.”

His fingers teased her nipples, driving her mad with want. Turnaround was fair play. She wiggled her bottom against him. “It doesn’t feel like it subsided at all.”

“It never stays down for long around you.”

She smiled with all the feminine power that statement imparted. It emboldened her to take the next step. Give in to the temptation that had been simmering in her mind. Turning within his embrace, she pushed him back and wiggled down his body, kissing his neck, his chest. He helped her maneuver, always attuned to her needs.

Her chemise rucked around her hips, exposing her legs and bottom as she continued to slide down his body. Kai lifted himself from the bed, his abdomen contracting as he braced himself on his elbows to watch her.

“Esther, what are—” His sentence dissolved into a groan as she closed her lips around his cock.

She hummed in pleasure, exploring its shape, running her tongue over the edge of the flared tip, teasing the little patch of rougher texture at the underside of its head.

He grunted, falling backward onto the pillows as if his arms couldn’t hold him up anymore. She had done that to him. He was all power and sleek strength, yet she, who had no physical power at all, had him under her control with her hands, her mouth. It was a heady feeling. It was glorious.

She had heard about this act years ago, when she still moved around in society. It had sounded intriguing, but she had not understood how a woman could find pleasure in that. Now she knew. Every groan he emitted. Every involuntary tightening of his muscles. Every jerk of his rod in her mouth ratcheted her pleasure.

When his hand grabbed her hair and commanded her head, she moaned as a rush of

moisture soaked her intimate parts. He guided her with his hands, with the undulation of his hips. She took everything he offered, and more. She was greedy, insatiable. Wanting it all. The tightening of his muscles announced it was near. She redoubled her efforts, sucking, caressing. She was ready, so ready. Any moment now...

He yanked his cock out of her mouth with a wet smack, holding her head away.

“Stop. Wait,” he panted.

No! Not again. She wanted him to fall apart in her mouth. Wanted to taste his release.

“Why do you always interrupt me? Am I not doing it right?” she pouted.

The sound he made wasn’t quite a laugh, more like a grunt of disbelief. “On the contrary. It feels sublime. But I’m about to lose control—”

“Then let go. Lose control. Release.” Her voice was lower. Sultry. She barely recognized herself in the seductive tones. But this new persona felt right.

“Esther, I can’t release in your mouth.” His voice was tortured now, his gaze frantic, as if fighting a losing battle with himself.

“Why not?”

“Because you are a lady—”

“I’m a woman. And right now, I’m desperate for a taste of my man.”

He muttered something in Chinese that she thought might be a curse or a plea. Or maybe an acknowledgment of surrender, because grabbing his cock with his other hand, he presented it to her, easing her hold on her hair so she could move closer and

take it.

This time, she gave no quarter. Allowed no retreat. And received her reward when, with a groan, he surrendered. Warm liquid exploded in her mouth, but she was ready. More than ready. Without pause, she swallowed it all, staying with him until the last tremors left his body and he opened his eyes again to gaze at her. High color tinted his cheeks.

“I can’t believe I did that. How are you?” His tone was cautious, as if she were a porcelain doll that might shatter.

She smiled with female satisfaction and licked her lips for good measure. “Never better.”

“Minx.”

Maybe she was. She felt wanton, bold, seductive. Today she had taken the initiative, had claimed some power. She had conquered her indomitable lover, and his sensual surrender made her feel powerful.

CHAPTER 16

The SS China glided into New York Harbor eleven days after departing Liverpool. Esther sat by the rail, the salty wind tangling strands of her hair as she gazed upon the bustling waterfront. The city rose before her, a jagged silhouette of brick and stone against the sky, the masts of docked ships swaying like a forest of wooden spires.

The voyage had been an enchanted time, a perfect oasis of togetherness with Kai. She felt so much closer to him. In some ways, she wished she could extend the journey, but in other ways, the sight of land relieved her. They had made it. Tomorrow, she would continue her treatment. Soon, she might walk again.

Oh, she did not deceive herself that the path there would be easy or without challenges. It would take all the strength she had. But today marked a new beginning for her, and she would give it her all. For her daughter. For herself...and for Kai.

He stood beside her, his posture as composed as ever, though she caught the flicker of something in his expression—a quiet anticipation, perhaps. He had returned to a place that had once been his home, and though he had spoken little of it during their journey, she wondered how he felt stepping onto its shores again. Had he missed it? Was he glad to be back?

With a sudden pang, she realized this was still his home. Not England. He had accompanied his friend and had been staying with them for several months. A guest in their homes. But he never said he would stay in England. He had not set roots there. What if he intended to remain in New York? Surely, he wouldn't, not after what they had shared...

But there had been no promises between them. He never spoke of the future, other than in terms of her rehabilitation. Maybe he didn't see their relationship as something permanent. She had considered nothing at all. Stupid, really. For a lady of her years, to fall headfirst into an affair without considering the possibilities. But she had found so much happiness in his arms. Had felt so cherished and secure that nothing else had mattered at the moment. Perhaps that had been the biggest surprise of all. She was no nubile girl, no extraordinary beauty. She wasn't even a woman in good health. Yet he, who knew her body's limitations better than anyone, wanted her with intense vigor.

Their relationship had bloomed easily. Like a flower in spring. Unfurling its petals, reaching for the sun. She had enjoyed its beauty, reveled in the joy she had found. But flowers were notoriously ephemeral. They never lasted beyond one season. Was their season running its course as well?

Esther didn't want to believe what they had was transient. It seemed so solid. So real. She reached out and slid her hand into his. Seeking his comfort and reassurance. His fingers closed around hers, and he looked down and offered a warm smile. It assuaged some of her fears. But couldn't banish the cold tendrils of doubt that had sneaked through their summer. At some point, she would have to ask him what he intended.

And hope it was what her heart desired.

"Time to disembark," Wang murmured, giving her hand a little squeeze. "Are you ready?"

"Certainly. I've been ready for a long time."

The gangplank swayed under their weight as they descended, the crowd thick with men in work-worn coats, ladies lifting their skirts to avoid the grime of the docks, and

porters shouting offers to carry luggage. Their trunks were swiftly loaded onto a hired carriage, and within minutes, they were jostling through the streets of New York.

Esther pressed her face to the carriage window as they rode. The city was alive in a way unlike London—louder, brasher, filled with a restless energy that thrummed through its very stones. They passed grand townhouses with wrought-iron balconies, rows of tidy brownstones, and storefronts with bold signs.

At last, they arrived on a quiet, tree-lined street. Wang informed her this neighborhood was called Kips Bay, and that it was home to professionals, doctors, and merchants. He had made his residence here because it was close to the hospital.

The coach stopped in front of a four-story brownstone, its red-brick facade softened by ivy creeping along the wrought-iron railings. The exterior was neat, the entrance framed by polished railings and a tidy stoop. As he had said, it wasn't as grand as the townhouse where she lived in London, but then, that wasn't her townhouse anymore. It belonged to Colin and Abigail now. She was the dowager countess, and when she returned, she should start looking for another residence for herself and her daughter.

Oh, she was sure Colin and Abigail would gladly allow her to live with them—they might even insist on it. But they were a young couple who needed to make their own home without having the dowager underfoot. When she began her search for her residence, something like this townhouse would be perfect.

As was his custom, Wang got off the coach first and arranged for her chair and all their luggage to be brought inside, then he came and picked her up, carrying her up the short flight of steps. He had carried her through countless doors by now, and yet, the gesture of bringing her through the threshold of his home felt poignant, significant. It was very reminiscent of what a groom did when he first brought his bride home.

Nonsense, of course. Her own maudlin thoughts were making her see things in a different light.

“Welcome home, my lady,” he said, depositing her with the utmost care on a comfortable chair.

She smiled, looking around. Inside, the home was spacious and neat—not ostentatious, but almost stark in its simplicity. And undeniably his. She could see it in the carefully chosen details—the jade figurine upon the mantel, the books lined in perfect order, the faint scent of tea that lingered in the air.

“It’s a lovely residence. How long have you lived here?”

“About five years now. I moved in after we opened the hospital, which is at the end of the street.”

“You have all this here.” She waved her hand to encompass the room. “And yet you left your home and your job at the hospital to accompany Colin across the ocean.”

Wang’s shoulders bobbed in a shrug. “Colin is my friend. When I agreed to teach him Kung Fu, I became his Sh?fù. That’s a mentor of sorts. A responsibility not to be taken lightly. Despite him being estranged from his father, I know his death affected him. I watched him suffer when he lost his mother. Now he had lost his father, and his entire life was being upended. I...couldn’t leave him alone at that crucial time.”

“Colin is lucky to have a friend like you,” she said, moved by his loyalty.

“I owe much to him and his mother as well. They saved me in more ways than one.”

She tilted her head with curiosity. “How so?”

His gaze moved away, to stare into the empty hearth. She thought he would not answer, but he said. “It’s a long story, but I was on a path toward destruction. They helped me find my way.”

“What was Colin’s mother like?”

He smiled with fond reminiscence. “She was a force of nature. Smart, passionate, bold. Always managed her life as she saw fit and made her opinions known. She believed women deserved the same freedoms and opportunities as men and faced every challenge head-on. Fiercely devoted to her son. Sometimes impetuous, but always courageous and generous. A very fine lady.”

“You sound as if you were very fond of her.” A sliver of nonsensical jealousy must have shown in her voice, for he looked at her quizzically.

“I was not romantically involved with her, if that’s what you are thinking.”

“Oh, no. I didn’t mean... Even if you were, it’s none of my business. I shouldn’t have asked. It’s just... I’ve always been curious about her, but couldn’t ask anyone. My husband forbade everyone to speak about his previous wife. But I always thought he was still in love with her.”

Wang frowned, taking the seat in front of hers. “From what I know, their marriage ended rather badly. He divorced her, after all, which is almost unheard of. She never mentioned the Earl, but Colin always spoke of their parent’s marriage as...tempestuous.”

“Oh, I’m sure it was. My husband was very forceful as well, and proud. I can imagine how such personalities might clash. But I think, deep down, he admired her. And always loved her.”

“Why divorce her, then, and abandon his wife and child? Why marry you?”

She shrugged. Regretting having started this conversation. It was painful and useless, since both people in question were already dead.

“Like I said, he was a proud man. He wouldn’t apologize or compromise. I think he married me because he wanted someone meek and biddable. The opposite of his first wife. But then he found that my compliance bored him.”

He crouched in front of her, in a gesture she was beginning to recognize as something he did when he wanted to speak to her heart to heart.

“Then he was a fool. First for letting his first wife and child go, and then for not appreciating you. Esther, you mustn’t compare yourself to her. You two have very different temperaments, but you are every bit as courageous. You possess a quiet strength. A gentle spirit is no less valuable than a bold one.”

“But less exciting.”

He gave her a smile laden with promise and burning desire. “Oh, you are most definitely exciting. And passionate. A man would be so lucky to delight in you for a lifetime.”

Their gazes connected, and something arced between them. An acknowledgement of a feeling neither dared to mention.

He straightened up. “I could take you up to your room now if you wish. You should know that I have let the two upper floors, since I don’t need that much space, and it seems like a waste to have all those empty rooms. But I hope you find your accommodations appropriate.”

She recognized what he was doing, accepted his deflection. They had wandered into dangerous territory.

“What a practical concept,” she replied. “In that regard, you must consider the British aristocracy quite a wasteful lot. We have huge townhouses in London and even bigger estates in the country, where most of the rooms sit unused.”

He smiled faintly. “I’ve noticed. That’s why I thought to warn you. I hope you won’t mind. They won’t disturb you since the apartment has its own entrance. We still have three bedchambers in the main residence, so you won’t lack space.”

“I’m sure I’ll be perfectly comfortable. After all, I shared a tiny cabin with you for days and have never been happier in my life.”

He nodded, giving her one of those tender smiles. “At the moment, the house has no staff. I had a lady who came to cook and clean, but since I’ve been gone, she only comes once a week to dust the cobwebs. I shall send her notice that I’ve returned and also see about hiring more servants. How many servants do you require?”

Esther shook her head, her eyes widening with alarm at the thought of putting him through more expenses. “Oh, no. I don’t need any servants. With my maid to help me, and the woman who comes to clean and cook, we shall be fine.”

“You are accustomed to more servants. I don’t want you to go without.”

“I don’t need more servants. Truly, it’s an unnecessary expense.”

“You shouldn’t concern yourself about the expenses.”

She frowned, annoyed. “Wang, you keep saying that, but I know nothing about your finances. For all I know, you are overextending yourself, and I don’t want to be a

burden. My late husband kept me in the dark about money as well. He paid for my expenses but never discussed finances with me. I supposed he considered me too delicate to understand money. When he died, I found out that the estate was not doing as well as it once was. He left me a pittance, and if it hadn't been for Colin's generosity, I would be living in genteel poverty, despite being a countess. So forgive me for worrying about money and expenses."

He frowned. "You are right, of course. My apologies. It was not my intention to patronize you. As I told you before, I can well afford it. Though the means through which I obtained my fortune is not something I'm proud of, which is why I avoid discussing it. But you deserve to know."

His eyes lowered as he stood and walked away, bracing his hand on the fireplace mantel. Esther braced herself for the revelation. What could possibly be so bad that would make him so uncomfortable?

"I used to be a prizefighter. A man who fights for money—that was the path of destruction I told you about. I spent years doing that. Traveling from city to city. When I became too notorious in one, I would move to the next. I made quite a tidy fortune by misusing my skills to beat men I had no quarrel with. I live simply, so the money is untouched."

Ladies were not supposed to know about those fights, and the bets placed on their outcomes, but she knew. She had heard of boxers who had made their fortunes in the ring. Wherever gambling and vice were involved, there was money to be made. He would have been a formidable opponent. She had seen him fight off three attackers who were also skilled fighters. And although he wasn't big or bulky, she knew firsthand the strength of the arms that had carried her so many times. The power and agility in his whipcord body. But it was difficult to reconcile the kind, courteous, and protective man in front of her who lived to heal people with the merciless fighter.

“Why did you do it?” she asked quietly. There was no censure in her tone, only curiosity.

“I told you about the circumstances under which I left China. When I arrived in this country, I was angry and quick to take offense for any real or perceived slight. I had trouble maintaining a job and brawled constantly. A prize promoter saw me and offered me money to fight. More money than I would have earned in a month of honest labor. With the promise of more if I won.” He shrugged. “Like the saying goes, one wrong step leads to every step being wrong. I’m not proud of how I made my money. I think that’s why I hesitate to use it. But I will gladly use it on you.”

“But you came out of it. You mustn’t be so hard on yourself. You were grieving and hurting. We all make mistakes when under the influence of such emotions. Most people don’t even recognize when they are in the wrong, much less try to make amends. But you turned around. Look at how many people you have helped since then. Including me. You’ve always had a core of honor and goodness, even during the darkest times. The way you came to Colin’s rescue when they were being attacked proves that.”

His lopsided smile conveyed his skepticism. “I still have much to atone for. But I didn’t tell you the story to gain your sympathy, but to convince you that you needn’t worry about money. But enough of that. Let’s get you settled in your room, and then I’m going to feed you.”

The scent of garlic and ginger filled the small but well-appointed kitchen, mingling with the faint smokiness of sizzling oil. Esther sat by the worktable, arms loosely crossed, watching in awe as Wang moved about the space with effortless precision.

While she changed and rested in the comfortable room he had given her—which she suspected was his own room, since it carried the faint scent of him—he had gone to the market and was now preparing dinner.

She had never seen him cook before, but it suited him—this quiet certainty, the way his hands worked with practiced ease. He had rolled his sleeves up to his elbows, revealing the strong, sure movements of his forearms as he deftly chopped a bundle of spring onions and set them aside. A pot of rice steamed on the stove, its fragrant warmth curling through the air.

She tilted her head. “You never mentioned you could cook.”

Wang glanced at her, the corner of his mouth quirking. “You never asked.”

“That smells divine,” she admitted.

“Simple food,” he replied, turning back to the stove.

“You are a man of many talents. Is there anything you can’t do?”

This time, he chuckled. “There are many things I can’t do. I can’t sing. I can’t play any instrument. I can’t dance. Just to name a few.”

He tossed in thinly sliced pork into a heated pan, the sharp sizzle filling the room as the meat browned, its edges crisping. A splash of rice wine sent up a fragrant puff of steam before he added a handful of mushrooms and varied vegetables she couldn’t identify.

Another pot sat beside it, where noodles boiled, their surface glistening. Wang plucked one up with his chopsticks, testing the texture before nodding in satisfaction. Within moments, he strained them, then tossed them in a dark sauce, finishing with a sprinkle of freshly chopped herbs.

Esther leaned forward, inhaling deeply to capture the smells, the warmth, the utter competence with which he moved.

“You look completely at home in the kitchen,” she mused.

A chuckle rumbled in his chest. “A hungry boy learns quickly.”

She was beginning to realize just how many skills he had that she had never thought to ask about. His life was so rich, his experiences so vast. She could spend a lifetime discovering every aspect of him and it still wouldn’t be enough. But she very much liked the idea of trying.

This quiet domesticity, in this lovely house. No multitudes of servants or any other people around. Just them. The thought filled her with joy and warmth. If it weren’t for Elizabeth, she wouldn’t mind staying here with him. Or recreating this life in London. If he wanted to, of course.

But there was no point in pondering what ifs. The reality was that she didn’t know if he wanted to live in England, and she could not stay. Her daughter came first. She was the reason Esther was working so hard to get better. And what would she do when Elizabeth married, as she would probably do in a year or two? Maybe then she could return to this cozy house. Or Wang would—

“It’s ready,” he announced, pushing a plate toward her.

With a smile, she surveyed all the dishes in front of her—a bowl of tomato and egg stir-fry, the pork and greens, and the noodles—everything looked and smelled delicious.

“This looks almost as good as you did while cooking it.”

His lips curled in quiet amusement, but she detected the hint of a blush. “Eat, before you decide you’d rather watch me cook all night.”

Esther lifted the chopsticks that she had finally mastered and took a bite. Chewy and savory noodles, laced with warmth from the scallions. Soft and velvety eggs. Flavorful pork, bursting with spices.

It was comforting in a way she hadn't expected.

She swallowed, met his gaze, and smiled. "This is delicious."

Wang picked up his own chopsticks and began to eat, his expression unreadable but just a little pleased. She realized he enjoyed doing things for her. Pampering her. And she wanted to do the same for him. Ease his burdens, make him happy. What a wonderful thing.

CHAPTER 17

M orning light filtered through the curtains, soft and golden, as Esther lay still, both anticipating and dreading the moment she would have to rise.

What day was it? The days blurred together, a steady cycle of effort, pain, and quiet moments of comfort. Her body ached, deep in the muscles, in places she hadn't even realized could ache. Sometimes she longed for the laudanum. For the relief it could provide. She squeezed her eyes shut. Perhaps today, just today, she could take—

No. She couldn't. Wang hadn't asked her not to take it. He had left it in her hands. Her decision. He trusted her that much. But after learning what he had suffered because of it... She was determined not to take it ever again. And she was succeeding. She had not touched opium in months. But sometimes, sometimes she longed for the relief.

A kiss on her forehead.

Kai.

She could hear the faint amusement in his voice as he spoke. "If you're awake enough to think of excuses, you're awake enough for your therapy."

She sighed, pushed herself up, and called Margaret to help her get ready.

At the hospital, the pool was her first battlefield. Warm water lapped against her skin as she pushed through it, her legs sluggish, uncooperative. Had she ever thought

recovery would be easy? Fast? She now realized the first therapies she had in London had been but a prelude to the grueling work still ahead.

She kicked, stretched, and pulled herself forward, each motion a quiet war between will and weakness. Kai stood by her side, watching, arms crossed, sharp eyes catching every falter, every small triumph.

“Again,” he said when she paused, breathless.

She clenched her jaw and did it again.

The gymnasium smelled of polished wood, sweat, and determination. Esther gritted her teeth as she gripped the parallel bars, her fingers aching from how tightly she held on.

One step.

The muscles in her legs trembled, fire licking up her thighs.

Another.

Her knees buckled. She pitched forward—but Wang was there, always there, catching her, steady hands gripping her waist, her back.

“You fell less this time,” he murmured.

“I still fell.”

“It’s progress.”

She swallowed hard and nodded. Then she tried again.

By the time they arrived home each evening, exhaustion weighed down every inch of her body. She would lie on the chaise, limbs like lead, convinced she could not move for the rest of the night.

And then—Kai's hands.

Warm, firm, skilled, as they worked the knots from her legs, her back. The sharp sting of his acupuncture needles, the fleeting discomfort that melted into relief. His touch was efficient, practiced—but when she risked glancing at him, she caught something else in his face. Something reverent. Possessive. Or perhaps it was just her wishful thinking.

She closed her eyes and let herself trust it.

Weeks passed. Summer turned into autumn.

She walked ten steps unassisted.

Then twenty.

The day she crossed the length of the gymnasium, she collapsed into Kai's arms—not from weakness, but from sheer, disbelieving triumph.

She burrowed into him, chest heaving, sweat dampening her brow. And burst into sobs. He held her in silence, his strong arms protecting her from the storm of her own emotions. When she looked up at his face, his expression was unreadable. Then, just for a moment, the corner of his mouth lifted.

She smiled back.

One more step.

Tomorrow, another.

Even if it seemed that for each step she took, he was a step farther away. She couldn't reach him. But she was determined. She hadn't finished her therapies. She wasn't finished with Kai.

She wanted to run to him. Dance with him. Fly with him.

Each step she took was a step away from him. Wang watched Esther walk away toward the other end of the gymnasium. He didn't need to stand by her side anymore. Her hand hovered over the rail that stretched the length of the room, but she didn't grab it. She was walking on her own. A little unsteady still, but better than yesterday. Her confidence would grow from there. She had worked relentlessly. With courage and determination. She had gotten better. His little fawn was ready to stretch her legs and run. He couldn't hold her back.

Soon, he'd have to let her go. Wang could see the day approaching like the swollen black clouds of a thunderstorm. But not yet. Maybe in a month? She reached the far end of the room and turned, walking back to him. Her face was radiant with hopeful joy. He took in her delicate features, so dear to him. The finely arched eyebrows, the small nose, the rosebud lips that were so innocent and so naughty.

She appeared fragile, but she was strong. Oh, he knew she wouldn't agree. Esther thought he was the strong one. But in truth, he was in awe of her. Of her determination, her resilience, her openness.

How could he bear to let her go? But how could he keep her? These months stolen away from reality couldn't endure. They had escaped scandal so far by avoiding society. But once she returned to England, she would have to reenter the world to which she had been born. Her daughter was entering society, and she needed to be there by her side. It was the reason she had done all of this. It was her purpose.

And he? There was no place for him in their lives. The British aristocracy might tolerate him as long as he stayed on the fringes, a silent character they need not pay attention to. But they would never accept him among their ranks. Even here in America, he felt his standing eroding with each passing year. He would only be a liability to her and her daughter. And they didn't deserve that.

Esther reached him and flashed him a bright smile. "Well? How did I do?"

"Splendidly. You are stronger every day. Before the month is out, you shall be dancing and running."

She laughed, the sound like the musical notes of a flute. "Not quite. But I hope to be able to dance again someday. Will you dance with me?"

He shook his head slowly. "I told you I can't dance."

"Of course you can. You may have never tried, but I've yet to see someone move with more elegance than you. Your feet are light, your every movement graceful. Those exercises you do look like a dance."

"Tai Chi?" He chuckled. "I guess in a way they are, but I don't know how to dance the waltz or any western dances."

"I will show you. And then we can dance together," she replied, full of optimism.

He didn't contradict her. Far be it from him to take away her joy, but he knew it was unlikely they would ever have the occasion to dance together.

But that didn't mean they couldn't have some fun. In the months Esther had been in New York, she had barely seen more than the inside of his house and this hospital. He had given her no respite from her treatment, and she had taken every challenge in

stride and surpassed every expectation. Perhaps it was time to celebrate the victories.

“Let’s take the day off tomorrow,” he said impulsively. “We should celebrate your victory.”

Her eyes lit up. “That’s a splendid idea! Where will you take me?”

“Eager to ditch the therapies, are you?”

“The therapies? Yes. Everything else? No. Not a chance.”

And therein was the problem. Because when the therapies ended, so must everything else end.

CHAPTER 18

A utumn filled the air as Wang helped Esther into the open carriage. The air was sharp but invigorating, carrying the mingling scents of roasted chestnuts and spiced apples from a nearby vendor. Before them, The Mall stretched like a golden tunnel. Beneath their carriage wheels, leaves crunched softly, a reminder of the season's inevitable shift.

Esther tucked a woolen shawl around her shoulders, but raised her cheeks, pink from the cold, towards the cool autumn sun.

“Ah, this is glorious. I’ve lived in confinement for so long that I almost forgot how lovely the outdoors can be.”

“Yes, you have. These past few months, you have only gone outside to travel from the house to the hospital and back. And before we started the therapy, you were almost a recluse.”

Her smile held a tint of sadness. “I didn’t want to put people to the trouble of having to cart me around and was ashamed to be seen in public. What a waste of time and life.”

“But you have been going out with me even before you could walk.”

She shrugged. “Your presence imparts courage. I feel...stronger. Not so alone. Like I can face the world.”

She could not know how much those words moved him. He wanted to be her rock. Her protector. Always. Lifting one of her gloved hands, he placed a kiss on the palm.

When the carriage reached The Boathouse, Wang stepped down first, lifting his arms to circle her waist and bring her down from the carriage. Gently, as if she were made of glass, he set her down on the ground. But he needn't have worried. She stood, steady and sure—so much more than she had been months ago.

They walked along the lake, where the water reflected the hues of the trees. Now and then, her steps faltered. Every time, Wang caught her elbow without thought, steadying her was a reflex more ingrained than breathing.

“Are you tired?” he asked softly.

She exhaled. “A little.”

“Then we rest.”

“No, I can keep going. Let's reach that kiosk. I want to eat something.”

“Stubborn.”

She looked at him askance, her lips curving seductively. “Where is the hard taskmaster who would demand I keep going when my strength was faltering?”

He huffed a small laugh. “Today is your resting day. Enjoy it. The hard taskmaster returns tomorrow.”

This time, her gaze held pure wickedness. “Do you promise? I rather like you hard...and masterful.”

Good God. She was going to make him go hard indeed in the middle of the damn park.

“Stop looking at me like that, you minx, or you’ll find the outing cut short.”

Her smile reflected triumph. She liked to tease him. Make him burn at inappropriate times. Keep him simmering with desire and then revel in the explosion when his passion erupted in private.

They reached a vendor selling roasted chestnuts, baked apples, and sweet pastries. Wang bought them both a treat. He handed her a paper cone filled with warm chestnuts, watching as she peeled one delicately, then popped it into her mouth.

A voice—crisp and unmistakably English—interrupted her sigh of pleasure.

“Lady Hartfield?”

Esther turned, mid-bite, blinking in surprise as three elegantly dressed women approached. The one in front, a tall, stately blonde in a dark green walking dress, studied Esther with a look of pleasant shock.

“My goodness, it is you,” she said, her gaze flicking briefly to Wang before dismissing him with the effortless ease one dismissed a servant. “What a delightful surprise! We did not know you were in New York!”

Esther swallowed, dabbing her lips with her napkin. “Lady Caroline. Yes, I arrived some months ago.”

The other two women—poised and impeccably dressed—smiled at Esther, studying her with avid eyes. They were probably American, eager to further their acquaintance with an aristocratic lady. This country may eschew monarchy and nobility, but they

certainly were awestruck by them.

“And you are walking! I’m so happy to see you have recovered after your unfortunate accident.” Without missing a beat, Lady Caroline continued, “Please allow me to introduce my companions, Mrs. Morgan and Mrs. Livingston.”

Esther inclined her head graciously. “How do you do, Mrs. Morgan, Mrs. Livingston.”

The women returned the greeting warmly. None of them had so much as acknowledged him, but that wasn’t surprising. Esther, however, wasn’t about to let that stand. She gestured toward him. “May I introduce my dear friend, Dr. Wang? He was instrumental in my recovery.”

The moment stretched.

Lady Caroline hesitated—barely a flicker—but Wang, used to such pauses, remained composed. He inclined his head politely.

“How...fortunate,” Lady Caroline said finally, her lips pressing into something that was meant to be a smile. “Dr. Wang.”

The other two murmured similar greetings, their voices cool, their gazes already shifting back to Esther, as though Wang was an unfortunate incident in an otherwise delightful encounter.

Esther held their gaze, unimpressed, before shifting the conversation. “And what brings you to New York, Lady Caroline?”

“Oh, the usual—business, travel. My husband has investments here.” She glanced between them, curiosity flickering in her gaze. Then, as though making a sudden

decision, she retrieved an ivory-embossed card from her reticule.

“We are hosting a ball two weeks from Saturday. A rather exclusive affair,” she added, as if to remind Esther of her own status. “Only la crème de la crème of New York society will be attending. You must come.”

Her tone made it clear—the invitation was meant for Esther alone.

Esther took the card, turning it between her fingers. She glanced at Wang, then back at Lady Caroline, her lips curling slightly.

“How kind of you,” she said smoothly. “I shall attend.”

Lady Caroline beamed. “Excellent.”

Esther turned to him and smiled. “With Dr. Wang as my escort.”

The silence that followed was thick and telling.

Lady Caroline’s lips parted, just slightly, before she schooled her expression. “Oh.” Another forced smile. “Well, I—Of course.”

The other two women’s gazes flickered between Esther and himself, assessing. They shifted on their feet while sporting stiff smiles. Obviously uncomfortable, but not wanting to antagonize a countess.

Lady Caroline recovered quickly. “We must be off, but we shall see you soon, I hope.”

With another brief nod toward Wang—distantly polite but utterly dismissive—they strolled away.

Esther watched them go, expression unreadable. Then, slipping the card into her pocket, she turned to Wang.

“I shall only attend if you escort me,” she said.

Wang exhaled slowly, shaking his head. “Esther, that is a terrible idea.”

She raised a brow. “You sound like you doubt my social prowess.”

“I doubt their willingness to accept me,” he said frankly.

She tilted her head, lips curving mischievously. “Then I shall teach them some manners. Lady Caroline is the daughter of an earl, but she married a man of industry. She, of all people, shouldn’t be so haughty.”

“Wealth can cover a lack of aristocratic pedigree. But they will never accept me in the world you belong to.”

Her smile softened. “There’s no world I wish to belong to that doesn’t include you.”

Her fierce loyalty speared his heart. He had expected no less from her. But he feared it was the world that was about to teach her a lesson.

He studied her for a long moment, his jaw tightening just slightly. “Why does this matter to you?”

She stepped closer, her fingers brushing his sleeve. “Because you deserve to be included. Because there’s no finer man than you. And because I am craving a dance with you.”

He shook his head, sighing. “Then I suppose I must attend...if only to prove my

point.”

Yet beneath his exasperation, a quiet wariness simmered. An unspoken warning that she was about to lead them both into a battlefield where the rules were already stacked against them.

Despite that, he would go.

Because there was no battle he wouldn't fight for her.

CHAPTER 19

The day of the ball arrived with surprising swiftness. Focused on continuing with her therapies as she was, she had barely had enough time to have a suitable ball gown made. In London, she would have known exactly where to go, but it was different in New York. Fortunately, Margaret proved invaluable in helping her locate a suitable dressmaker.

When the dress had arrived that morning, it had taken her breath away. It was a beautiful confection of blue silk, with a glittering bodice beaded with crystals and pearls. She hadn't worn anything so beautiful in years. Maybe never. But for this occasion, she had wanted—needed—something grand. Impressive. She needed to dazzle these high-nosed Americans into accepting Wang. If she had her better jewelry with her, she would have worn it tonight. Alas, her diamond and sapphire necklace had remained in London, but her pearls would do for tonight. The gown was magnificent armor. And this was a battle she was determined to win.

The widening of Kai's eyes, the sheer appreciation in its dark depths as she appeared at the top of the stairs, told her the gown was causing the desired effect.

"You look stunning," he said, climbing the stairs at a clip, not once taking his eyes off her. He stopped a step beneath her, taking her hand to place a kiss on her satin-gloved palm. She felt the warmth of his breath through the fabric, and goosebumps all along her arms.

"Thank you. You look very sharp yourself," she whispered.

He took her breath away in his evening attire. His well-tailored suit accentuated the lean strength of his frame, the dark silk of his cravat a stark contrast to the crisp white of his collar, while the ice blue waistcoat provided a beautiful complement to her own gown. If they had planned to coordinate their attire, it couldn't have turned out more perfectly.

He had combed his dark hair back, accentuating his high cheekbones and sharp jawline. She wondered how long it would take for his rebellious lock of hair to escape the control of the pomade. She looked forward to it falling over his brow.

The corner of his eyes crinkled with appreciation and color bloomed on his cheeks at her compliment. But he only inclined his head and tucked her hand on his arm as he helped her descend the stairs and depart for the ball.

Together, they entered the grand Fifth Avenue mansion. According to Wang, this was the pinnacle of a prestigious address in New York, akin to Grosvenor Square in London. Well, she had attended many a ball at a Grosvenor Square residence. She had never been haughty—it was not in her nature—but neither was she intimidated by haughtiness or the flashy display of the lavish mansion.

The gilded chandeliers of Lady Caroline's grand ballroom cast a golden glow over the assembled elite of New York, their jewels glittering as they moved in swirling waves of silk and satin. Esther stood at the threshold, her gloved hand resting lightly on Wang's arm.

He stood with quiet confidence, his posture effortlessly elegant, his expression unreadable but composed. If he felt the sting of their scrutiny, he did not show it. To Esther, he was the equal of any man present. But not everyone in attendance seemed to agree.

The first wave of greetings was measured. Some—those eager to court her

favor—offered effusive pleasantries, their smiles too wide, their eyes darting to Wang before quickly skittering away. Others were cool, polite but distant, their greetings clipped, their gazes guarded. A few simply ignored them altogether, their disdain evident in the whispers that trailed in their wake like the rustling of silk skirts.

Through it all, Wang remained composed, his face an unreadable mask of quiet dignity. He neither courted their approval nor shrank beneath their scrutiny. When he inclined his head in greeting, his manners were impeccable, his voice measured and even. He did not seek to ingratiate himself, nor did he display the meekness they might have expected from a man of his background. He stood as he always did—unshaken, self-possessed, a man who knew his own worth and didn't need to flaunt it.

And then, as if to defy them all, he led her onto the dance floor.

“I believe you wished for a dance, my lady.” His eyes bore into her as he extended his hand. The first strains of a waltz wafted from the orchestra.

She did not hesitate for a second. Placing her hand in his, he allowed him to lead her onto the dance floor.

Despite his claim that he could not dance, the moment he took her hand, she knew he had learned. He moved with innate grace, his steps precise yet fluid, guiding her across the polished floor with a quiet confidence that stole her breath. She had dreamed of dancing with him, but the reality surpassed her imaginings. They moved as one, with him measuring his steps to her level of comfort. If she ever faltered, he held her secure, his touch firm but careful, his gaze steady upon hers. It was not just a dance—it was a statement. Or perhaps a declaration of something he couldn't put into words.

She caught sight of their audience from the corner of her eye. The whispers, the

sidelong glances, the pursed lips of matrons too scandalized to speak but unwilling to look away. Let them whisper. Let them judge. She didn't care, but maybe she had not stopped to consider how this would feel for Wang.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm dancing with the most beautiful woman in this ballroom. I'm feeling splendid."

Her eyes smiled up at him. "And you said you couldn't dance."

"I learned."

"You are a fast learner. You dance flawlessly, like I knew you would."

As if to prove his prowess, he led her through a turn, never taking his eyes off her.

"I'm sorry if I've put you in an uncomfortable situation."

He shook his head. "Don't worry about that. Right now, just enjoy our dance. I know I am."

When the music ended, she let out a shaky breath. She may be able to walk now, but dancing required quite a lot of stamina. He guided her from the floor, his hand resting lightly against the small of her back.

"How do you feel?" He was always so attuned to her needs.

"I am a bit tired," she murmured, truth and excuse woven together.

Wang looked down at her, his dark eyes unreadable, though she knew he had seen and heard all that she had. Without hesitation, he inclined his head. "Then we shall

go.”

They made their way toward the exit, past faces that welcomed her but struggled to mask their unease around Wang. She longed to stop, to tell them what a great man he was, to make them see what she saw. But she knew it would not matter. Not tonight.

Instead, she squeezed his arm and whispered, just for him, “Thank you for the dance.”

His lips quirked, the faintest hint of a smile. “It was my pleasure.”

And with that, they escaped the gilded cage of the ballroom, into the cool, crisp night beyond. She had not expected to win the battle tonight. Not really. Just as with her rehabilitation, it would take time and determined effort. But she had both. She left today, but they had made a statement. This was a strategic retreat to continue the battle another time.

Wang’s mood was spiraling down a dark vortex as he escorted Esther home that night. Not for him—he didn’t care one fig for the opinion of this stuck-up elite—but he was angry on Esther’s behalf. She had naively believed she could prevail upon them to accept him. He had known it would be impossible and thus should have protected her from disappointment. Instead, he had allowed this farce to play out, and now he regretted it.

The events of tonight had only driven home a truth he had always known. They didn’t belong together. He would never be accepted in the circles she belonged to. Their relationship had lasted in anonymity. Now that their association had become public, further entanglement would only drag her down. Mire her in scandal and gossip. He couldn’t allow that to happen. She had made a full recovery—the way they had

danced tonight was conclusive proof of that. It was time to let her go.

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow, he would let her go. But tonight, before the night ended and the harsh light of a new day conquered the darkness, tonight she was still his. And he intended to have, taste, feel, and possess every inch of her. He would imprint her in his soul so that he could carry her with him for the rest of his life.

The carriage drew to a stop in front of his house, and he helped her descend, his manner solicitous and careful as always, but once they were inside, and they had shed their coats, he swept her into his arms. His arms that had carried her so many times. She didn't need it anymore, but he did.

Her musical laugh fluttered against his neck.

"I can climb the stairs on my own now," she purred.

"I know. But I enjoy carrying you." And it might be for the last time.

He took her up to the bedchamber they had shared for the last four months and set her down slowly, sliding her down the length of his body, letting her feel the desire she inspired in him. Even before her feet touched the floor, she turned and sought his mouth. He gave it to her, captured her lips in a deep kiss, explored her mouth, sought her flavor, luxuriated in the texture of her velvety tongue, and drank down the sweet mewls of pleasure as she exhaled.

His fingers had not been still. They played over the fastenings of her gown, undoing the row of buttons down her back, unwrapping her like the most precious of gifts. When his mouth finally left hers, it was to slide across her downy cheek, down the slim column of her throat.

“You looked so lovely tonight. I could hardly wait to get you home to devour you.”

She chuckled at his declaration. Her hands had not been still either. They had undone the knot of his necktie and the top button of his shirt, and now her questing lips were also cruising along his throat, dotting it with kisses and little licks that were driving him crazy with want, inflaming his desire to dangerous levels.

He needed her out of this dress now. Stepping out of her embrace, he turned her away from him to focus on his task of undoing the maddening row of buttons. But the curve of her neck where it met her shoulders still distracted him, the creamy skin calling to his mouth.

The last of the buttons undone, he pressed his mouth to the center of her back, right above the edge of her corset. So many layers. He was desperate to have her naked under his touch, and at the same time wanted to savor this unveiling. To cherish every inch of skin he revealed.

He found the laces of her petticoats and crinolines, untied them, and pushed the gown off her shoulders with a caress down her arms. The entire mass of silk collapsed to the floor in a froth of fabric.

Before she could step out of it, he held her with an arm around her waist and the other around her chest and lifted her, dragging her backwards. The curve of her bottom, covered only by the thin fabric of her drawers, pressed against his aching erection, and the minx arched and rubbed into it, pillowing his cock between the soft cheeks of her buttocks. He tightened his hold on her, rocking into it, while his hand snaked down the front to cup her mound, his fingers delving through the opening of her drawers to find moist heat at her core.

“So wet. So ready for me.” His voice was an indistinct murmur in her ear.

“Yes.” The word was a moan of ecstasy as she dropped her head back onto his shoulder.

His fingers played slowly over slick flesh, finding her button, tormenting it until her breathing fractured and she was panting, her hips jerking in a steady rhythm that matched the tempo of her need.

“Kai...” she sobbed. His name on her lips was the most erotic sound he had ever heard.

“Yes, my darling. Let go. Fly free. I’ll catch you..”

He traced the delicate whorl of her ear with his tongue before biting down on it with controlled pressure. She exploded in his arms. Her flesh pulsing against his fingers, while her slight weight pressed more firmly into him, as if her legs needed his support, having lost their strength not from injury this time, but from mind-numbing pleasure.

But he wasn’t done. Not even close. Guiding her a couple of steps toward the bed, he set her palms around the bedpost.

“Hold on,” he commanded, and she obeyed, wrapping her hands around the wood.

He tore at the laces of her corset with contained ferocity, loosening the garment until it fell to the floor with a thud.

At last, her body was free for the exploration of his hands. He cupped her breasts through the thin lawn of her chemise, the material a flimsy barrier that could not disguise her stiffening peaks and warming skin.

“I love your breasts,” he whispered in her ear. “I love the feel of them in my hands,

so round, perky, and dainty, just like the rest of you. Do you like it when I touch them?”

“You know I do.” Her voice was a breathy whisper of need.

“And when I do this?” He pinched her nipples with careful pressure, making her moan and strain toward his touch, her bottom once again backing up to his front. “Tell me.”

“Yes!”

“Do you want my hands directly on your breasts, with no fabric in the way?”

“Please.”

He lifted away the chemise, leaving her standing only in her drawers and stockings.

And then his hands alighted on warm, silky, pliant flesh. “Hmm, so much better.” He purred against her ear.

A pinch to her nipples elicited a moan and a squirm from her. Her bottom was grinding against his hard cock, and the friction was driving him half mad with want. He suspected if it weren’t for the barrier of his trousers, he would have already taken her like this. Standing up. From behind. Insanity. She may have recovered, but she wasn’t ready for that.

So he slid his hands downward, molding her slim torso with possessive hands. Learning every dip and curve. When he reached the ribbon that held her drawers, he pulled at it, skimming his hands over her waist and down the brief curve of her hips. The scrap of fabric fluttered to the floor, exposing the gentle curve of her bottom.

His hands kneaded the orbs, but he needed more. Without conscious thought, he knelt behind her and placed a kiss on the cusp of one of the mounds. She squirmed and giggled, but his hands on her hips held her steady, and he trailed his mouth to the other cheek and bit it.

Her squeal was more of surprise than pain, and she immediately relaxed when he followed the first bite with a second. A squeeze, a massage, another bite. He adored her ass. How many times, while doing the therapies, had he dreamed of doing just this? He had forced his hands to never touch beyond the appropriate. Had forbidden his eyes to look.

But now she was his. And he could delight in her body, in her love.

Love. There it was, that word again. He didn't want to think about it. The love she might feel for him, or him for her. They did not belong together, so it was best if pleasure and friendship were all there was between them.

Standing up, he turned her to face him again and fused their mouths, walking her backwards a few steps until the back of her legs hit the bed.

"Get on the bed," he growled against her ear.

She obeyed instantly, sitting on the bed, inching backward on her behind until she perched in the center of the mattress. He followed, prowling over her until his thighs straddled her hips. Swooping down, he recaptured her mouth in a ravaging kiss that went on forever. Pressing her down into the mattress. Her hands were not idle. They grabbed fistfuls of his shirt, pulling it from his trousers, and then sneaking under to caress his back skin to skin.

He could have purred under her touch, his lovemaking becoming slower, less frenzied for a minute. But then he remembered his purpose. He planned to map and kiss every

inch of her body.

Leaning down, he took one nipple into his mouth, teasing the tightly furled tip with his tongue, then closing his lips around it to suck rhythmically. Her hips bucked, her legs wrapping around his waist. The warmth of her pussy seeped through the cloth of his trousers, scalding him with her need.

“Kai, please.” She grabbed his head with both hands and moved him to the other breast, squirming and moaning when his mouth transferred his attention to the other nipple. She wasn’t passive, his Esther. Her fingers tunneled through his hair, her nails scraping his scalp, her hands fisting in his hair, pulling, directing him.

“Oh, God. It’s too much. Kai... I can’t stand it.”

“Yes, you can,” he growled against her heart but gave her over-sensitized breasts a brief reprieve as he slid downward over her body.

The small triangle of dark curls at the apex of her legs beckoned him. Pushing her legs open wide, he fell on her like a starving man. The first swipe of his tongue over her slick flesh drew a guttural cry from her, and her hips bucked.

“Stay still.” He growled, grabbing her hips to immobilize her for his feasting. Her taste was intoxicating, an elixir he couldn’t get enough of.

“I can’t... I can’t stay still when you do that,” she panted.

“What, this?” Another swipe, this time over her bud.

She strained against his hold, her hips undulating against his mouth. He was going to savor her until she exploded against his mouth.

Her hands came once again to tangle in his hair as if to hold him. Make sure he wouldn't leave until he satisfied her. If his mouth were not so wonderfully occupied, he would have told her there was no chance of him leaving the heaven between her legs.

He inserted his tongue deep, mining for the delicious essence of her, relishing her moans, her undulating hips, her hands clawing into his scalp. She was so close. He could feel it. Taste it. He concentrated his efforts on her pearl, licking, sucking. Inserting one finger, then another into her tight sheath. He twirled them around, the wet sounds of her flesh as it sucked at his fingers driving him crazy as he mimicked the movement with his tongue around her bud in a repeated pattern. She tensed, her breathing quickened, and she exploded against his mouth. He stayed with her until the last pulsations rippled against his tongue, around his fingers. Then withdrew them slowly, sitting up to bring them into his mouth and lick them clean.

"Kai..." She said his name with the dazed tone of a well-pleasured woman. That he had given her this satisfaction made him feel invincible.

"Kai, that was spectacular, but now I need you in me. Please." She spread her legs farther, and he almost came in his pants, like a callow youth, at the sight of her pink, glistening pussy. But it was more than that. It was the invitation. The acknowledgment of the need to be joined.

He freed his erection with astonishing speed, desperate to be welcomed into her slick heaven. Rising on one elbow, she grabbed his engorged cock and poised it at her entrance as soon as it sprang free.

Every fiber in his body demanded that he slammed into her, but he forced himself to penetrate her slowly, watching as his cock slid into her. Her guttural groan and clawing at the bedsheets told him she felt it too as he sank to the hilt.

And then the beast broke free as instinct took over. His hips pumped furiously. His cock pistoned into her with a frenzied need. This was madness. Savagery. Sublime. He would have worried, except she was with him every step of the way. Arching her back, rolling her head in ecstasy.

He changed positions, lying on top of her, desperate to feel the entire length of her body. Skin against skin. Sleek with sweat, panting with desire. Her hands pressed down his back, coming to rest on his buttocks. He loved her hands there while they made love. And then she contracted, inhaling in a ragged breath and digging her nails into his flesh.

“Oh, God. Again. Kai...”

Her exclamation of ecstasy as her flesh pulsed around him was the last push. His climax overtook him with the force of a typhoon, drawing him under, taking her with him. He was aware of his own guttural cry mixing with her keening moan as they exploded together.

CHAPTER 20

E sther awoke, still floating in the haze of satisfaction their lovemaking had created. It must be early morning, because the light that filtered through her closed eyelids was still dim. Without opening her eyes, she reached for Kai, seeking his warmth, the comfort of his embrace. Only to find emptiness and cool sheets. It was enough to make her open her eyes and scan the room.

Kai was nowhere to be found. Did the man have to be so blasted disciplined? Couldn't he have slept in today? After the activities of the previous night, she thought they well deserved to sleep in. He had been insatiable last night. Even waking in the middle of the night to slowly arouse her until she was begging for him, and then curling around her, taking her from behind, stroking slowly, lazily, until their desire overflowed and spilled like water gurgling from a spring.

With a groan of exhaustion, she rolled over, intending to get up and go in search of her insatiable lover. The door to the bedroom opened, and the man who had filled her fantasies and her body all night long walked in. Fresh from a bath and casually dressed in his trousers and shirt, carrying a tray with tea.

“Good morning,” he said with a small smile. “I’ve brought you some tea.”

She returned his smile with a wide grin. “Good morning, Kai. Tea sounds lovely.”

He came over and deposited the tea tray on the small table by the bed. She reached out to him for a hug and a kiss when he drew near, but even though his arms wrapped around her and his mouth gave her a peck, there was a faint but distinct coolness in

his demeanor.

She shook her head. No doubt she was imagining things. After the heat of last night, everything would feel cooler in comparison. He was just being his usual reserved self. But she tucked the sheet around her naked body, feeling unaccountably shy.

She took a sip of tea, noting that he had prepared it exactly how she liked it, not overly sweet and with a splash of milk. She savored the bracing hot drink.

“We need to talk, Esther.”

Cold dread licked down her spine, lodging in her stomach in a ball of ice that not even the heat of the tea could melt. At that moment she knew with certainty that something had shifted since last night, like a chilly wind frosting early spring flowers to their death. She swallowed another sip of tea, not daring to respond. Maybe if she ignored his overture, he would not pursue this topic.

No such mercy.

“You have completely recovered now. I think it’s time to return to England.”

Her heart did a little flip at the mention of England.

“Oh, of course.” She was eager to return. To see her daughter again. But still, something didn’t feel right. “How soon can you leave? Do you have to give notice at the hospital or—”

“I won’t be going.”

Her contentment vanished in a cloud of smoke. The inkling of cold dread turned into a solid certainty.

“Wh-why? I mean... I know you have your home and your work here. But I thought...”

What had she thought? That he would leave everything for her? He had never said he would. Had never made any promises beyond what they shared. They had never even defined what they felt.

“Esther.” His voice was as calm and reasonable as ever. It commanded her scattering thoughts, but she didn’t want to listen to him being rational.

She shook her head, lifting out a hand, palm out, as if she could shield herself from his words.

“I’m sorry.” He didn’t sound so calm now. He was sitting on the chair by the bed, head down, his elbows on his knees, hands clasping each other as if to provide support or comfort. “Don’t think this is easy for me. But it’s for the best. You and I simply don’t belong to the same worlds.”

“Why?” she said again, even though she realized the futility of questioning reality. “Why can’t we be together? Surely, there must be a way.”

His gaze lifted and froze her with the torment she saw there. “You don’t need me to explain why. You must know that society will condemn our relationship. People will gossip about you. Your reputation will be sullied. Your standing in society affected.”

“Well, if we continue as we are, yes. But if we marry, the scandal will eventually die out.”

A teasing smile broke upon his face. “Esther, are you proposing to me?”

Oh, good God, she was so foolish. And completely out of line. He had never

mentioned loving her, or wanting to marry her, or even wanting anything permanent. Violent embarrassment flooded her face.

“I’m sorry. You are right. I’m being presumptuous.” She tightened the sheet around her, attempting to slip out of bed decently covered. Suddenly, her nakedness had become too vulnerable.

He was on her instantly. His arms gathered her to his chest, holding her so tightly the beating of his heart reverberated through her body.

“Forgive me, love. I didn’t mean to embarrass you.” He rocked them together, his face buried in the tangled mass of her hair. She gloried in his warmth, reveled in his closeness. But too soon, his arms loosened. He brought his hands to cradle her cheeks, lifting her face to meet his gaze. His lips were not smiling now.

“You honor me with your proposal, with your presence in my life. These past few months with you...they have been the happiest of my life. If circumstances were different, I would have gone down on my knees long ago and begged you to be my wife. I love you. I love you so much that I can’t accept your proposal, knowing what it would cost you.”

She shook her head. “It’s a price I’m willing to pay.”

“Maybe you are. But are you willing to let Elizabeth pay it as well?”

The air left her in a single, broken gasp, and she could not pull it back in. With his usual precision, he had cut to the heart of the matter. Shame, doubt, despair, loss. Everything was attacking her at once.

Was she being selfish? Was she putting her happiness above that of her daughter? How had she failed to consider how her standing in society would affect Elizabeth?

Oh God, what kind of terrible mother was she?

With sinking despair, she knew she could never endanger her daughter's happiness. But the thought of leaving Kai made her chest ache as if something vital had been torn from it.

She raised tear-filled eyes to him. "There must be a way," she insisted.

He didn't answer. Merely stood and walked to the door. He stopped for a second with his back to her, the doorknob in his hand. "I'll leave you to get dressed in privacy." Then he was gone, taking all the warmth in the room with him.

Esther had never dressed so fast in her life. Not bothering to call for her maid, she simply threw on a dressing gown over her shift and hurried after Wang. She didn't know what she had expected, but it wasn't to find him in the kitchen, calmly kneading dough.

"Would you like some breakfast? It will be ready in a few minutes," he said as she barged into the kitchen, his voice maddeningly even, as if their lives weren't unraveling right in front of them.

"No, I don't want bloody breakfast. What I want is to talk."

A half smile pulled one corner of his mouth. "You are cursing."

"Damn right I am! And don't you dare lecture me," she said, pointing at him with a finger.

This time, his smile was full, reaching his eyes. "I think I rather prefer you angry than sad."

“Don’t joke about this, Kai. We need to find a solution to our situation.”

“You want to change the world. But that is not possible. The world is the way it is, and we must adapt.”

“Poppycock! Weren’t you the one who made the statement about stealing a tiger’s cub?.” She advanced on him, rounding the table where he was placing small little dumplings onto a tray. “We need to fight for what we want. You taught me that. You made me keep going when my strength faltered, when I didn’t believe I could do it.”

“Some battles can be won, and those are worth fighting. Others are a lost cause before one even starts. A wise person discerns the difference between the two.”

She planted her hand on her hips. “Is this another one of your Chinese proverbs?”

He looked at her with a frown. “No, it’s simple common sense.”

“It’s cowardice. It’s giving up before one has even tried.”

He turned to her then. “What would you have me do, then? Fight for you? It’s what I want to do with every fiber of my being. But doing that will ultimately be a disservice to you and your daughter. If our relationship hurts her, you will hate yourself and resent me. Trust me, Esther, fighting for you would be the easiest thing to do. That would take no courage at all. Letting you go, on the other hand, takes almost more than I have.”

The raw pain in his eyes took her aback. He was not calm at all. He was only pretending to be. Trying to be strong. For her. A wave of tenderness and sadness washed over her. She placed her hand on his naked forearm, exposed by his rolled-up sleeve. The muscles there tensed under her touch.

“At least come back to England with me. We will think of something. Maybe we can introduce you to society in small steps.”

Wang shook his head. “You were there yesterday, Esther. You heard the murmurs, saw the forced smiles, and the pointed avoidance. Even among common folk, the sentiment toward Chinese people is deteriorating. Do you really think those people are ever going to accept me in their rarefied circles?”

“It will be different in England.”

Wang scoffed. “It will be worse.”

“Not necessarily. And Colin will help, I’m sure. With the support of the Earl of Hartfield, you will gain entry to society.”

“Colin has his own problems to contend with. He’s newly married and is expecting a baby. I refuse to burden him further.”

“Maybe we can keep our relationship quiet for a while.” She was grasping at straws now. “Until we find a way to introduce you to society, or Elizabeth marries.”

“That won’t work. It could take years for Elizabeth to marry, and I don’t think we’ll be able to keep our relationship a secret. The truth has a way of coming out.”

Only a lifetime of training in decorum prevented Esther from stomping her feet or raging at the fates. But just barely. Everything she suggested, Wang rejected. She was running out of arguments. She tried to hold on to the remnants of what they had, but they slipped through her fingers like sand.

“At least give me hope that someday in the future, maybe after Elizabeth marries, we can be together again.” Her voice trembled, defeated. She sounded like a beggar, but

she was beyond pride or even dignity.

He placed a finger under her chin, then slowly lifted it until their eyes met. To her shame, two fat tears slipped down her cheeks and fell on his hand.

“Don’t cry, my love. I will always be here for you should you ever need me. But don’t live your life thinking about me, waiting for what might be. Go forth and live. Attend balls, go on picnics. Do all those things you couldn’t do before. Dance, be happy. And enjoy the time with your daughter.”

She could tell him she needed him now. But she recognized his firm determination. He was the most disciplined man she knew. And besides, he might be right. Maybe she was being emotional and irrational. Despair was rising within her like a black tide, but she refused to fall apart in front of him. The least she could do was match his strength with her own.

She nodded jerkily. “Very well, then. I shall move to a hotel this afternoon and buy passage back to England on the next available ship.”

That drew a frown from him. “I am not throwing you out of my house, Esther. You can stay here until you leave. I shall help you buy the ticket and will escort you to the ship.”

She could not imagine a more harrowing scene than saying goodbye at the docks. And staying here with him, knowing their relationship had ended? No. She couldn’t do it. She couldn’t even breathe at the prospect.

“No. I can’t stay.”

“Esther, I will not leave you alone in New York—”

She lifted her chin. “Why not? You think me incapable of taking care of myself? I’m an adult, and thanks to you, not an invalid anymore. I shall be fine.”

“But you are a lady. You have been sheltered all your life. And you are in an unfamiliar city. The dangers—”

“Colin’s mother was a lady as well. Yet she left her husband and her country, taking her son, who was still a child and in need of care. Am I less capable than her?”

She knew she had stumped him when he frowned, and his gaze skittered away. “The situations are different.”

“No, they aren’t. We are both women leaving the man we love because we think it’s what’s best for our child. What you are saying is that I am different. Less capable. Not as intrepid or dashing. And maybe I am not. But don’t underestimate me because I’m quiet.”

His eyes were tender, and his lopsided smile sad as he brushed a lock of her wild hair out of her face. “I never have, Xi?o Lù . I just want to protect you, that’s all.”

She captured his hand, removed it from her face. Closed her eyes. “You gave up that right.”

“At least let me know where you’ll be staying and when you plan to depart,” he asked, the first notes of despair threading through his tone. “We need to let Colin know as soon as you have the ticket, so that the telegram arrives in time for him to be waiting for you—”

She placed a finger over his lips. She wasn’t sure if her motive was to stop the words, or if she simply wanted an excuse to touch him.

“I shall notify you. Don’t worry about me.”

CHAPTER 21

The moment of waking was the worst of the day, Wang decided. It was when the blessed veil of unconsciousness lifted away and all the memories came rushing in, bringing with them the pain of loss. He was almost positive that was the worst moment of the day. Except a thousand other moments followed it. Memories of Esther were everywhere. In the house, in the hospital. In his heart. They were inescapable.

He rolled out of bed with a groan. Not his bed. He hadn't been able to sleep in the bedchamber he had shared with her. So he had taken refuge in the smaller guestroom. The amount of light filtering through the closed drapes told him he had overslept. Although 'overslept' might not be the right term. He had slept little in the past week. He checked the clock on the mantel. A quarter past ten. When had he ever slept this late? Never. Maybe his body had finally rebelled and refused to wake until it got the sleep it needed. Regardless of the late hour, he forced himself to stick to his routine, as if habit alone had the power to hold him together.

It had been a week since she moved out. Taking all the warmth, the happiness, the sunshine, and the hope with her. Seven restless nights. Seven horrid mornings of waking in this manner, instead of with her in his arms. His house had never felt emptier, nor his soul more lonely. Strange that he should feel so lonely now, when he had been alone for so long.

As she promised, she had sent notice of where she was staying, at The Astor House, of all places. The most snobbish, elitist hotel in all of New York. They wouldn't allow him to get close to it. Just another reminder of the unbreachable gulf between

them. She had also sent another note three days ago. Letting him know she had booked passage on the RMS Scotia . She was leaving today.

He tried to move through the patterns of Tai Chi. Movements he knew by heart. The slow, controlled motions should have been centering. Calming. But today, they failed to soothe his anxiety or provide any sort of emotional balance.

Abandoning any hope of calm, he walked into the kitchen, where he built the fire and set the water to boil. Today would be the worst day. After she was no longer near, after her presence no longer presented a temptation to fuel his ambivalence, he would find a measure of peace again. He only had to make it through today.

Liar.

It wasn't getting easier. Each day was harder than the previous, and he couldn't foresee an end to this misery. But an honorable man didn't let pain shape his actions. An honorable man did the right thing, despite the personal cost.

The problem was. He didn't know what the right thing was anymore.

These past few months with Esther, she had filled every corner of his life. Now he missed everything. The tender moments and the blinding passion. The deep conversations and the teasing phrases. Her curiosity, her quiet strength. Without that, his life was empty. Devoid of purpose or satisfaction. The thought that she might feel the same way squeezed his heart until it could barely beat.

He gulped down the scalding tea and went to wash and get dressed for work.

He had thrown himself into the work at the hospital with single-minded determination. He arrived every day before sunrise and left well past sunset. There were always people to help, patients to tend to. At first, his colleagues had seemed

grateful for the extra help. But now some of them had remarked on his strange compulsion to work.

The doctors who had known him from before were friendly, suggesting he should go home and rest, and even inquiring after his well-being. But there were a few new ones, hired by the administrator in the past year, after Colin and he had left. Those looked at him with mistrust, if not outright resentment. They probably thought he represented a threat to their practice. Or simply didn't like his different approach to healing.

Regardless of the reason, his work no longer was a source of satisfaction. He felt displaced. A strange way to feel about an institution he had helped found, together with Colin. But it was the truth. He didn't belong in that hospital anymore. They didn't need him. The core values that had driven Colin and himself to open the private practice—that of combining Oriental and Western medicine to help as many people as possible—no longer seemed the guiding principles of the hospital. Some doctors may support him, based on their long acquaintance, but most tolerated him simply because they had no other choice. He should weigh his options and decide what to do, but he was so weary, his mind in such turmoil, that he couldn't see past the needs of the day.

He washed with quick, efficient movements and searched for a fresh shirt. There was none to be found in his new bedchamber. He had probably gone through all of them, and the cleaning lady had restocked the newly laundered shirts in his bedroom, not knowing he had moved. With a deep sigh, he headed there, girding himself.

As soon as he opened the door, her fragrance of orange blossoms, still lingering in the air, assaulted him with such a wave of longing that it almost brought him to his knees. Steeling himself, he went to the armoire to retrieve a shirt. He flung open the door and reached for the neat stack of folded garments, but his hand froze mid-motion as his eyes landed on the tunic Esther had embroidered for him. Forgetting the shirts, he

grabbed the tunic. His fingers traced the neat stitches that made up the complex design. So many tiny stitches. So much work, patience, and talent required. She had done it for him.

Needing to have something Esther had touched near him, he donned the tunic. The fabric her fingers had adorned seemed to caress him. He had been a coward, avoiding this room. Fighting the memories when he knew there was no escaping them.

He was about to close the doors when he noticed something else. A ray of sunlight glinted off an object lurking towards the back of the armoire. He reached for it, his fingers wrapping around a glass vial. The laudanum bottle. He had not seen it again since that night, long ago, when Esther had asked for it, and he had lost his composure at the discovery that she used laudanum. After that conversation, he'd given it back to her. He had no right to withhold it, and if she had used it for so long without succumbing, she could be trusted with the dangerous substance.

But he had begged her to be careful and to come to him first if the pain ever became unbearable. He had watched her like a hawk for months, looking for signs of usage, for signs of withdrawal. He had seen none. Now he knew why. The proof was in his hands.

She had never used it. The vial was as full as it was months ago. He knew she had not purchased more, because they were together day and night. No, she had stopped using it altogether.

Through the grueling recovery, the arduous exercises, Esther had not complained. She had done it all. And she had not used laudanum once. She had beaten, all by herself, the biggest monster that destroyed so many people. This just drove to his heart something he had known in his head.

She was strong.

Her appearance of fragility was an illusion created by her delicate features, her dainty figure, and ladylike demeanor. He, of all people, should have been able to recognize that strength and see her for what she was. A warrior.

Don't underestimate me. She had said. And he had done just that.

He had underestimated her when he had insisted on taking care of all the travel arrangements, had underestimated her when he worried about her moving out on her own. And worst of all, continued to underestimate her now. Making unilateral decisions about their future. Denying her the chance to fight for their love. His overbearing protection had stemmed from his own fears and insecurities. She had wanted to fight for them, and he had taken that choice out of her hands, thinking he doing her a kindness. What a horrible thought.

She didn't need protection. What she needed was someone to fight alongside her. Oh God. He knew Esther was strong. But he was treating her as if she were weak.

And was about to lose her because of it.

Glancing at the clock, he noticed it was half-past eleven. At what time did her ship leave? Was it too late already? Why in blazes did he have to oversleep today of all days? No. He wouldn't let himself think of that. He ran out of his bedroom, snatching his coat on the way out.

He had to reach her. He had to tell her. They needed to talk. It was past time he stopped being a coward.

CHAPTER 22

Kai had not come. She had given him every opportunity. Had notified him of every move she made. He knew she was leaving for England today. And still he had not come.

Her trunks were packed. The porter waited for her command to load them onto the hired carriage that would take her to the docks. She checked the time once more. Eleven o'clock. The ship was leaving at noon. She dared not wait any longer, or she risked missing it.

With a decisive nod, she indicated to the porter she was ready to go. The young man hoisted the trunk and walked out of the hotel doors to load it onto the waiting carriage. Margaret and she got in, and they were off.

The carriage rattled over the cobbled streets, its wheels splashing through the slushy remnants of last night's snowfall. Outside, the city blurred past in a swirl of gray and white—chimneys billowing smoke into the crisp December air, pedestrians bundled tightly against the cold. But Esther barely saw any of it. Her gloved fingers clenched in her lap, the leather tightening over her knuckles, as the weight in her chest grew heavier with each turn of the carriage wheel.

The docks loomed closer, and with them, the inevitable—the ship that would take her back to England. She was happy to go back. She missed her daughter with a deep, unrelenting ache. But she also recognized she was leaving a part of her heart behind. Was it possible to exist with parts of her heart on different continents?

She must, because Wang was not coming.

She had told herself he would. That he would see reason, see that she—they—were worth the fight. But the days had slipped through her fingers like sand, each one passing without a word from him. Now, time had run out.

A sharp gust of wind seeped through the carriage window, making her shiver beneath her heavy cloak. Why was New York so much colder than London? Or perhaps it was the hollowness in her chest, the ache of knowing she was leaving behind something—someone—who had become a part of her. He had insisted their relationship was impossible, that it would ruin her, harm her daughter. That the world would never allow them to be together.

Fear for her daughter had moved her to accept his decision. Yet, would it really be detrimental for Lizzie if she married Wang? She wasn't so sure anymore. But what choice had she, when the man she loved had made it clear he would not fight for her?

The carriage jerked to a stop, the driver's call breaking through her thoughts. The scent of salt and coal smoke filled the air. She lifted her head and looked out.

The docks stretched before her, busy with the usual chaotic energy of departure day. Men shouted orders over the screech of gulls. Crates and trunks were being hoisted onto the waiting ships. Families clung to each other in tearful farewells, and travelers hurried up gangplanks, eager for the journey ahead.

With a deep breath, she steeled herself and reached for the door. She had waited. Hoped.

But Wang was not coming.

And now she must leave.

The hack jolted forward, hooves pounding against the frozen December streets. Not fast enough. Every second felt like water slipping through his fingers. Wang clenched his fists, his breath shallow, his pulse hammering in his ears.

“Faster,” he urged the driver.

“We’re goin’ as fast as we can, sir!” the man called back, flicking the reins.

The streets of New York were thick with midday traffic—wagons laden with goods, street vendors hollering their wares, pedestrians clogging the crossings. At every turn, another delay. A carriage overturned ahead on Broadway. A stubborn mule refusing to budge. A tangle of carts vying for space along the narrow stretch leading to the docks. The frustration coiled tight in his chest.

Every delay was a nail in the coffin of his hope to reach her in time.

At a particularly dense intersection, the coachman yanked the reins, cursing as the carriage jolted to a halt behind a slow-moving omnibus. Wang shoved open the door before the driver could protest.

“Here,” he thrust coins into the man’s gloved hand. “Keep the change.”

Then he ran.

The cold air burned his lungs, but he didn’t stop. His legs moved with frantic desperation. He weaved through the crowd, dodging barrels and crates, nearly colliding with a dockworker carrying a sack of flour. The man yelled at him in outrage. He paid no mind. He kept running.

Then he saw it.

The RMS Scotia had lifted anchor. The massive steamship, dark against the grey sky, was pulling away from the dock, its great paddle wheels churning the water.

Too late.

Still, he ran. His heartbeat a wild, uneven drumbeat in his chest. His breath came in harsh gasps. If he could just—

He reached the edge of the dock as the gap between ship and land widened. He screamed her name. His voice caught in his throat. He tried again. If she was on deck, maybe she'd hear him. He could tell her he loved her. To wait for him.

If he had been but a few minutes earlier—

But time had betrayed him.

He placed his hands on his knees, panting, watching the ship carry her away. A few passengers were on deck, still waving to family and friends who remained on the dock. But not Esther. His head bowed, the weight of failure settling over him like an iron shroud. The taste of regret was bitter on his tongue.

But defeat was not an option. He may have missed her today.

But by God, he would be on the next ship to England.

Jaw tight, he pivoted on his heel, his mind already set on his next course of action. If he couldn't catch the Scotia, he would simply find another way. The Cunard Line's offices were nearby—he would secure passage on the next ship to England. He took a step forward, his pulse still hammering, when something made him stop.

A glimpse of a familiar face, spotted for a second through the shifting mass of people.

His breath caught.

Esther.

Through the sea of dockworkers, travelers, and vendors, he saw her, half-turned, her hand resting on the handle of a waiting carriage. But she wasn't boarding. She was searching. Her gaze swept the crowd, her brows furrowed, her lips parted, as if she were hoping—praying—to see someone.

Him.

A powerful, visceral jolt went through Wang.

“Esther!” His voice tore from his throat, desperate and raw.

Her head snapped in his direction. For an instant, she froze in place, as if she couldn't believe her own eyes. Then she moved. One step. Another. She broke into a run—her skirts lifted slightly, her movements quick, unthinking, like she couldn't reach him fast enough.

He launched forward, closing the distance between them in great, bounding strides. People moved aside, startled by the force of his momentum. He didn't care. Nothing else mattered but her.

They met in the middle of the docks, crashing into each other in a wild, frantic embrace. His arms locked around her waist, holding her so tightly he could feel the hammering of her heart against his chest. Her arms twined around his neck, her fingers gripping at his collar as if she might never let go.

A low, shuddering breath left him as he buried his face against her hair, inhaling the delicate, familiar scent of her. His hands trembled as they pressed against the small of

her back, reassuring himself that she was real, warm, solid in his arms.

And then, unable to stop himself, he lifted her clear off the ground.

A startled laugh bubbled from her lips, smothered by his mouth as he kissed her. Right there in the open, in the middle of the bustling docks, he kissed her until her lips soothed the ache in his heart. Until his burning lungs demanded air.

Touching his forehead to hers, he whispered a breath away from her mouth.

“You are here.”

“Yes.”

“You didn’t leave.”

Her slow shake of her head rubbed their noses together. “I couldn’t. When I—”

A passerby bumped into them, muttering an apology as he hurried by. Wang stabilized them, becoming aware of his surroundings. All around them, people bustled to and fro. Some bystanders stared. Others whispered, tossing them scandalized looks. He didn’t care one fig. Let them judge. But this was not the best place to hold such an important conversation.

Taking Esther by the hand, he led her towards the carriage she had been about to board, and offered his hand as she climbed in. Her maid was already inside.

“Home?” he asked her. She nodded, and he gave the driver the address before climbing in himself.

He took both her hands in his. “I can’t believe you are here. I was crushed, thinking I

had missed my chance, that I had arrived too late. And then I turned, and you were there...”

“I couldn’t go,” she said quietly. “I was about to board. The porter was halfway up the gangway with my luggage, but I stepped one foot on it, and everything felt wrong. With every fiber of my being, I knew I couldn’t go without talking to you.”

Ignoring her maid, who was doing an excellent job of looking out the window and ignoring them too, he sat next to her and gathered her into his arms.

“Thank you for not leaving, despite me being an unmitigated fool.”

“You are not a fool,” she caressed his face, her eyes roaming over his features. He didn’t know what she sought, but she must have found it, for she smiled. “But you are too noble.”

He shook his head, pressing a kiss to her palm. “I am not noble. That is precisely the problem.”

“No, you are. In the truest definition of the word. You sought to protect me and my daughter. You care deeply and don’t hesitate to sacrifice yourself for the people you love. For that, I’ll always love you. But sacrifice is not necessary in this case. In fact, I truly believe our lives would be better for having you in it.”

His indomitable Esther. “I don’t know that. It won’t be easy, Esther. Some people may shun you. Or will whisper behind your back. Others will mock you for your comedown in the world.”

“Shush.” She placed her gloved fingers delicately over his mouth. “I don’t consider it a comedown. And the people who think that don’t matter. They will either see their error, or I don’t want their friendship. You know what I realized? The thing that made

it impossible for me to set foot on that ship?”

He shook his head.

“I was never afraid of scandal or rejection for myself. But I was afraid for Lizzie. What if my actions denied her opportunities? Would I decrease her chances of a good match? What if a suitor shunned her because of her mother’s choices? But then I realized that any man so close-minded and prejudiced to reject her for such a reason is not worthy of her, and she’s better off not marrying such a man. But the good ones won’t be deterred. The good ones will see her for herself. Her values, her heart. So you see, I think, if anything, our...involvement would protect her.”

His mouth lifted in a half smile. “The only kind of involvement I want between us is a marriage.” Right there in the cramped confines of the carriage, he went down on one knee and took her hand between his. “Esther, I know I don’t deserve you, but I love you with all my battered heart, and if you do me the honor of becoming my wife, I will spend the rest of my days loving you, protecting you, supporting you. Striving to make you happy.” Her eyes had flooded with tears, but her smile was shining. “Would you marry me?”

“Yes! Yes. A thousand times, yes.”

And she kissed him. She took his face in her hands, holding him gently between her palms while her mouth sought and devoured his. The carriage turned, tossing him to the side. He flailed and caught himself against the door, then he stood and sat again beside her, gathering her against his chest.

“Obviously, I haven’t done this in a very long time. That was not the romantic proposal you deserve. But never doubt that I love you more than my life.”

“I have no complaints whatsoever. It beats me proposing to you, and you rejecting

me.”

Shame and sorrow swamped him. “I could never reject you. I only did what I thought was best for you. Perhaps you’d be better off if we hadn’t fallen in love.

She frowned. “No, I wouldn’t be. I thought you were past that foolishness.”

“You’ll be giving up a great many things for me.”

“Nothing that I value more than our love.”

“You won’t be a countess. You won’t be called ‘lady’.”

“Titles are just words. They are meaningless. Does it change me in any way? I will wear your name proudly.”

“Some of your old acquaintances might shun you.”

“You know what I discovered when I couldn’t walk? Society is quick to forget about you. During those years, Abigail was my only companion. None of my acquaintances visited or even wrote. Why bother when I didn’t have any juicy gossip to share? I’ve lived away from society for too long to miss it now.”

“But you will enter society now, for your daughter’s sake. What I’m trying to say is that it won’t all be sunshine and roses.”

“I know that. And I’m ready to face whatever may come our way. What about you? You are a very private man, but you will face scrutiny, suffer gossip, and bad-natured whispers. Can you bear that?”

He grabbed both of her hands, brought them to his mouth, planting a kiss on each.

“Of course. For you, I can bear anything.”

The coach ground to a halt in front of his house, and they descended. Wang opened the door, but when she was about to walk through, he swept her up in his arms and carried her over the threshold. Her musical laugh lit up his soul, which had been dark and cold from the moment she left his home.

“You already carried me once over your threshold.”

“Yes, but now you are my betrothed. I will carry you over every threshold of a place we call home. Because you are my bride. My love. My forever.”

CHAPTER 23

S unlight streamed through the tall arched windows of St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery, casting golden hues over the worn stone floors. The scent of incense lingered faintly in the cool air, mingling with the heady aroma of fresh hothouse roses adorning the altar.

Esther stood next to Wang. They had walked down the aisle together, as she was no young girl being given away by a male relative. She was a woman. Standing by the man she was pledging to love. Her hands clasped lightly before her, holding a small bouquet, her fingers trembling—not with fear, but with an emotion far sweeter.

Her heart fluttered as she lifted her gaze to Wang's face. His dark eyes met hers, steady and sure, filled with a quiet intensity that made warmth bloom in her chest. He wore a perfectly tailored suit, the deep charcoal fabric stark against the crisp white of his collar. He was so breathtakingly handsome that her breath caught. But it was the way he treated her. The way he had seen her when she was all but invisible. The way he spoke to her deepest desires and understood her interior self that made her knees weaken with love for this man.

She was wearing the same dress she had worn to the ball. It was the most beautiful gown she owned, and it made her sparkle. She wanted to look her best on this day. Wanted to take his breath away. Not that it was difficult to do. He always looked at her as if she hung the moon and the stars.

The vicar cleared his throat, ready to begin the ceremony. The small congregation stirred, but she paid no attention. There were just a few attendees. Her maid, two

doctors from the hospital with their wives. The vicar's wife and their daughter.

A pang of sadness tightened her chest. Elizabeth should have been here. Her daughter, her precious girl, was waiting for her in England, blissfully unaware that her mother's heart had found a new home. She hoped her daughter would understand. Esther and Wang had made the difficult decision to marry here, before their voyage, so that when they arrived in England, their union would be unshakable—a fait accompli.

The minister's voice rang through the quiet church, solemn and steady. Wang's fingers brushed hers as he took her hand, his touch warm and grounding. A soft shiver ran through her. Even now, even after everything they had shared, he still made her pulse race.

As he spoke the vows, her heart swelled with the weight of them. His voice, rich and unwavering, declared: "I take thee, Esther, to be my wedded wife..."

They were not merely words; they were a promise, an unbreakable bond.

And then it was her turn. "I, Esther Knightsbridge"—her voice wavered for only a moment before she steadied it—"take thee, Wang Kaiwen, to be my wedded husband..."

No hesitation. No doubt. Only love. She was marrying the man she loved.

When the minister gave his final blessing, Wang turned to her, his hands framing her face, and kissed her—a soft kiss, merely a butterfly caress of his lips upon hers, but it lingered. Warm, almost reverent. Pulsing with such a deep, aching tenderness that the rest of the world fell away.

At long last, she was his. And he was hers.

They left the church in a flurry of well wishes. The gentle snowfall outside felt as if the heavens themselves were blessing them with a shower of petals.

Tonight, they would stay at the St. Nicholas Hotel for their wedding night, where Wang had insisted on reserving the bridal suite. Tomorrow, they would board the ship to England. Their honeymoon would be spent beneath the vast open sky, rocked by the motion of the waves.

As soon as they settled onto the deep cushioned seats of the coach, Wang enfolded her in his arms and lifted her onto his lap.

“Hello, Mrs. Wang.” He touched his forehead to hers.

The tender smile that lit his eyes filled her with longing.

“Hello, husband.” She smiled back.

“Are you ready for the next chapter of our lives? There will be much work ahead.”

Wang had made the decision to sell his house, and his tenants were interested in buying it, so the sale had been arranged and was in the hands of an agent. In England, they would find a new home together, and he and Colin would open a new clinic, a sanctuary of healing just as they had in New York.

“I am eager.” She brushed back her favorite, rebellious lock of hair. “What about you? You are leaving your home, your work, your entire life behind. How do you feel about it?”

“You are my entire life, and my home is where you are. I am excited. Happy as I have not been in years.”

A new beginning awaited them across the ocean. But for now, there was only this moment—their love, their vow, their future entwined.

And as Wang kissed her once more, she knew—without doubt, without fear—that together they'd conquer whatever came their way.

Chapter One

If there was one thing Evelyn Davenport knew for certain, it was that proper, demure young ladies did not propose liaisons of a sexual nature with rakish marquesses. Of course, she was no longer young, and it transpired that she was not particularly proper or demure, either.

At least the marquess in question also had his share of vices—far more salacious than hers. And, crucially, he had plentiful experience in the realm of lovers.

Lovers.

The salacious word slid over her skin, and she shuddered. If she played her cards right, she might join those ranks.

Charles Hardinge, the Marquess of Rotherham and son of the Duke of Norfolk, was also one of her best friends, which made things infinitely more complicated. But if she could find the right words to convince him, he might be persuaded to teach her all the things she had missed in her thirty-seven years of life.

She had no problem with being a spinster. That, she knew, was an unavoidable fact of life. She didn't even mind being mistress of her father's house, or caring for him in his old age. These were things that made her useful, and she enjoyed being useful.

But as the years passed and her peers married, she had begun to wonder if there might be other things to life. Not marriage. Not children. But pleasure. A certain blooming joy that had never touched her—but that she hoped might.

Thus, she had concocted a plan to find something—or someone—who would. Before it was too late.

At a rap on the door, she glanced up. “Come in.”

Charles strode into the room, brushing snow from his greatcoat. “Evie,” he said, bending to kiss her cheek. “You look well. But what’s that awful cap for?”

She touched the cap on her severe bun. “Don’t you like it? It’s perfectly appropriate, you know.”

“I hate it.” He scowled at her, then cast a quick glance at his reflection in the mirror above the fire. As always, the glass returned the image of a man a fraction past his prime, with a lean face and dark hair falling rakishly across his forehead, his temples slightly streaked with grey. His scowl deepened.

“When did I become such an old man?” he grumbled.

Evelyn didn’t bother telling him the wild excesses of his youth were the likely cause. “You’re not yet forty,” she told him, pouring him a glass of port. Better he imbibe something before she get into the matter of why she had invited him here. “Not very much older than I am.”

“Well, in that case, you should remove that ridiculous ornament on your head.”

She only smiled. “I prefer wearing it.”

“Why?” He accepted the port and folded his long body into the armchair beside her own. “It’s unflattering.”

“So is my hair.”

Charles looked at her critically. Although he only had two years on her, he often pretended he had far more wisdom, a trait she found endearing enough to allow. “There’s nothing wrong with your hair, Evie,” he said at last. “Now, why did you summon me here? And why the port?”

Evelyn refrained from patting her hair with some difficulty. She had been in her mid-twenties when her dark hair had first begun greying, and now no hint of colour remained. Even now, though it was somewhat less of an oddity, she felt self-conscious.

“The port is a celebration drink,” she said, deciding to save the subject of seduction for later. “To congratulate you on your forthcoming engagement.”

He scowled. “Not you too. Who have you been speaking with—my mother?”

“The duchess did inform me of your arrangement, yes. And while I am not out and about as much as I once was, I do hear rumours, Charles. Lady Buxton keeps me abreast of all the news. You’ve been paying Lady Rosamund particular attentions. All that remains to follow is your proposal.”

“Between my mother and Lady Buxton, you no doubt have all the gossip in London,” he muttered, tossing his drink back in one. Long fingers toyed with the gold pattern etched into his glass, and Evelyn watched the clever way they moved, fascinated despite herself. Charles had always been rather tall and thin, though he contrived to be elegant despite it, and his hands looked as though they had been designed to play the pianoforte.

Of course, he’d never so much as touched the instrument. Charles had many virtues, but musicality was not one of them.

“Your mother wants nothing more than to see you happy,” Evelyn said.

“She wishes to see me married, and before the year is out. No doubt she thinks marriage will promote my happiness.”

The displeasure in his tone about such a prospect should not have pleased her as much as it did. She attempted to push those unruly emotions back down where they belonged. “Your marriage is not an unreasonable request,” she pointed out.

“Which is why I agreed to the first girl my mother put forward.” He released a heaving sigh. “I ought to sire an heir before I get too much older, and the thought of reaching fifty and picking a bride from the latest flock of debutantes makes me feel ill.”

“You have a decade before then.”

“I already have a decade more on Lady Rosamund than I’d prefer. The years do not make me any younger.” He glanced towards the mirror again, as though he could repaint his reflection.

Evelyn bit back a smile. “You shouldn’t be so vain.”

“Vain, am I?” He sent her an arch look. “My dear, I am merely a connoisseur of beauty, and I’m disappointed to find mine fades.”

Perhaps she was not a connoisseur of beauty, but Evelyn found the years had said little about Charles Hardinge. True, his face had changed somewhat—giving him thoughtful lines across his forehead, wicked lines around his mouth. Dissipation, she supposed, wore a man down, smoothed over some corners and made others still harder.

But when he smiled, the open charm of the expression, and the dancing light in the back of his dark eyes, dampened any thoughts that he might have reached—and passed—his peak. The flaring lines around his eyes merely served to highlight their

colour; the grey in his hair distinguished him. His mouth, when he was not pressing it into a thin line, was lush in a rare way, softening the severity of his face. It was also perfect for kissing.

Evelyn knew, because she had thought about kissing him often. In part because she found him so impossibly handsome that she could not, at least occasionally, help herself. And in part because she had been in love with him for over twenty years.

It was a worn, comfortable sort of love, like an old pair of slippers, not hampered by unpleasant things like expectations. She knew that whatever their futures brought them, they would not share a life.

He had proposed once, when he'd been too inebriated to know what he was saying. He'd been staying with her father and found her up late, reading in the library. His breath had reeked of ale when he'd leaned over her and told her that they dealt so well together, they may as well make a thing of it. And for a moment, she had been tempted—until she had realised he could hardly stand up straight. So she had refused him, telling him he ought to sleep and think things through before asking her questions of that nature, and he had never broached the subject again.

She doubted he even remembered.

“You should not get married to her if you don't want to,” she said, because he looked at her as though he wanted her to say something, and the only other thing she could think of to say was how handsome he still was.

“Ah, Evie, my sweet girl. To think you have reached the age where you choose to wear a cap and yet do not understand that we must not always do the things we want to.”

She arched a brow. “It seems you have often done the things you want to.”

“You wound me.” He held a hand to his heart. “No, but let us understand one another, my dear. I am a confirmed bachelor and I have enjoyed my days being such—doing, no doubt, some of the horrid things you’ve heard about.”

“There have been a great number of rumours,” she admitted. Drinking, gambling, and even a drunken bet to sail to the Isle of Man on a yacht categorically not built for the journey. How he’d survived that, she had no idea, but she’d lain awake for a week worrying about him until he’d returned with salt in his hair, a twinkle in his eye, and far richer than he had left.

“I doubt fewer than half are true—and the less sensational half, at that. I’ll confess, however, that I’ve enjoyed my time, and I find myself reluctant to relinquish it. But,” he said with a sigh, “I am the son of a duke, much as it pains me to admit it. I must marry. And so must Lady Rosamund. Believe me, we understand each other very well.” He stared into the bottom of his glass, then looked up, eyes narrowed. “But surely you didn’t invite me here to listen to my griping.”

She half smiled, though her heart beat a little faster, and she poured him another drink. “No, Charles. Not precisely.”

He eyed the port as though he thought it suspicious—or perhaps he thought her so—before draining it and putting it on the lacquered table to his right. Then he leant forward, taking her hand in both of his and smiling winningly. “What is it, Evie? You can tell me, you know.”

Easy for him to say, perhaps, but significantly less easy to feel. Her fingers trembled in his, and he tightened his grip. “Evie,” he coaxed, eyes glinting with warmth and fond amusement. “I know you didn’t bring me here, so we can discuss that deathly boring girl I intend to marry.”

“You shouldn’t talk about your future wife that way,” she managed, but failed entirely to free her hand. As a result, her heart gave a disconcerting leap. Not much

about her felt comfortable now. Her corset, loosened yet again this year, dug into her stomach and chest, and although the neckline of her modest gown practically reached her neck, she felt as though he could see through her.

It didn't escape her knowledge that he knew precisely what lay underneath a lady's clothes—far more than even she knew, probably. After all, the only person she had ever seen naked was herself, and she had no way of knowing if her body matched those of other ladies. Her breasts were smaller than many, to be sure, and her waist not nearly as slim as some others, but aside from knowing her figure was not fashionable, she didn't know what men thought.

Presumably they had preferences. After all, she had developed a preference for tall, lanky men.

Or rather, one specific tall and lanky man.

The teasing look in his eyes gentled, and he released his hold on her hand. “Too much, Pidge? Want me to stay quiet for a while?”

She shook her head. “It's unseemly to call me that.”

“It was unseemly for a twelve-year-old girl to catch a disease-riddled pigeon and attempt to turn it into a pet, but did that stop you?”

“I read about messenger pigeons,” she protested, smiling faintly. The pigeon had been another faux pas, one her mother had despaired over—but when she'd told Charles, he'd roared with laughter. The name Pidge had been born thereafter, to her dismay and secret pride, and it had stuck.

Four years passed before she realised she might love him, by which point she knew it was too late to do anything about it. Charles's character was set as a flirt, to the disappointment of his father, and Evelyn was . . . well, she was Evelyn. And there

was little she could do about that, either.

“Drink?” he asked, holding up his glass and pouring her a little in the bottom. “That might calm your nerves.”

She shook her head. “I dislike port.”

“Hmm.” He sniffed the glass, then took a drink. “I forgot. Hold all wine in distaste, don’t you. Want me to call for a scotch? Brandy?”

For a moment, she considered reminding him that this was, at least for all intents and purposes, her house, and if she had wanted another drink, she could have arranged for one herself. But she knew his intentions were good; he had only ever tried to look after her.

“It’s all right,” she said. “It’s just . . . I’m not precisely sure how to approach the subject.”

“I can wait.” He sat back in the chair, sipping at his port and lounging back, one leg curled under him and the other outstretched, knee angled out, as though he had nothing better to do but wait for her convenience. As though he had nothing he had rather do. Like this, he appeared all long limbs and smouldering heat, and Evelyn briefly lost her words.

It was hardly any wonder that she loved him. For all his foppishness—and whatever he liked to claim, he was vain—he had a kind heart, and he never treated her as anything other than an equal, even when she failed to abide by society’s dictates.

After a few moments, where she forcibly untied her tongue and reminded her heart of its given duty—pumping blood around her body, not breaking free of her ribcage—she spoke.

“I had hoped for a . . . favour,” she said carefully, and his head tilted slightly, firelight gleaming across his skin as though he were made of gold. “From you.”

“I’d assumed as much, given you asked no one else to come.”

“It’s a delicate matter.”

“You intrigue me.”

She folded her hands on her lap, wishing she had brought some scotch with her for this, after all. Perhaps then she might not feel so self-conscious, and in a way she rarely did in front of Charles. Though obviously he knew she was a lady, and he made allowances for the fact, he never treated her as one of his flirts, never made her feel as though he judged her for her appearance or her lack of beauty. With him, she knew her value lay elsewhere. A touching sentiment until she considered that for this, physical beauty would go a long way.

“I’ve thought about this for quite some time,” she began, “so I hope you will hear me out before coming to any decisions. You see, I do believe I am being logical about this.” She took a deep breath before plunging on, not allowing herself to look at his face or see the expression there. “As you know, I am not particularly skilled in the art of making friends. You are my only male friend, and you are currently unmarried, though not for much longer. I have very little chance of marrying now or in the future, and there are certain things I—I wish to know. About . . .” Again, her words failed her, this time at the most crucial moment. “About the act of, ah, lovemaking, as it were. Coitus. Physical intimacy.”

Charles held up a hand, his face, once so open, now carved in hard lines. His eyes glittered with an unreadable emotion. “Enough,” he said sharply. “Am I hearing right? Are you asking me to seduce you?”

“Yes,” she said, relieved he had finally got the idea. “That’s precisely it.”

“Evelyn Davenport,” her oldest friend exploded as he pushed himself to his feet. “Are you out of your mind?”