



The Duchess and the Rake

(A Gentleman's Gambit #2)

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Category: Historical

Description: "A gentleman would have asked for my kiss, but you are no gentleman... are you?"

Lady Bridget lives a lonely life. Toiling away as a seamstress by day, her life takes an unexpected turn one night when she rescues a mysterious man, who happens to be none other than the notorious Beast of Brookhaven—and declares her his newest obsession

Duke William is the Beast of Brookhaven. Bound by debt and disgrace, he's a rake beyond redemption—until an innocent lady saves him. Desperate to restore his fortune, he proposes a marriage of convenience that promises to resolve all their troubles

He vows her nights of unbridled passion, then to set her free with enough wealth to live like royalty. Yet as Bridget finds herself falling for him, she is faced with an aching choice: secure her future or protect her heart...

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CHAPTER 1

Rothwell, West Yorkshire

March 1817

The lamp light was burning low in the modest dressmaker shop, the night's flickering shadow growing with encroaching inches upon the table. However, Bridget's eyes were fixed on the tiny, almost invisible stitching of white silk thread on white satin cloth.

The lady who had ordered this gown was Lady Ruth, or as she was locally monikered, Lady Ruthless, and she lived up to her name—so Bridget could not afford to produce something lackluster.

“Just a few more stitches and the hem will be done,” she whispered.

The window rattled with the night wind, and the sudden shock of cold made her shiver, but she tugged her shawl tight around her shoulders and sunk the needle through the cloth.

The nights in Rothwell were calm ones, even in the changeling spring nights. At a huffing of breath, a lock of her brown hair fluttered away from her eyes as she pulled the last stitch into place, tied the knot off, and then slumped into the chair in relief.

Her heavy eyes ached, her fingers stiff with hours of needlework but her heart was light knowing the dress was finally done. Gently, she stood and wrapped the dress in

a garment bag and hung it under the screen before preparing to leave the shop.

It was on the underside of nine when she slid the key into the lock and turned the bolt, wrapped her shawl tight, and hurried down the streets, lamp in hand, her heart thumping at the empty road before her.

The tap of her worn half-boots on the cobblestone rang out like gunshots in the silence as she hurried. It would not be too long now, as her godmother's cottage was just three streets beyond, but with no one around and the imposing silence hemming in on her, it felt like an eternity away.

I should have stayed at the shop and pretended to arrive early tomorrow morning instead of taking this dangerous chance.

Her hand slipped to her pocket where a pair of her sharp shears pressed cold on her skin and she fixed her fingers around it as she kept her head bowed, her face shielded by the brim of her bonnet. A cloud passed from the moon and the silvery rays fell over the battened-up windows of the many shops and dining establishments that lined the pleasant square.

In the backdrop were rolling rural hills and sprawling earthenware factories that had sprouted up there and in the nearby towns.

“Two more streets to go,” she whispered and quickened her steps—only to hear a rough masculine shout from the alley mouth ahead.

Terror thundered in her chest and she gripped the shears tightly, as her feet felt nailed to the ground.

Turn around.

Turn around.

Run...

“Do we have to do this, gents?” a deep voice slurred in drunkenness. “Surely, we can resolve this another way without violence?”

Against all common sense, she edged closer to the mouth of the head. A horrid stench came from the pile of garbage packed further in the back, but she saw two men, clad in dark clothes, one had greasy, overlong hair, with a jagged mark that bisected the man’s face into two menacing halves. The other had a cap on and was barefoot.

“Aye, we do want to do this, guv ,” one of them snarled. “A certain Lord Harcourt has paid us handsomely to inflict... violence.”

Once again, the clouds moved from the moon and when the rays dropped on the man—her breastbone held her breath hostage.

Clad in his dark dinner jacket and matching breeches, the white of his shirt, waistcoat, and cravat stood out like a beacon.

What is a gentleman doing out here? In the middle of nowhere?

“I doubt you want to do that...” the lord said, staggering a little.

His square face and dimpled chin were chiseled and strong, jawline flinty and sharp, and his skin glinted tan in contrast to his snowy cravat. With how he carried himself, he could only come from centuries of blue-blooded stock.

“...especially in front of a lady,” he ended.

Spinning on their heels, the two men rounded toward Bridget, and the sight of the wicked knife in their hands had her blood going cold. She stepped away— and screamed.

The lord, losing all signs of drunkenness, attacked, landing two efficient blows to both blackguards, sending them crumpling to the wet cobblestone, unconscious.

With his boots, he kicked the knives away, then stepped over them, moving closer to Bridget. Fearful, she stepped back and turned to run— but he grabbed her arm and stopped her. Senseless with terror, she tried to yank her arm away, but his grip was ironclad.

“Stop, Miss,” he muttered, “Please don’t run. I won’t hurt you. I give you my word, I will not lay a finger on you.”

Still terrified, Bridget swallowed and after a tense moment, nodded silently. He dropped his hold on her arm but gripped both her shoulders instead. Even though he had let her go, the feel of his fingers still lingered, as if branded by an invisible iron.

Sweat trickled beneath tight stays as she stared up at him. His strapping arms held restrained power as he caged her, and her heart beat a rapid staccato as his heavy-lidded eyes perused her. Mute, Bridget's eyes traced the crimson scar that pulled taut along the right side of his face, from cheekbone to chin.

“Did...” her voice was frail, “did those men do that to you?”

“Do what to—” he paused, then slipped his hand down to her wrist, only to bring it to his face and slide her forefinger over the scar. “This? No, they didn’t do that. I have been carrying this a long time before they tried to duplicate it though.”

“Who— who were those men?”

“Cutthroats.” He looked over his shoulder to the men, a wry tick of his lips. “Probably hired by a jealous fiancé of a woman I’ve dallied with or a vengeful father seeking equalization for wronging his pure child. Either way, they have not succeeded.”

Dallied? Heavens! He’s a rakehell!

“I see,” a shudder racked through her as she pulled away. “I must go. It’s late and I… please.”

Still, his hold did not lessen. “If it was not for you, those men might have gotten the advantage over me…” His smoldering gaze seemed to penetrate her innermost being and his thumb stroked along her jaw, her chin, “Thank you.”

Is he going to kiss me? Surely not…”

“What could I do to repay you?”

“You needn’t,” she assured him. “I am happy to have helped but, I—I really need to get home.”

“Are you sure?” he asked. “Coin? A jewel perhaps?”

“I am sure, my— my lord,” she stammered. “You needn’t give me anything.”

“But I think… I do,” he replied, his voice a low timbre, both thumbs framing her cheekbones. “Indulge me for a moment.”

He lowered his head toward hers, and instinctively, her eyes fluttered closed. The first touch of his lips melted away the last vestiges of reason.

The strange lord did not apply any pressure, just a gentle coaxing that unspooled the tight knot under her breastbone. He tipped her face up a little, and when his tongue coasted over the seam of her lips, she tilted her head back for more.

He thrust deep into her mouth, and she opened to him—the taste of him hit her like wallop, rich coffee, dark whisky, and a bite of icy gin. He tasted of sin and temptation. A needful moan broke from her lips, and he soothed it away with his tongue.

Somewhere in the far recesses of her mind, she registered that her first kiss was unlike anything she could have imagined. He tasted her as if he owned her, and his unapologetic possession sent a strange, singing sweetness through her blood.

Disoriented, she realized the tips of her breasts turned taut and throbbing. Liquid heat pooled between her thigh at the glimmer in his hazel eyes, under slashing brows. He caressed the nape of her neck... and then he was gone. A blast of cold air had her blinking in shock.

“Sweet,” he murmured, almost to himself. “You taste of sweet... innocence.”

What could she say to that ?

“Go home, little one,” he whispered in her ear. “But know this, the Beast of Brookhaven is forever in your debt. How far are you going?”

“Not— not far, only two streets away,” she admitted breathlessly.

“Hurry on now,” he smiled. “And you needn’t take such a strong grip on those shears in your pocket. You will be safe.”

Starlight and strains of fog swirling around her wrapped the dreamlike state she was

in that much tighter. With the lamp high, she found her godmother's door, the cheerful pop of yellow among the plain dull wood with ivy climbing the stone part of the walls. Surrounded by overgrown hedgerows and rose bushes, the cottage had a peaceful, tumbledown charm.

At the door, she paused to look over her shoulder. Nothing came from the shadows, but the back of her neck prickled as if unseen eyes were lingering on her. As she unlatched the door and stepped in, she turned and closed it, still without a single form emerging from the gloom.

Pressing her forehead on the cool wood, she sucked in a breath. Had that truly happened or had it been some sort of feverish dream? Touching her forehead, she felt no abnormal heat. No fever.

The cottage was neat as a pin, and walking past the modest parlor, which served dual purposes as dining and sitting room, she headed up a narrow staircase. Upstairs, where a thin wall separated the two sleeping quarters—and beyond both was a bathing room—she found her cot, rested the lamp down on the end table, and her knees gave out from under her.

Looking down at her trembling hands, she could still feel the sliver of scar under her forefinger and the heat of his palm around her wrist. She glanced at the window and down at the blooming hedgerows and vegetable garden—hoping and praying that the presence she had felt at the door had belonged to someone. But nothing, no one emerged from the darkness.

Her heart sank.

Still, even though disappointment reigned—the mysterious lord had been right. She had been safe coming home.

Maybe it hadn't been a dream after all.

Four Days Later

"For Christ's sake, Arlington," a surly Colin Lightholder, Baron of Thornbury, huffed, nearly spilling his brandy, "Have you heard a word I have said all night?"

"You have eleven tenants who have mystically forgotten to pay their taxes, your prized phaeton has a broken wheel, the country house in Leeds that you have hoped to stage a hunting party is now infested with termites.

"Your parents are still hounding you to marry and this time they are set on making a match with the utterly repulsive Lady Carrington who does not speak a word of French and continues to ride astride like the tomboy we know she is—not to mention your new ball suits that are still not ready for the upcoming season," William Hartwell, the Duke of Arlington, drawled, refraining from brushing a finger down his scar. "In that order, I believe."

"Wiseacre," Colin grunted.

"How did you manage to hear all that when it is clear your mind is ten leagues away," Andrew Pembroke, the Viscount of Sutton, said knowingly.

Sipping his brandy, William gave his oldest friend a slanted look, "Must you always bear my true emotions to the rest of the world?"

"When it is clear that you are brooding over something, yes," Andrew replied, utterly immune to William's glares. Leaning in, he demanded, "What is troubling you?"

Before he answered, William pressed his lips tight and thought back to that night in the alley. First, he condemned himself for getting into that mix. In the name of

discretion, he had taken pains—discreet hackney and all that—to warm a forlorn young widow’s bed in the countryside but had allowed his discretion to slip on the reverse journey.

Of course, someone had taken the opportunity to corner him and pay him his just desserts. What rubbed him the wrong way was that... they might have succeeded too if a young lady hadn’t materialized, seemingly out of nowhere.

“Five nights ago, I went to see Lady Madeline—”

Variations of aggrieved groans rose from the table; it was clear that neither of the two were in favor of William’s liaisons with the notorious widow, but William ignored them all—again, “However, on the way back, two henchmen from Lord Harcourt’s slums, poised as hackney drivers, managed to accost me.”

This time, the cries of grief became ones of outrage.

“Good God man,” Andrew shook his head. “How did that happen? Were you drunk?”

“Against all reason, I had one foot over the line, yes, but believe me, I got starkly sober very soon,” William toyed with the rim of his glass, sliding a long forefinger around its crystal edge. “They had almost gotten me until an unlikely aide came my way. A woman. Her scream made my training unfurl and I soon dispatched them to the ground, perhaps with a broken bone or two.”

“Ah,” Colin lifted his drink. “Good man. Do you know who this woman is?”

“No clue,” he shrugged. “But I kissed her and saw her home, in secret.”

“Oh, good god,” Andrew sighed, then waved to a waiter to refill his glass. When it was topped off, he took a mouthful and asked, “So you came from one rendezvous ,

almost got murdered and then kissed a strange woman and followed her to her home?”

“Yes.”

“And may I assume your distraction is because your mind is lingering on that woman?” Andrew pressed.

“Partly,” William nodded.

He remembered the moment the young Miss had entered the alley, how her skin glowed like porcelain in the moonlight, her small, neat features and uncommonly large doe eyes had possessed a delicate charm. She put him in mind of a painting of Daphne escaping Apollo.

The other two men shared a look before Colin asked, “Are we the only ones seeing the sticking pin in this matter? Clearly, you want to see this woman again and you know where she lives. Why not go and see her?”

“Because she is innocent and I do not dally with innocent Misses,” William’s words dropped like a judge’s gavel on its stone.

It was true. The young woman was the epitome of virtue. After his romp with Lady Madeline, he had not bothered tying his cravat, so his throat was bare above his collar and the faint musk of sex clung to his skin.

The young Miss had not picked up on the post-coital clues. In hindsight, he probably should not have kissed her when it was clear the young innocent miss did not know what carnal pleasure was. The moment his lips had touched hers was when he’d known that she’d never been kissed either.

A na?f in the best sense. I didn't think women like those still existed.

It was why he had stopped the intimate embrace— well mostly because of her innocence, but secondly because the men were starting to wake— and in contrast to her purity, he'd suddenly felt... foul.

“I swear you might have forgotten the ordinary social graces,” Andrew sighed. “What is wrong with making a simple friendship?”

William's hand tightened around the glass, but his face was still impassive. His mind flew back to the simple cottage the young woman had slipped inside and knew that even such a simple act would never be simple enough. What if word got out that the Duke of Arlington, the Beast of Brookhaven Castle, was friends with a peasant woman?

He could easily explain this to the two—but it felt like too much work, so he simply said, “No.”

It was enough that William was already under scrutiny as his title of Duke was simply that, a title, and until his uncle released his inheritance and lands, he had little power to work with.

He expected the two to contest his decision and push him to either reveal who the lady was or where she lived so they could intervene themselves, but Colin and Anthony only looked at each other.

“He is tempted, yes?”

“Very much.”

“How long will it take him to cave under the temptation?” Colin pressed.

“Ooh, a wager,” Andrew said giddily. “I give him two weeks, a hundred pounds.”

“Two hundred says three,” Colin replied.

Annoyed, William had the urge to swat at them as he would do a buzzing insect. “You will both fail.”

“No, I don’t think we will,” Andrew sat back in his seat, one arm slung around the back of the padded leather armchair. “Do you know why?”

“Please, enlighten me,” William narrowed his eyes.

“You’ve already gotten a taste of something you have never had before,” Andrew smirked. “You’ll go back to devour it, and nothing, not even your most laudable assertion of not following the temptation of innocent misses, will keep you from it, old boy.”

Instead of answering, William took a long, measured drink and then decisively turned the conversation to a safer topic, not because he didn’t have the mindset to debate with them on how wrong they were... but because secretly, he feared they might be right.

What would he do if he found that young woman again? Leave her be... or tempt her like the snake did with Eve?

Did it matter? Why was he even concerned for her? He had other problems to work through, first and foremost. He looked down at the paper on the table and the next name on the list, the third debt he needed to pay, Viscount Tollerman .

With a frustrated growl, he tossed back the rest of his brandy and got back to work.

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CHAPTER 2

THREE WEEKS LATER

A rm in arm with Lady Eleanor Pembroke, one of her two dearest friends, Bridget stepped carefully down the garden path while gazing at the scattering of tiny white gazebos with enhanced unease.

These get-togethers were her nemesis and while they reminded her that she was, in fact, a member of the ton, the daughter of a viscount, she never felt like one.

Well, not since Father passed away, brother went to war, and I came to live with Godmother Lydia.

At three-and-twenty, and on the teetering cups of spinsterhood, wearing white felt like a fallacy. Until she was certifiably unmarriedable, there was nothing else to wear, well, not unless she wanted to draw the disproving glares from matrons and unkind rumors.

She longed for a day when she was married and would not be obligated to wear debutante pastels and whites but did not see a suitor materializing from the air anytime soon.

Wish upon a star.

Having lived a modest life for the past two years, the opulence of the other ladies with silk dresses at the height of fashion and a fortune in jewelry at their throats and

ears contrasted with her simplicity and made her feel self-conscious, but she refused to allow herself to fall into the woes of once-upon-a-time.

It was horrid to be the exception, drawing eyes and stares and whispers, but, “ C'est la vie,” she whispered to herself.

“Did you say something, dear?” Lady Eleanor, or Ellie , as Bridget called her in private, asked, twisting her head a little.

“Not to you,” Bridget gave a soft smile. “I grow anxious when I am around other ladies, especially with the ones we used to know.”

Young lords, most dressed in warm tan breeches and bright waistcoats, were on the lawns, chatting with each other with flutes of champagne in hand, and Bridget trained her gaze away, for God forbid that one of them might mistake her simply appreciative look for something else.

“Lady Bridget,” a feminine voice called. “What an unexpected delight to see you.”

She knew that voice. The owner of that voice never liked her.

“Lady Rebecca,” Bridget forced a smile, then curtsied. “Or should I say Marchioness Savory. How do you do, my lady? May I compliment you on your gown? It is beautiful.”

The marchioness was indeed ravishing in a light blue waist-tight gown with a delightful revealing décolletage. White satin elbow-length gloves encased her slender arms, and her dark blue half-boots gleamed bright.

Lady Rebecca’s bright green eyes slid over Bridget’s form, her gaze polite. But gleeful superiority rested in the depths at seeing the soft white muslin day gown with

a subtly embroidered hem and flattering neckline.

“So are you,” the lady replied, her nose tilted, her laugh trilling, gloved hand swirling her champagne. “In debutante white? I am deeply surprised. Out of all of us, you were the one we expected to have found your Prince Charming by now, ruling half a continent.”

“I decided to reprioritize,” Bridget replied calmly. “Marriage is wonderful, I know, but perhaps it is not the be-all and end-all. Well, for some.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Lady Rebecca’s lips curved after sipping her drink. “Marital life is lovely. You were always the bookish sort, so I suppose you do find another happiness in facts and figures.”

“Is that Lady Bookish?” Another one of her tormentors, Lady Ophelia, approached, her deep purple gown gathered beneath her faultless bosom, while diamonds glittered at her ears and throat. On her arm was a tall, handsome blond man with the face of Narcissus. “Oh, pardon me, I mean Lady Bridget?”

Straightening her back and notching her chin up, Bridget smiled, “Lady Ophelia, pleased to see you again.”

“Not as much as I am to see you,” the countess smirked. “You disappeared from Town for what, two years?”

“Three,” Bridget replied, noticing that Lady Rebecca had made herself scarce.

“My mistake, three,” Lady Ophelia replied. “We all thought you had done like the Grimm Brothers and their Snow White, how you had wandered off into the forest and became friends with the fawns and hares.”

“I did for a while,” Bridget smiled derisively. “The monarch of the forest, a stag named Titan, sends his regards.”

The two tittered. “Oh how delightful,” Ophelia said, twisting to look at the man on her arm. “Pardon my oversight. Lady Bridget, my husband, Septimus Hargrove, the Earl of Rookerly.

“My dearest, Lady Bridget is a girl I knew from finishing school, you see. She lived in the library as much as we lived in the dorms. Alongside Lady Eleanor Pembroke and Miss Josephine,” Lady Ophelia added. “Lady Bridget’s bosom friends.”

So subtle, Ophelia, making me look perpetually girlish in your husbands’ eyes. By the end of this party, I expect to be ostracized in full. I will be a pariah by dawn.

“My lord.” She curtsied and heard Josie and Ellie echo the same beside her.

“My ladies.” The older man, with streaks of gray at his temples, bowed. “I do like to see when old friends stay together. Were the two of you...”

“Goodness, no,” Ophelia laughed, showing her perfectly white, even teeth. Her smile edged into a smirk, “We were more acquaintances than friends, dearest.”

“I concur,” Lady Rebecca reappeared, husband in tow, a tall man with blond hair, high cheekbones, squared jaw, full lips. He looked like a prince.

Unbidden, her mind flew to the dark stranger who had kissed her on those desolate streets weeks ago, the seductive power she had tasted in his lips.

Swallowing, she forced her thoughts away from that man. In any case, she did not need to marry a lord—or be entangled with one—that was a rakehell. The best choice was someone handsome, titled, with a good head on his shoulders, a profitable

business or territory, and without a speck darkening his name.

“Ladies Bridget, Josephine, and Eleanor,” the marchioness smiled, “May I introduce my husband, Charles Westport, Marquess Savory.”

After exchanging introductions, Bridget was desperate to find a way out when the Marchioness asked, “My lord, do I recall you saying you had three unattached friends who might appreciate some companionship this afternoon? Maybe we could even find Lady Bridget a beau , hmm?”

Oh, how she wished for a mask to conceal her violent, mortified blush. Tilting her head up, Bridget fought for the word—but found none, because the acrid humiliation burned up her throat. Did she truly look that hopeless?

Being in the public eye put her on edge. When she was on edge, Bridget tended to shut down and shrink away. That drew withering looks and sudden walls of silence, feeding the cycle of her anxiety.

Thankfully, Eleanor found the words Bridget could not, and quite civilly declined the invitation. “As much as we would appreciate company,” she began, “the three of us have not seen each other for a long while and thought to use the time to reconnect. Perhaps the lords might join us later on?”

Thin brows arched in surprise at the blunt refusal but Lady Eleanor took it with grace. “Of course. Please, enjoy the rest of the afternoon. And from an insider, please try the blackberry tarts with your tea, they are utterly scrumptious.”

“We surely will,” Josephine replied with a grimace. “Please, excuse us.”

“Such a pleasure to see you, ladies, but especially Lady Bridget. We really should visit more often now that you are in Town and we are moving in similar circles.”

Similar, but not the same circles . Bridget swallowed the reply like she would do broken glass. I do not belong here anymore.

“Of course,” she said, the lie heavy on her heart. “We shall surely see each other again.”

A ripple ran up the back of her neck, and she turned, trying to catch the spy who was studying her—but found no one. Her eyes lifted to the walls of the grand mansion behind her, her eyes floating to the wide bow window in the dark gray brick—again, no one was there.

I should not have come here.

Swallowing over her remorse, she turned to her friends and forced a smile. “Perhaps we should seek out the hostess, Viscountess Tollerman.”

Stepping away from the window, William took a sip of his rich brandy to moisten his throat. What were the odds that he would come across the same lady he had assured himself he would never cross paths with again?

A day ago, he would have said nonexistent, but now, fate was toying with him. But then again, he never believed fate had his best interests at heart.

“What is my debt down to now, Tollerman?” he asked.

“One thousand and seventy pounds,” the viscount replied. “Down from seven thousand, Your Grace.”

Sticking a hand into his pocket, William considered his options. He could sell another useless portrait... or he could do a night in the Underground Ring.

He took another sip. Selling a portrait would earn him a quarter of that sum, but then... one night in the boxing ring would earn him the full sum with the prize money and the bets rolling in for the Masked Marauder —his alter persona.

It was utterly ironic; a gentleman of the Ton was not one to get his hands dirty. They earned their funds by old wealth, investments, and for those lords who were financially ruined, marrying a rich heiress. They did not lift a finger; God forbid they operate a shop and they certainly did not pummel others for money.

Pugilism is not savagery, young man, its art, it is control, it is discipline. A man must master himself before he can master others.

The sage words of his old mentor, Mr. Buchanon, from Gentleman Jackson's, a boxer of seventeen years came back to him. He felt guilty turning the one thing he prized as a gift into a tool to earn money quickly, but what needed to be done, had to be done.

It is either do a quick turn or wallow in debt for years to come. I have only so many paintings of sour-faced hounds to sell.

"I shall pay that debt off by the following sennight," William promised.

With an exasperated sigh, Tollerman stood and rounded the table. Though in his late forties, he was ruthlessly fit, his silver-gray waistcoat hugging his trim torso, his dark trousers fitted perfectly. His light hair, dark brows, and unlined face gave him an oddly ageless aspect.

"For the last time, you needn't pay it off at once," Tollerman pinned William with a steady gaze. "There is no deadline, Arlington."

"Perhaps not for you, old chap, but certainly for me," William replied, finding a seat and resting the glass at the end of the table. "I have a limited amount of time to prove

myself to my uncle who is watching me dance like a puppet, toeing the line of being the perfect Duke.”

“How much time do you have?” the older man asked.

“Up until this Season ends,” William replied, stretching out a leg and rubbing a tense knot in the back of his neck. The cravat felt like it was cutting off his hair. “I know you are acquainted with the... dissolute life I used to live?”

“I have heard rumors, yes,” the Viscount said.

William gave him a tight smile. “Not the best reputation for a duke, is it?”

“When I was nine-and-twenty, nothing on earth could have kept me in the house,” Tollerman shrugged. “Hunting parties, masquerade balls, racing at the tracks, Rotten Row, you name it, I was probably the ringleader. We all make questionable choices, Arlington, just do not let those choices define your future.”

Reaching for his drink, William chose not to say anything to that. If only his younger self, a dissolute, hellhound debauchee, had once thought to stop; stop from gambling, stop from jumping into the next lady’s bed, stop from drinking himself into the wheelbarrows, William knew he wouldn’t be doing half the things he needed to do now.

“Is gaining a wife anywhere in those plans of yours?” Tollerman asked.

“Yes, but I’ll cross that bridge when I meet it,” William stood and reached for his jacket. “I shall let myself out, old friend. Please, go and enjoy the delightful soiree your wife has put on.”

Reclining in his chair, Tollerman twiddled a pen. “You won’t be joining us?”

“With no disrespect to your dear wife, I might corrode if I am forced to drink tea and make inane chatter with other gentlemen and gentlewomen,” William replied with a wry smile. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

With a curt nod, he descended the stairs and headed to the carriage gate, but after sending for his carriage, turned to the nearest back porch and stepped under the shade.

Women in light pastels paraded the walks, twirling parasols and the men accompanying them. It felt all so... domestic. Jaded, William could only compare the men in the bright waistcoats and colored cravats to strutting peacocks trying to sway the hens to their roosts.

The courting game was so tedious—meet a lady, make an offer of marriage, choke down dry watercress sandwiches, two waltzes at maximum every night, publish the banns, and swan off to live a humdrum life of domesticated purgatory.

A cold shudder ran through him at the very thought of seeing himself scheduling intimate appointments with his wife. No true gentlemen fulfilled their real desires inside their wives’ bedchambers. Instead, they did what was perceptually expected of them and then found the sort of woman who would embrace their baser needs somewhere else.

Glancing over the mass, he tried to find the little nymph in white and found her standing near a water fountain, looking as if she would rather be anywhere else but there.

What is a simple seamstress doing in a ladies’ soirée?

As if summoned by his stare, the little miss turned and met his gaze, and her eyes rounded. He held the gaze for a long moment, allowing a slow, tantalizing smirk to

curve his lips as she grew even pinker.

If he had a mind, seducing the impetuous little goddess would be a simple matter. Almost too easy... but no, he had to keep his focus on his responsibilities.

After allowing his eyes to appreciatively trail over her from head to toe, he gave her a slow nod, then headed back the way he'd come. Outside, under the gentle sunlight and cool wind, he paused on the step of the carriage.

“Home, Your Grace?”

“Not this time, Percy,” William replied, his decision made on the spot. “Take me to Spitalfields. I need to speak to a man about a horse.”

CHAPTER 3

Bridget was having trouble breathing, and not just due to the strip of linen binding her bosoms beneath her dress. Perspiration pricked along her hairline at the sight of the same man whose face—and touch—haunted her dreams at night.

The feel of his muscular arms as he caged her; the memory of how her heart had beat a rapid staccato as his heavy-lidded eyes latched onto hers, and the crimson scar pulled taut along the right side of his face.

He is here, that rogue who kissed me is here.

She felt mortified at how easily he had awakened a hidden unknown emotion inside of her. After the moment he had taken—or rather stolen—her first kiss, she'd had... urges. What could another kiss from him feel like? A touch maybe? She may be virginal but was not a featherbrain.

“Bridget? Dear?” Ellie's concerned voice cut through the shocked haze in Bridget's mind. “Have you seen a phantasm?”

“No.” She turned, trying to ignore the thudding in her ears from her heightened awareness of everything around her. “I just feel... unwelcome. It's clear that I don't belong here, and Lady Ophelia, or should I say, Lady Obnoxious' smug superiority set my teeth on edge.”

“Let's ignore them,” Josie said quietly, as she led them to an empty gazebo near an artificial, ornamental pond.

All around the sprawling gardens of Tollerman Manor, butterflies floated, dipping to perch on plants with sweet pollen while ducks and ducklings splashed on the water's surface, and sunshine rendered the still part of the pond into faceted prisms. Everything seemed more vibrant, more alive. A warm breeze caressed her skin, and she breathed in the scent of clipped hedges, lavender, and spring roses.

For a moment, her eyes rested on the faded posts of the gazebo, before trailing to the tall stone wall that protected the garden and manor house from prying eyes beyond it.

“...not sure if he will be a good husband?”

Snapping at attention to Eleanor's words, Bridget sequestered her thoughts about the Beast of Brookhaven aside for another day. Blinking with embarrassment at her thoughts, she asked, “Pardon?”

“Lord Weatherly,” Eleanor replied, dropping another square of sugar into her delicate cup. “My latest suitor. He is a decade and a half older than I am, but mama says he is a staid choice. Not once has he ever been implicated in a scandal or had any illegitimate children.”

“Plus, his investments have made him very rich,” Josie added. “He sounds like a true gentleman in every sense of the word.”

Ellie did not look as eager or happy as Bridget thought she would be. A suitor was a wonderful thing to have... not that she had any experience. Why did her friend look so hesitant?

“So what is troubling you, Ellie?” she asked quietly.

“Rumor has it that the man is as predictable as vanilla trifle after Sunday dinner,” Eleanor sighed, gazing into the depths of her tea. “I know I should not complain

about such a thing, there are many ladies without a suitor—” her eyes flicked apologetically to Bridget “—but is it too much to ask for a little spontaneity in a man?”

“Maybe you can teach him spontaneity,” Josie offered. “I know they say you cannot teach an old dog new tricks but maybe you can inspire him to change a little?”

“If we marry, that is,” Ellie replied.

“And if you do not, you are still young,” Bridget added. “With two or possibly three seasons ahead of you. If this is not what you want, what is the harm in looking for another?”

“It’s not that I...” Ellie shook her head, “I feel as if I am explaining this so, so wrong. I don’t want to give up on what could be a good match, but I fear exchanging a good match for the *joie de vivre* I do have.”

“Then what are you...?” Bridget did not know what to ask.

“I do not think it will be a love match, but if it is a marriage of convenience based on mutual respect and shared goals, I shan’t complain. I just don’t want to be bored out of my mind in a monotone routine,” Ellie explained.

Looking away, Bridget bit her lip. In her heart of hearts, the girl inside her believed in true love, the triumph of good over evil, and fairy tale endings, but as she grew older, her mind was changing to that of a realist.

She leaned her elbows on the table and grasped Ellie’s hand, her friend’s heart-shaped face twisting with indecision. “You’re beautiful, generous, and caring. Any sane man will see that and cater to it.”

“I agree,” Josie affirmed. “And I think you need to speak to him, tell him what you would like in your courtship and marriage, and go on from there. If he does say he will try to accommodate your wishes, watch and see if he does. Actions do trump words, dear.”

Going back to her cooling tea, Bridget sipped before plucking a warm blackberry tart from the tiered tray and nibbling on it.

“What about you, Bridget?” Ellie asked. “How are you on the marriage front?”

“For now, I prize my independence,” she said. “I do hope to go home soon, however. My brother has not sent word about the estate and no matter how many times I write to him, I get nothing back. It’s been two years and I have saved enough to return home.”

“Oh,” Josie nodded. “I assume when you return to your old station, it will be easier for you to find a fitting match.”

“Speaking of matches,” Bridget teased Josephine, “you’re one to talk. You turned down two proposals this year!”

“For the first, he proposed a marriage based on mutual respect and shared goals and was happy I am the sort of woman who keeps to herself, but He doesn’t believe in love, and told me in no uncertain terms that falling in love with him would be to my detriment,” Josephine said.

“As for the second suitor, Mother found out literally a day after the proposal, that the man was buried in debt. He hid it carefully, but apparently, a lord spotted a known gambling debt owner banging on his door, and now, it’s all over Town.”

“Goodness,” Eleanor pressed a hand to her breasts. “Thank heavens you escaped the

clutches of that fortune hunter.”

Once again, her mind flew to the mysterious man who had kissed her and she fit her hands around the cup. Unsure of what to do, if she should confess what happened to her friends or keep it to herself, Bridget pulled a corner of her lips between her teeth.

What to do...what to do...

“Bridget, dear, that Ceylon tea, though fine and so gentle on the mouth as it may be, can hardly be worthy of such studious observation,” Eleanor remarked. “Would you care to discuss what is holding your attention and is clearly bothering you?”

Bridget’s eyes darted to her friend’s face. “It’s... nothing much... well, I- I don’t know if it is nothing, to be honest. What do you know, if anything, about this Beast of Brookhaven?”

Her two friends shared a look before Ellie pronounced, “He is the worst rakehell in London, or should I say, was . Years ago, every scandal sheet had his name splashed across it, alleging that he had relations with this woman or the other.”

“I too have read about him in the scandal sheets,” Josephine added with a gasp. “They say he is wicked and unprincipled, a ravenous wolf in lord’s clothing.”

“I’ve read one, mind just one, that described him as less than a lecherous hellhound but a handsome and masterful lover, and blessed with godlike looks, wealth, and charm. He was said to cause a female frenzy wherever he went.”

“Where-where do these scandal rags get that knowledge from?” Bridget felt her head start to spin.

After setting her cup down, Josie added, “One of the most lucrative scandal rags even

claimed to have interviewed a few of his past lovers, but kept these women named as ‘legitimate anonymous sources,’ . One of the women said his stamina is unparalleled and his tastes are diabolical.”

Her stomach twisted. Was that why he had said she tasted of innocence? Was he one of those men who demanded unspeakable things from his women?

Bridget knew it was not wise for her to know, but she asked anyway. “Diabolical how?”

“Fantasies that would shock the senses,” Ellie said, dropping her voice to a whisper. “Some say he likes his women bare and bound, blindfolded and at his mercy.”

“It matters not,” Josie waved her slender hand. “He is cursed with ennui , my dear. Even if a woman succeeds in attracting his notice, they will not hold it for long.

“If the scandal sheets are to be believed, his affairs are short-lived and too numerous to count. Some even equate them to be incendiary, flaming hot for a long while before they burn to ash, and he moves to another without a look behind him.”

Swallowing, Bridget could sum up what she knew of this Beast in three words: arrogant, seducer, and disreputable , characteristics that any virtuous lady would take pains to avoid— but the kiss still lingered in her mind.

“Oh,” she mumbled.

Once again, her friends shared another look, and this time Josephine asked, “Why did you ask, Bridget?”

“Erm... I overheard a lady speaking about him when she and her mother came to the seamstress shop.” The lie felt heavy on her tongue as she knew neither of her friends

would take it well when she admitted to the titillating encounter that night. “I wondered about it.”

“Hm,” Eleanor gently lifted her cup. “We shall all pretend you are not lying to us, but we will wait until you are ready to tell us what really happened.”

She blushed to the roots of her hair and turned away. “I am not.”

“Sure, dear,” Ellie patted her hand. “Sure, you aren’t.”

The unintrusive hackney William had hired to carry him into the depths of the Spitalfields clattered down the streets. As they got deeper into the town, shuttered storefronts lined both sides of the street, and people and horses jostled along the cobblestone.

They arrived at a street wedged in between two buildings in Petticoat Lane, the two-story building sandwiched between a bakeshop and a gin store. Wrapping on the roof, he waited until the carriage stopped and hopped out, pulled the rim of his hat down to shield his eyes, and headed to the steps.

Bypassing the front door, he took the side staircase and headed to the door around the side before rapping on the peeling door, hoping Silas Gilliam, a middle man in the boxing industry, was home and not tousled up in a gutter somewhere.

“Or nursing an injury in a hospital,” he muttered.

On the fifth knock, the door opened. Silas’ lean boxer-honed frame filled the doorway. His hair was scruffy and his jaw stubbly with the beginnings of a night beard, and his fine lawn shirt was partially unbuttoned, revealing the corded column of his throat, while the robe he wore only gave a glimpse of the edge of his trousers. His large, masculine feet were bare.

“What are you doing here?” the middleman asked. “Well, I shouldn’t ask that. I bloody well know why you’re here, but the answer is no .”

“I endeavor to change your mind,” William said affably. “Are you going to let me loaf on your doorstep like a wretched urchin or will you let me in so we can discuss it?”

Grunting, Ambrose stood aside, and William stepped in, doffing his hat and tugging off his great coat. As ragged as the outside was, the inside was the opposite; the furnishings were rich wood and pelt with wing chairs of leather, with cigar smoke curling in the air.

“You aren’t in the middle of a rendezvous , are you?” William asked, looking around for female paraphernalia. “If you are in the middle of—”

“Do you think I’d answer the door if I had some youthful chit lounging around?” Silas scoffed as he went to a cupboard and liberated a bottle of Tobermory whisky. “A glass?”

“Just one, thank you,” William gazed at a portrait. “More than that and I am a danger to myself.”

Shame clamped William's insides when he thought back to two years ago, when he had woken up half naked on the floor of a whorehouse, covered in his rancid sick and up to his neck in debt.

His drinking and gambling had spiraled out of control, his rakehell ways had found him jumping from one bed to another, in the abyss of ignominy.

He thanked the Gods that his father had not been around to witness his ultimate disgrace; he'd wagered the Brookhaven Castle—his papa's legacy—on a round of

hazard.

By a stroke of luck, he had won.

When it came to personal virtues, William could claim only one: he had the ability to see his own faults clearly, well, without the haze of liquor covering his mind.

A glass plunked on the bookshelf beside him and William took it, then sipped. “The Circuit is approaching, where all the prizefighters will compete for a hundred thousand pounds. I need you to get me in.”

“I know you’re good, Your Grace. As the Masked Marauder, you have trumped a lot of n'er-do-well competitors, but those were silly boys doing silly things for shillings and half-pennies. This race is for the big boys, respectfully, Arlington,” Silas replied.

“See, how this works is you put in your bid, and the powers that be choose you . Sixteen of the seeds are chosen from all over England. In their respective areas, eight advance to the semis, and four rough it out for the first spot against the reigning champion.”

The Circuit Matches, a play on the Circuit Court, the highest-level administrative division of His Majesty's Courts, was an open secret in the rounds of pugilism. The tournament had no set date or year but when it came around, all the best prizefighters in the realm endeavored to win it.

Hundreds of thousands of pounds traded hands at a single match, and the winner gained not only the prize money, but a share of the bets as well.

Slamming the glass on the table, William turned. “I can handle it. What I need from you is to arrange the matches I need to qualify.”

“No offense.” Silas threw back his drink. “But unless you have been living in a corner of Gentleman Jackson for the past three months to half a year, you are not ready.”

William was getting irritated. “Do me a favor and shelve the condescension and judgment, old boy. I do not need to prove to you that I am ready, I am telling you to prepare the match. I will take care of the rest myself.”

“No,” Silas repeated.

“Well, then I have wasted my time here,” William shrugged and moved to get his jacket and hat. “But mark my words, when I do win, you’ll rue the day you lost a five-thousand gratuity.”

“The prize money is a hundred thousand pounds,” Silas narrowed his eyes. “And five thousand is all you would hand me?”

“Would you prefer nothing?” William asked, a brow lifted. “Because if I go to another, you will lose it all.”

Scowling, Silas said, “If you do this, if I arrange all of it, you will do everything to make sure you get to the top. You must train from dawn to dusk, cut out all the rich food you lords eat every day—incorporate some healthier options.”

“I see.”

“No wine, no sherry, God forbid Blue Ruin, and if you must drink, brandy and cordials. I know you toffs love the stuff but limit your intake of coffee too, and no liquid or powder enhancements if you get my meaning,” Silas continued. “As for sparring partners, I can arrange those as well, and if you need them to keep it quiet—”

“I do.”

“—I will arrange that as well,” Silas added. “When the matches come about, I will have a bottle man, a knee man, and a physician lined up. They, too, will need a cut of the profits.”

“From the grand matches,” William negotiated. “Not the matches that lead up to it. I actually need that blunt.”

“But what if you lose?” Silas grunted. “We’d come out with nothing.”

“Alas, there is the crux. I won’t lose,” William replied with a wide grin, thinking back to how long and hard he had been training his entire life. Taking his hat, he fixed it onto his head. “Send notice for my acceptance and the first match as soon as you can arrange it. I will be ready and waiting.”

The carriage trundled through the wrought iron gates of Brookhaven Castle while William was running down a mental list of things he had set out to accomplish that day, and felt satiated knowing he had completed them all.

Alighting from the carriage, he sent the driver off with a good night and headed inside to be met by his valet, Oliver Lane, an impeccable man who had served William’s father before him.

“How are things this fine evening, Lane?” William chimed while handing off his hat and coat.

“You have a visitor, Your Grace,” Lane replied. “Of the female disposition. A Lady Rosalind, I believe.”

Although careful with his words, William could tell by his manservant’s tone alone

that he disapproved—and he did have a point; Rosa was a gentlewoman who plied her body as currency for favors.

“And where is she located presently?” he asked.

“In your study,” Lane replied. “With a bottle of wine as her companion.”

“I see...” William nodded as he headed to the grand staircase. “Please see to it that we will not be disturbed, this might take a while.”

CHAPTER 4

His study was at the end of the corridor on the first floor, a comfortable space paneled in oak. Leather seats were clustered by the stone fireplace, with bookshelves on both ends of the room, and a massive desk sat by the front window.

A semi-circle of leather chairs was arranged around a coffee table and to the side, a velvet chaise longue—which is where Lady Rosa reclined seductively.

“It’s scandalous to show that amount of stocking,” William greeted her. “Helped yourself to my wine collection, I see.”

“Of course, dear,” she murmured, while drawing a hand up her shapely legs to her garter. “You are such a hospitable host.”

Leaning on the edge of his table, William shed his jacket and fiddled with the cufflinks. “Shall we do away with the pleasantries and get to the reason you decided to visit me so abruptly?”

She slid off the chaise and ambled to him, her hips swaying, before dancing her fingers up his chest. “Can’t old friends visit each other without prior correspondence?”

“They can,” he replied easily. “But in your case, there are always conditions, strings, complications. What do you need, Rosa?”

“Nothing but your male company, Your Grace,” she replied, her hand sliding from

his chest to his abdomen and further. “The physical gifts you were blessed with...”

Her proprietary caress over his burgeoning arousal, paired with her practiced husky whisper, did draw a physical response, and thinking back to the last time he’d had relations with a woman, William allowed it, just for the feel of physical release.

He stiffened, however, and though he had no true lust for the woman, he would take an uncomplicated dalliance with a willing lady. Peeling her hands from his person, he rounded the desk, tugged a drawer open, and pulled out a white box of French Letters.

Plucking out a white tube with red strings dangling at one end, he unfastened his waistcoat, undid his cufflinks, and dropped them in a small box. “Well, toss up those skirts, sweetheart.”

Her eyes lowered. “I’d prefer a bed.”

“I don’t take lightskirts to my bed,” he said. “Those four-posters are sacred to me.”

“Sacred,” she pouted. “Why sacred? You hardly have a wife.”

“Matters not,” he smiled wolfishly. “The chaise or the door, Rosa, you choose.”

“Good work on Lady Ruth’s daughter’s gown,” the seamstress, Mrs. Abernathy, peered at the almost invisible stitching with her spectacles perched on her nose. “Your needlework has grown leaps and bounds in the past four months.”

Smiling, Bridget agreed. “Your tutelage is why I am so good.”

If she felt confident in anything, it rested in her aptitude as a pupil. Back in her schooldays, she had prided herself on being a student with good sense. Her tutors had

always remarked on her quickness in acquiring proficiency in various subjects, from French to music to painting.

“Nevertheless,” the widow pulled her spectacles away and hung the dress so it would not wrinkle. “The lady will be most pleased, and I am sure she will reward you handsomely.”

A knock on the door had them turning to it, and when it was pushed in, a young man in shades of brown and tan stepped inside, doffing his hat. Shaking his flaxen hair, he smiled, blue eyes bright. “Pardon me, but I am told a Lady Bridget is—”

“Adam!” Bridget shot up from her seat at seeing her brother’s old friend who made it a habit to drop in on her when he was in town. “I mean, Baron Howell,” she dropped into a curtsy. “How good to see you.”

Instead of replying, Adam turned his bright blue eyes to Mrs. Abernathy. “Good afternoon, Mrs. Abernathy. I hope you are doing well. Would you please give Lady Bridget and I a moment to talk?”

“Of course,” the portly woman stood. “You have been by here months ago, My Lord, you’re quite familiar. I shan’t deny my prize apprentice of time with her friend, but please keep it to a quarter of an hour. We do have other jobs to attend to.”

“Thank you,” Adam replied, then took Bridget’s hand and kissed it. “How are you, dear?”

“I’m fine,” she replied, overjoyed at his company. “How are you though? I am surprised you can come here at will. Shouldn’t you have a doting wife by now?”

He grinned. “I have been asking you for that honor for years, but still you refuse me,” Adam teased while reaching into his bag and pulling out a tin of her once favorite

lemon drops. "I come bearing gifts, my dear."

Her lips parted at the sight of the treat. "You... remembered?"

"Of course, little sister," Adam smiled. "You have such simple desires that one cannot help but fulfill one or two of them. Here, it is yours, and do not tell me I shouldn't have, because not only did I want to, but I am also able to. A tin is just a few pennies."

Taking it, she smiled. "Thank you. It means a lot to me. How—" she swallowed. "How is my brother?"

Adam's face fell. "I have not heard or seen him, dear, as I am not in that part of the town much due to my frequent travels. But, believe me, when I do go back to York, I will search high and wide for him."

With her chest swelling with affection and appreciation, she smiled and hugged the tin to her chest. "Thank you, Adam. You are such a wonderful friend."

He inclined his head. They chatted for a little longer before he reached for his hat, "I believe I have used up all our allotted time. I am sure we'll speak again and during that time, rest assured, I shall find your brother."

"Adam," she swallowed. "When you find Frederick, please tell him that I do love him, and I will come back home as soon as I am able. Which is looking to be very soon."

"I surely will," Adam smiled before heading for the door. Pausing, he stopped at the door and turned to her. "Keep being the sweet soul you are, Bridget."

"I'll try," she replied, watching him as he left the shop.

Happy, she looked at the tin in her hands and quietly slipped it into her satchel before going to find Mrs. Abernathy. She found the older lady in the second part of the shop where the bolts of cloth were laid on the shelves and at hooks on the walls.

“He has left, Mrs. Abernathy,” she began. “What are we doing now?”

“I think...” She reached for a book on a pedestal and glided a finger down a list. “Lady Westlake needs a new riding habit and Miss Antoinette Tulloch would like a new set of chemises for the season. She has even supplied the silk for the chemises.”

Fingering the soft cloth, Bridget nodded, “We’d best get to work then.”

Agilely, William dodged a blow from his opponent and landed a blow in the man’s middle. “You’ve got to be faster than that, Magnus.”

Mist had barely risen from the ground when William was stepping into the door of Gentleman Jackson’s pugilism saloon. In the past weeks, a routine had emerged—getting to the saloon by dawn, training, and going home to run the trails of his lands had built up more than his musculature. It also exhausted him to no end, but he got up and repeated it every day.

The man, half a foot taller than William’s six feet, grabbed onto the ropes and hunched over, breathing hard. His hair was wet to the roots, yet they had only begun their bouts fifteen minutes ago. Though larger, the seasoned boxer was showing signs of fatigue, his forehead drenched with perspiration, his broad chest heaving.

William circled him in the ring, trying to look for a good opening. Magnus had a few tells, the man was prone to throwing an uppercut with his right, and following with double jabs by his left. When he prepared to do that move, his left foot slipped to the front before he launched.

Anticipating it, William ducked and landed a blow on the man's sternum, then braced himself for the blow that would come. The punch caught his lower belly, and though he grunted, he welcomed the jolt of pain. Rebounding, he bounced lightly on the balls of his feet, his arms up in guard position once more.

With his fists up once more, he let them fly, landing blow after blow, staying light on his feet, ducking strikes, and landing his own in a fierce return. The burn in his muscles was sweet—the quick flurry of his thoughts predicting moves and planning counterattacks made him feel light while he punched with calculated restraint.

Breathe in, breathe out. Do not lose control. Measure your punches, measure your steps, keep the energy up .

He flung out a blistering right hook that sent Magnus right into the ropes and the man stumbled, a foot slipping out from under him. He dropped to the mat and grunted. “Devil and damn, Your Grace, you pack a hard punch. We can stop for today. I give up.”

William stopped bouncing on his feet and took stock of his sparring partner. “Did I injure you too much?”

The older fighter stripped off his practice gloves and touched a hand to his jaw and cheek, wincing. “Not any worse than I have suffered before. You know—” he grabbed the rope and heaved himself up. “—you’ve got good eyes and sense, Your Grace. I have seen how you assess things, and you seem to have the ability to predict moves based on patterns.”

“That’s... not a good thing?”

“It is a great thing, but you need to be wary,” Magnus reached for his water and swallowed half of the waterskin in one gulp. “Relying on patterns may deceive you,

and a seasoned fighter will use patterns as feigns and unleash unexpected attacks while you are preparing for another one.”

Swiping the sweat from his eyes, Magnus added, “If you keep training like this, the first match will be a shoo-in for you.”

“But the others?” William reached for a rag in his corner.

“Those blighters are crafty.” Magnus sat again, this time with his back to the post behind him. “They have years, nay, decades of tricks up their sleeves, dirty ones too. You’ll have your work cut out for you when you start to climb the ranks.”

Rolling his neck, William grunted. “I wouldn’t think anything else.”

“Your Grace,” a man beckoned to William while he had his back on the ropes. He stuck out a folded paper. “A message for you.”

Unfolding it, he read Silas’ slashed writing, You’ve been chosen. First match is in eight days.

It was only when Lady Ruth, a countess that had been a beauty in her heyday, her daughter, and their three footmen stepped out of the shop, did Bridget suck in a breath and let the tension in her shoulders fade.

The lady reminded her of goshawk with a mouse under its piercing gaze and Bridget felt like that mouse. Comments like ‘girl’ or ‘child’ and the most demeaning one, ‘chit’. It made her feel dejected and diminished.

She could not— would not—dare admit to being a lady of the ton for they would declare her a liar and laugh into her face.

“Is she always so... direct?” she asked Mrs. Abernathy, afraid to say the more suitable word she wanted to say.

“Well, she was married three times, widows for two and her now husband is a milksop who cannot say no to her, so yes, she is that unyielding,” Mrs. Abernathy nodded while taking another bolt of cloth from the shelf. “Take comfort in her compliment, Bridget, she does not give them out freely.”

“I surely will,” she agreed.

That evening, just as Mrs. Abernathy closed the shop, Bridget stepped out and wrapped her shawl around her. She knew her godmother would be very happy with the half-crown; it would buy them food for two weeks. She made to walk off when a very familiar carriage came around the corner.

“What is Ellie doing around here?” she wondered aloud to herself.

When the blue lacquered carriage came to a stop beside her, the footman jumped down and opened the door for her. Stunned, Bridget stared into the plush interior as if she had never seen or ridden in a carriage before.

Ellie, clad in a peach carriage dress, tilted her head to Bridget, then sighed. “What are you waiting on, Bridget? Do I have a stain on my dress or a smudge on my face? Come in, for heaven’s sake. You and I need to have a conversation, and this time I need you to listen to me.”

Apprehensive, she stepped into the carriage and sat across from her friend, hunching in on herself. Eleanor’s eyes grew concerned. “What’s wrong, dear?”

“Nothing,” Bridget replied, but her still voice and subjected form said otherwise. Knowing her friend was not going to accept that answer, she admitted, “Today I had

another client that showed me how much I am disconnected from the ton, from the other ladies. A lady came in with her daughter, eligible for marriage, dressed as pretty as a picture.

“It’s... not my nature to be woe-is-me, but when these moods descend, once in a blue moon, I’d say, it shows me what I could have become, and knowing it might never be... it made me feel invisible and... hopeless.”

Sympathetic, Ellie reached for Bridget’s hand. “I know it’s been tough, Bridget, and the card life has played for you can and will be shuffled. You might feel like a jester now, but you’ll be a Queen soon, and I know just how to go about it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I have secured an invitation to a ball where, if the rumors are to be believed, a certain gentleman will attend that most eligible ladies of the ton would sell their eyeteeth to marry, while the lesser ones would sell much more for half a chance at that.”

Bridget blinked. “But if there are so many ladies after him, many with more fortune and higher station, I’d imagine, how would I ever get closer to gain his attention?”

“That is the magic of a masquerade, dear,” Ellie smiled mysteriously. “With a mask on, you may have the freedom to charm him more than if you had met him face-to-face.”

“I—” Bridget paused. “I do not know how to flirt. It is an art I never mastered.”

“Even better,” Ellie smiled. “He might be bored to death with women batting their lashes at him and their coy euphemisms. Your fresh honesty is your best bargain, and I know you can and will use it to your advantage.”

“Meaning... I have one chance and one only,” Bridget swallowed, her fingers tightening over her skirts.

“And you must use it wisely.”

CHAPTER 5

“ A masquerade ?” William dropped the invitation. “You are jesting, surely? Do I look like a popinjay to you? A dandy perhaps?”

“No,” Colin crossed his legs. The light flowing in from his mullioned study windows turned his brown hair a burnished bronze. “You look like a man who severely needs female company, the good kind, not the women of night kind, not the paid courtesan that could spill your secrets kind. You need clean entertainment, Arlington. Do you even remember how to waltz?”

Narrowing his eyes, William added, “Do you remember how to shoot a pistol? Keep pushing me and you might meet me at dawn.”

Rolling his eyes at the empty threat, Colin poured another splash of brandy into his glass. “I know you’re busy running around from bed to gambling parlor and playing this masked boxer, but for heaven’s sake man, try to repair your reputation with proper channels.”

Plucking the invitation, William fiddled with it, then said, “I’m not as free as I used to be, Thornbury.” He took a mouthful of whiskey and added, “I am joining the Circuit.”

“What?” Colin asked. “You’re becoming a lawyer? I knew you studied rhetoric at Oxford, but I had no idea you were willing to help people.”

This time, William rolled his eyes. “The other Circuit.”

It took Colin a hair longer than William expected him to catch on, but when he did, his mouth fell open. “That Circuit?” he dropped his voice to a strangled whisper. “The grand battle of prizefighters? Are you mad?”

“Yes,” William replied, then shrugged. “Or desperate, you could say. There is no difference. I just need to clear off my debts that are accruing interest every day, and there are only so many assets I can sell off without losing my family’s legacy altogether.

“If properly executed, it is the swiftest way to rebuild my fortune after I gambled away a good amount of money from the family coffers. Now that I have a shot at redemption, I will take it.”

“But...” Colin paused to consider. “...what if your true identity comes out? We know you have your pseudo-persona of the Masked... what was it again?

“Marauder.”

“But what if your true identity is revealed?” Colin leaned in. “This reputation you are trying to rebuild might be dashed if it gets out. A gentleman boxer is... unheard of, and surely you know that.”

Tracing the rim of his glass with the tip of a finger, William replied, “I might make a new trend. Who knows, and it matters not to me. My history will always be in the back of people’s minds, and I don’t think a damn thing will shock them anymore.”

“This is dangerous.”

“I know.”

“You may get grievously injured.”

“I am aware.”

“You may die.”

Taking another drink, William recalled another moment when he had woken up on the floor of his home, drunk on a mixture of liquor that had sent him into a torpor of agony and praying for death.

“Not something I have not faced before,” William replied.

Ruffling his hair, Colin crossed his legs and sighed. “Well, if you’re ready to sign yourself over, at least take a night of upstanding entertainment before you do.”

“You’re never going to let over on this damned masquerade, are you?” William drawled.

“No,” Colin laughed. “I would strong-arm you into it if I had to.”

Snorting, William took a drink, “I would love to see you try. But since you asked so kindly, I will be there, only do not expect me to come as any simple character either.”

Stalled, Colin asked, “What will you come as?”

“You’ll see.”

“I think it's time you rejoin the le beau ton, my dear,” Eleanor said while fixing her skirts. “I have an additional invitation to Baron Thornbury’s masquerade, and I am giving it to you. ”

“What?” Bridget asked, eyes dropping to the card Ellie had just plopped in her lap.

“A ball? Ellie, you know I cannot—”

“You can and you will,” Ellie said calmly, “Sometimes I think you’ve forgotten that you are still a lady of the ton, and you still have the right to dance and mingle and enjoy the advantages your birthright gives you.”

“I...” Bridget traced her fingers over the gilt leafing in the corners. It had been a long time since she had held an invitation like that; years ago, they used to come by the dozens. “...don’t have a costume, or a dress.”

“It is in ten days’ time, surely you have time to put something together?” Ellie asked, her brows lifting.

Biting her lip, Bridget thought of the few dresses she still had, and she remembered a white gown she could adjust into something presentable—only, she needed a few things. “Would you be able to secure a couple of things for me?”

“Whatever you need, dear.”

Sitting on her cot, she ran her hands over the soft silk of an ivory dress she’d purchased years ago. It was dated, but she could alter it to hide those flaws. Her eyes dropped to the bags of dove feathers Ellie had acquired for her. It would be an easy task to turn the simple dress into a stunning angel costume.

She heard the soft shuffle of her godmother’s slippers on the corridor beyond and she lifted her head when the older woman came to the door, two cups of tea in hand.

“Do you have a minute, sweet girl?” her godmother, Lydia Turner, began, resting both cups on the end table. “I would like to talk to you for a moment.”

‘Sure, Aunt,’ Bridget used her preferred honorific while shifting on the bed. “Please sit.”

While edging into fifty, her godmother, who she called her aunt, a spinster by choice, sat and handed one cup to her. “Do you think it is time to rejoin the world beyond these walls and the seamstress shop?”

Slowly, Bridget sipped the tea. Though this was the second brewing of the leaves, it still held its essence.

“Lady Eleanor said much of the same to me today,” Bridget nodded to the dress lying on the bed. “She gave me an invitation to a ball in a sennights time. I am trying to see if I can get a few things together.”

“Oh,” Lydia blinked. “Why, isn’t that just wonderful of her. I am so glad you still have supportive friends, my dear, and you are thinking of going, are you?”

“Yes,” Bridget replied, swallowing down her nervousness. “It will be good to mingle with the others while I have the chance.”

Patting her hand, Lydia nodded. “That’s good to hear. You know I only want the best for you, dear. I know life took a turn you never expected, but I am pleased with seeing how you reacted to it, how you’ve taken the hardships and risen above them.”

The only thing Bridget could muster was a faint smile.

“I know you still have hope for a husband,” Lydia continued, “and I do pray such a man will come about, but I hope you know, if the circumstances never align, you can live a fulfilling life still.”

While her godmother was right, the thought of living without companionship tore at her. While many ladies in the ton vied for the top bachelors in the Season, dreamt of being wed to the richest lord, having all the comforts riches could give them, traveling the whole world, buying the biggest jewels and gowns; Bridget did not.

Her dreams were simple: all she wanted was a husband to love. He didn't have to be extraordinarily handsome or exorbitantly rich, just nice, decent, and understanding.

She wanted an upstanding sort of man who wouldn't mind her flaws and who would enjoy spending time with her, doing ordinary things. To have a place where she would feel safe and always belong.

"I know, Aunt," she said, picking at her skirts. "If anything, I just want to enjoy myself as best as I can. And... and as for a husband, as much as I desire to be happily wed, that is... I suppose that is God's plan."

"That's the spirit, my dear," Lydia replied, while gently easing off the bed. "I shall leave you to your work."

Looking down on the gown, Bridget reached for a bag of cured feathers and touched the smooth, silkiness of them. Wonderful. They would do. Pulling out her needle and thread, she went to work, the first night of many to come.

The moment Colin laid eyes on William, or rather the costume he wore, the glass in his hand slipped and shattered at his feet.

The Baron, dressed like Robert the Bruce, gaped. "Good God, man, are you trying to send half my guests into paroxysms?"

Lifting his horned mask off, William shook out his hair. "They all term me as a devil, so why not show them what they believe?"

"But must you have a horn on your mask—" Colin's eyes dropped to William's feet. "—and modified your shoes into hooves?"

"It's part of the fantasy," William grinned, brushing the half-cape from his shoulder.

“The Devil is the Cloven Hoof, is he not? So there should be a hoof somewhere.”

“You are incorrigible,” Colin scoffed while waving over a waiter and taking two flutes from the tray. “Please tell me you will be sensible tonight and not seduce an innocent inside the kitchen cupboard.”

Slanting an eye to his friend, William asked, “And what on earth would cause me to be in your kitchens? Do you think I have a dash of cooking sense?”

“No, but you do have an uncanny ability and sense of spying who is corruptible, or have you forgotten your nickname from four years ago? They monikered you The Ravisher for a reason,” Colin fiddled with his Ottoman Sultan’s robe. “It is not as if you were raiding apple orchards.”

Turning, William glanced at his reflection in a nearby mirror—the onyx of his breeches, boots, and linen shirt were only broken by a gray waistcoat with red piping, a lurid red cravat, and a ruby pin. The horn on his demi-mask was made of stiff paper, curved into a wicked point, painted bloody red, and curled over his tousled hair.

“We shall see,” William promised him while surveying the floor. He saw mermaids, goldfish, queens, and goddesses galore, costumes he had expected. He could not measure how bored he was with them.

“Am I late?” Andrew’s voice cut in and both turned to see the Viscount clad in de rigueur dinner attire as the demi-mask he wore felt like an afterthought.

“Very,” Colin didn’t hide his displeasure. “And you couldn’t dress for the occasion?”

Glowering, Andrew replied, “Be glad I came at all.”

Ignoring his friends, William leaned on the balustrade and looked over the guests

below. Even with the plethora of masks and cloaks, he recognized some ladies, some he had kissed, some he had taken to bed, barely enough of them memorable.

“Must I be so jaded?” he muttered, sipping champagne.

An errant thought came to him—maybe he was not jaded, maybe he was just tired, tired of the thin veil of self-righteous superiority from the ton when he knew the men and women were downrightly savage.

The men were animals in smart suits and society ladies were the most cutthroat, ready to rip another lady’s reputation to shreds, backstab and seduce their way to the top whilst smiling and sipping tea with their pinkies lifted.

“Does true innocence and guilelessness exist in this world anymore?”

From his position so high, he saw the doors open and a lady entered, her pure white costume a beacon to his eyes, her feather-trimmed gown accentuated her angelic grace, the white perfectly draped over her petite slender frame. The neckline exposed her creamy shoulders, the rounded swell of her breasts, and her tight, nipped-in waist.

“Who is she...” he stared.

“What?” Colin turned to him. “Who are you speaking of?”

“I don’t know,” William replied while stepping away from the balustrade and stepping toward the doors, and grasping another glass of champagne on his way down. “But I will find out.”

He wound his way through the throngs of guests, his eyes honed on the young angel. When he neared, he saw the majority of her face was covered by a white lace mask, leaving mostly her eyes, a part of her cheekbones and lips revealed. The blond wig

she wore fell silkily over her shoulder and the ringlets quivered as she looked around.

“You look a little lost, my lady,” he said quietly.

Her eyes, so big and pure, found his face and her lips, rosy and full, parted on a breath, and he noted the bottom one had an inviting—and faintly familiar—divot at its center. She stared at him with rich blue eyes.

Swallowing, she said, “I don’t think it is wise to take advice from a Devil.”

“Spoken like a smart lady,” William smirked wickedly while offering her the glass. “But what if this Devil is looking for redemption from an Angel? Surely, you can help the most sullied of souls.”

“I am not sure I have divine powers, my lord,” she replied. “And even if I did, I am unsure I could cure you. If a gentleman dresses like the Cloven Hoof, certainly, he has done some wicked things.”

The strains of the waltz came from the orchestra, and William extended a hand and asked, “Would you do me the honor of your first dance?”

CHAPTER 6

It took a moment, but she rested her hand on his, and satisfied, he whisked her onto the floor.

Her gloved hand was much smaller than his, and he clasped it gently, but his other drifted a little lower on her back than was appropriate. She stiffened, of course, but did not pull away.

He couldn't prevent himself from gazing at the lovely curve of her cheek and her plump lips. Moving her onto the floor, he began the first forward step. She followed his lead without a falter.

"It has been too long since I waltzed," she said quietly, breaking their uncomfortable silence.

"As for myself, but you haven't lost the skill," he replied. "Clearly, you have been taught well."

As they glided over the floor, he cast around for a good question, finally remembering one he had uttered to Colin. "Are you a debutante? If you are, how is it that no chaperone gave me a quelling stare and warning to be utmost respectful?"

"I am somewhat of an anomaly," she replied quietly. "Not a debutante nor am I married; but somewhere in-between, in the ether of uncertainty," her lashes swept up. "Fear not, my lord, there is no chaperone to take you to task, though I do have a friend here that I must report to."

The tops of his thighs brushed against hers and leaning in, he breathed in and caught the freshness of her, rose water and a hint of lilies. She looked up at him, and in her gaze, he saw a multitude of emotions.

“In the same vein, do you have a female companion here that would be problematic for me?” she asked. “I would hate to step on your wife’s slippers.”

A disparaging laugh left him. “Wife ? Hardly. I am unencumbered, my dear, and yes, I do include children as well.”

“Why not?” she asked as he took her into a turn.

Once again, his eyes were drawn to her rosy and plump lips, and if how the lace mask molded to her delicate bone structure was any indication, she was a tiny little doll, and he wanted to see all her porcelain skin in his bed, under the moonlight.

My bed? Get a hold of yourself man, you never take a lady to your bed.

Any bed would suffice, he decided.

“Courtship is an endless circle of monotony,” he muttered. “The endless dances, curtained to two waltzes per night, the stifling strolls through the gardens and supervised carriage rides,” his top lips curled in derision. “Not to mention the visits with the parents, choking down dry watercress sandwiches, and discussions of the weather. No, thank you.”

“You are a bachelor then,” she said decisively.

“Confirmed and unwilling to change,” he spun them. “However, you must have beau’s clamoring at your door.”

“And that is where you are wrong,” she replied quietly. “I tend to fade into the wallpaper, my lord.”

“Sacrilege,” he murmured. “How can that be? You are gorgeous.”

“And how do you suppose that?” her lips curled. “My mask is covering my face.”

“What does show is enough to tell me you are devastatingly beautiful,” William replied as the music crescendoed. “She walks in beauty, like the night, of cloudless climes and starry skies. And all that’s best of dark and bright, meet in her aspect and her eyes, thus mellowed to that tender light which heaven to gaudy day denies.”

“Byron,” she said. “Such sweet nothings. Do you use poetry as ammunition in your seduction, my lord?”

“You agree that I am seducing you?”

“I mean to say seductions,” she stressed the s. “You do not go to be alone at night, do you?”

“You’ve avoided the question,” William replied.

“So have you,” she pointed.

“Touché,” he responded, “But am I seducing you?”

Her breath was shuddery. “Sadly, no.”

“I shall try harder then,” he said before taking them on a dizzying spin. “If you stay around for a few more dances that is.”

“You needn’t try,” she swallowed. “I won’t allow you to tempt me into your bed.”

His laugh was soft and smoky. “You misunderstood, my dear. If done right, seduction is not about me leading you into my bed. It is about me giving you enough reasons that you would want to do so yourself . Do you care for a wager?”

“And what would that be, my lord?”

“If by midnight, I don’t earn a kiss from you, I shall never bother you again,” William laid out the first term. “But if I do earn myself a kiss from those rosy sweet lips, you shall allow me to pursue you.”

His knuckles followed the trail of his words, a hot graze against the side of her face and neck, and he trailed his fingertips over her silky, rounded cheek, feeling the rising warmth of her blush down to her piquant little chin. Her eyes were wide and slightly glazed, like that of a doe confronted by a predator.

“Do you agree?” he asked. “It is just a little fun, my sweet, no harm will be done.”

“You lie,” her breathless voice drew him back. “If I do let this happen, I will be harmed.”

With deliberate insolence, he tucked the strand of hair behind her ear, his knuckles grazing the tender shell. Satisfaction flooded him when she trembled in response to his touch. “It is a battle of wills, then.”

“I—” she looked over his shoulder. “Everyone is staring.”

“Let them,” he finished.

“I—I must go,” she pulled away and curtsied before hurrying away. The flare of her

cloak was the last thing he saw before she vanished in the crowd.

Oh yes, seducing the impetuous little goddess would be a simple matter. Almost too easy. He didn't know which would be sweeter, chasing her or witnessing her succumbing to his wiles. By the time he was done with her, he'd have his cake and eat it too.

There was something unsettlingly familiar about the Devil in Red . Not only was he the same height and build as the man who kissed her that night in the alley—his voice evoked the same shivers up her spine too.

“The Beast of Brookhaven,” she whispered to herself while finding a refreshment table, and hastily picking up a glass of water. “Could it be...”

It was improbable... but not impossible.

For her first foray in a ton's ball in so many years, she felt that she had not touched her toe into the water; no, she had jumped into the deep end without a care. Was she that unlucky that the first gentleman she had met was a rake instead of a decent, upstanding lord?

Seek out Graham Haswell, the Earl of Hansen, Eleanor had told her. They call him the new Bard of the ton. He's a poet, smart, successful, and has not a smudge to his name. If there is anyone you should endear yourself to for a future courtship, it is him. And he is handsome, by the way.

Setting the glass down, she looked around the room, as another piece of advice from her friend flitted through her mind.

At masquerades, he is always dressed like Richard the Lionheart, and wears a stole with golden fur around his shoulders.

Banishing the rogue in red from her mind, she decided to look for the Earl and found him across the room, under a canopy with a Greek motif and a few ladies hemming him in like a mouse under a goshawk's eye.

How could she bypass these women and hold his attention?

As she contemplated the conundrum, she passed under the arched entryway and someone bumped into her back, causing her to trip, gasping as she hurtled forward.

Her hand flew out, bracing for impact with the floor—but collided with something else entirely that was firm and solid...

Blinking, she found herself in a man's arms—Lord Hansen's arms.

"Easy there," he said, amusement in his tone. "Are you all right, my lady?"

Mortified, Bridget thanked everything that was good and holy that she had not been holding a drink in her hand. "I—I sincerely apologize, my lord. I hope I have not..."

"Injured me?" He set her on her feet. "Hardly, my lady, you are as light as a feather. The only thing you have accomplished is interrupt a conversation."

"I am in your debt," she swallowed and tried not to pay attention to the glares digging into the side of her neck. "Pardon me."

"Since you are in my debt, I will ask for repayment, and I ask you to stay with me, with us, and join our conversation," he said, fixing his stole before gesturing for a waiter to come over to them. "I do not believe that I have seen you before. Do I know you, my lady?"

His short, coal-black hair topped a face more rugged than handsome, his nose a tad

crooked, with kind, gray eyes.

“No, we have not met before,” she said, taking a fortifying sip of the smooth champagne over a tight throat. “I am Bridget Wycliff, daughter of Viscount Marchwood.”

“It is poor form to introduce oneself,” a lady with a plumed hat quipped nastily, her fan fluttering. “Where is your chaperone, girl?”

The snub was not subtle, but Bridget had formed a defense against such attacks; simply pretend that she did not understand them to keep her expression cheerful and feign ignorance.

The strategy, while effective, pulled out all of her willpower, determination, and composure, to keep her manner bright as the slights pierced her skin, their poison seeping into her innards.

“I came with a friend,” she replied. “Who is otherwise engaged?”

The lady sniffed. “Are you sure you are old enough to attend this ball, dear girl?”

“I am,” she notched her head up. “I have absented myself from the majority of the ton’s assemblies because the games the other ladies play exhaust me.”

The other lady narrowed her eyes as her hand fixed around the flute so strongly, Bridget feared it would shatter. “Games?”

“The mind games,” she said bravely, knowing she was going to rub a lot of people—perhaps these two ladies too—wrong. “Not to cast allegations on anyone, it is plain that the ladies of the ton undertake every avenue they have available to make sure they come out on top.”

Snapping her fan closed, Lady One glared. “How rude of you. You need to—”

“Actually, I would like to hear what she has to say,” Lord Hansen interrupted. “Please, go on, and don’t censor the truth for politeness.”

Nervous, Bridget looked to the ladies and ignoring their scowls, continued, “Cliques are formed, rumors are made and dispatched to cut another lady down and tarnish her reputation, so her prospects of marriage are null. No one is as hateful as a friendly face that desires what another has.”

Lady Two laughed, her tone high and brittle. “Oh, this one considers herself an original, I assume. That is quite a conspiracy you have, dear.”

“Utter nonsense,” Lady One tittered, but her eyes glimmered with malice.

“...No,” Hansen replied, giving Bridget a staying look. “She is right and we know it. There is no kindness when it comes to putting oneself ahead. Lady Bridget, do you care for a turn around the room?”

“B-But Lord Hansen, were we not having a conversation before this—this interloper came in?” Lady One spluttered, aiming brimstone and hellfire at Bridget.

“We were,” Lord Hansen extended his arm toward Bridget. “But the topic was about the past balls, which lady was ruined by rakehells and who is definitely shoved onto the shelf and unmarriageable. I find her points very poignant, now please, excuse us.”

The light from the chandelier reflected in his eyes, which were lighter than she’d expected, and she had the sensation of losing herself in everlasting moonlight. “Don’t worry, Lady Bridget, you will always be safe with me.”

“Thank you,” she said, stifling the shudder in her words. “I do feel guilty though,

taking you away from your... companions.”

“You needn’t worry,” he shot her a soft smile. “They were not saying much. Many ladies here are precisely like you said, willing to tear another down not only to take their place but simply because their mean-spirited hearts enjoy it,” his head canted to her. “May I compliment you on your fine looks this eve, Lady Bridget?”

“You are ever so nice to say so,” she replied, her voice trembling.

Once again, she took the moment to discreetly gaze upon Lord Hansen, and her eyes dropped to his lips... out of nowhere, the memory of another mouth assailed her. Hard, sensual lips, made not for poetry but for sin.

Yanking her head away, she felt heat flood her insides, her nipples prickling beneath her bodice.

He chuckled. “You can look, my lady, I am not a cursed gorgon who will turn you to stone.”

“I—” she paused. “It has been a while since I have attended a ton’s masquerade. As I said before, some ladies are not nice.”

Especially since my father passed and my brother sunk us into debt.

“I am sorry you’ve suffered such discrimination,” Lord Hansen said, “And please, call me Graham.”

She laughed. “As much as I would love to, Madame Tillerman would rise from the grave and smack my knuckles with a ruler at the impropriety. Please bear with me as I call you my lord, until I feel comfortable calling you as you requested.”

“You attended that Madame’s school?” he peered at her. “My sister went there too and nearly buckled under the pressure.”

She blushed. “Perhaps it was because I stayed in the library most of my time there, and buried my nose in books, scrolls, and tomes as thick as that column over there.”

As she nodded to the column, her eyes glanced up to a balcony above, where the Devil lord leaned on the balustrade, overlooking his domain like a dark king. She swallowed and turned to Lord Hansen.

Ignore him. Lord Hansen is a staid choice and a sensible one. He is the sort of man I should be looking to be courted by. Forget the devil lord and the man in the alley, do the best for yourself, and choose a respectable man.

“My lady,” he smiled. “Would you like to dance?”

CHAPTER 7

“Have your little fun, pretty lamb,” William murmured while keeping his eyes locked on the lady below, her white costume a beacon in the dark. “I will see you soon.”

“Arlington,” Colin came closer. “Some of the lords are convening in the billiards room for cards and drinks. Will you join us?”

“No,” William replied while not losing sight of the little angel below. “Go enjoy yourself.”

From the corner of his eye, he spotted Colin’s brows draw together, then he followed William’s train of sight, and a liberal sigh left him. “Good god man, please do not tell me you are planning on corrupting the pure girl?”

“And how do you know she is pure?” A possessive growl left William’s mouth.

“But you are planning on corrupting her.”

“Answer my question first.”

Instantly, Colin had his hands up. “I have never touched her. Matter of fact, I do not know who she is, so please, shelve the undue jealousy for God’s sake.”

Sedated, William grunted. “I won’t be tempted to the card table or drink. Not only am I unwilling to risk what I barely have, I am also in training for the Circuit, Thornbury.

Hard liquor impedes my judgment.”

Glancing at the lady below who was twirling with Hansen, Colin smirked, “I see something else that is impairing your judgment.”

“Thornbury?”

“Yes?”

“Go away, enjoy your cards, cloying cheroot smoke and liquor.” William’s eyes lifted to the clock on the far side of the room and grimaced. It was a quarter to eleven and his time to win the kiss from the lady was slipping away. “I need to think.”

Cackling, Colin walked away, and William descended the stairs to the ballroom as the jig ended and the minuet was announced. He joined the line strategically where he would be able to be one of the angels’ partners.

By the end of the night, I must learn her name.

He fixed his gaze on her face, willing her to look up and meet his eyes, but the way she kept her head down and her blush trailed to her hairline... he smirked. She damned well knew he was there.

The dance began and while William hated such a stodgy dance, he would endure it if he got to touch her again. On the first turn, his palm met hers and her eyes dropped.

“Keep your eyes on me,” he ordered softly, and when her lashes swept up, he smiled. “There you are, sweet girl.”

They parted and met different partners, but William craved going back to her and forced himself not to hasten the steps and spoil the dance for the others.

When he twirled to his angel again, he pressed his hand tighter to her. “The next waltz is mine,” he told her as he met her eyes. “Whatever you have with Hansen, I care not, but that waltz is mine.”

She swallowed. “You are a bit arrogant, aren’t you?”

“No,” his lips twitched. “I am very arrogant, selfish, and entitled, but I am also wise enough to know my vices.”

She made to reply but was forced to turn and meet her other partner, and when they finally reunited, her eyes were calm. “What virtues do you have?”

“Longer than my vices,” he whispered. “And I would like to show you some before you leave this night.”

Her head turned and he caught a glimpse of gold around her neck, and it felt like torture to spin away and dance with another. He did the last turn, eager to meet the angel once more and then get away from the dance floor until the next waltz.

“The north garden, there is a white-painted gazebo,” he dropped his voice. “Meet me there after this.”

They parted and he briefly slipped his fingers through hers, then pulled away and headed to the overhead balcony. Betraying his decision earlier, he took a drink of strong scotch from the billiards room.

“You have decided to join us then, eh?” Colin grinned.

“No,” William snorted, threw back the rest of the drink, and reveled in the burn before setting the heavy glass down. “I have a prior engagement.”

“Oh god,” Colin muttered, his Scot accent slightly coming in, as it did when he let go of his stateliness. “You are set on ruining the little lass, aren’t you?”

Annoyed, he replied, “I am not, and devil take it, why must you keep assuming I am as despicable as I once was?”

Reticent, Colin’s shoulders fell. “My apologies. I suppose... I suppose we were so used to the man you were that it has become a sticking point with us. But still, Arlington, I do not think you should be doing this to the girl. You are not in the marriage way and teasing her with something she will never have is simply cruel.”

“And I’m simply having a bit of fun.”

“You have fun with bed partners who know what they are doing,” Colin added knowingly. “Virginity has no special appeal for you and we both know it.”

He was right, William did prefer women who knew the way around the bedroom, and while virginity was his antithesis... he felt a pull to this lady that he had never felt with anyone else.

Fixing his jaw, William headed down to the lower story, and as a new dance was in swing, he slipped out of a pair of glass French doors and headed to the garden. Would his angel meet him there or would she run from the mutual attraction he knew she felt?

“And when did she become mine ?” he grumbled.

He had chosen this garden because he was certain that the gazebo there had a blind spot. When he reached the small gazebo, hemmed in by trees, he leaned on the wooden balustrade and let the night air rake through his hair.

What did he really want with this woman?

Was it the intrigue she possessed? Was it her fresh beauty, or did he really want to claim her innocence? Or was it a revisit to the days when he could so easily charm a lady into his bed with a smile and a whisper?

Not much light came in from above as the moon was still enshrouded in clouds and the stars were dimmed.

He could not be certain of the time, but the moments ticked by like eons, and just as he decided that she was not coming—a soft crunch of pebbles under heeled silk slippers from behind him drew his attention, but he didn't turn.

She stopped. "...I'm here."

"I know," he replied, still not moving. "Tell me, angel, is a man like Hansen the one you want to be with?"

"Why not?" she asked. "He is a decent, upstanding fellow with not a black mark to his reputation."

"I will give you that the proper match in the le beau ton has everything to do with breeding, status, and money. Attraction can fit somewhere in the twisted tangle and if one is lucky, gain a love match, but in the end, the spouse that is chosen is undoubtedly the one whose status and pocketbook enhances one's own."

She came closer. "...What are you trying to say?"

This time, he did turn and stopped himself from clenching his jaw. "I suppose it should not be a shock that you fancy the man, even though he is as interesting as plaster. Half the chits in Town would give their eyeteeth to wed the bloody earl, but

since I am not a woman, please enlighten me, what do you see in that bloodless fop?"

Even by the faint moonlight, he could see the telltale signs of her blush. "I just told you why."

"No, you told me why every lady wants to marry the man. You did not tell me why you want to pursue him, or why he should pursue you," William said evenly. "Are you attracted to him?"

"What?" she gaped. "How is that any of your business?"

"Are you?"

"No," she said defensively. "I—I don't know. It is too early to tell. Why does it matter at all? We are not getting... involved."

"Aren't we?" he murmured, reaching out for her and pulling her closer. With both hands, he brushed the twists of loose curls that fell on either side of her jaw. Pulse thudding, he rolled his thumbs over her cheekbones, then tilted her head up.

Slowly, he traced his hands from her face down over her hip to the small of her back, pressed her closer than any legitimate waltz would allow until they were flush chest to hip. Silently, he moved his other palm up to capture her hand. "I told you, this waltz is mine. Let us dance, and after we are finished, maybe you will change your mind."

"There is no music," she said softly.

"Matters not," he replied, stepping back. "We shall make our own."

From the first step of the waltz, she followed his lead without a falter. The heat of

their bodies surrounded them, as did the mingled scents of heady perfumes from the flowers. The clouds above shifted, and the night sky blazed with stars, while her breasts pressed tight against his chest.

“This is scandalous,” she whispered as he spun them.

“I know,” his grin was unrepentant. “I prefer it this way.”

After a few steps, he decided to do something drastic to remove the apprehension in her eyes; bracing a hand on her back, he tilted back and lifted her off her feet, then took in a round of dizzying turns—and her breathless laugh rippled over his senses as she gripped his shoulder.

“That’s better,” he brushed his lips across her cheek.

The infectious sound warmed his chest, and when he set her back on her feet, she glowed with a youthful, dazzling energy. As they danced, he could not take his eyes off her.

“You are breathtaking,” he held her around another music-less turn.

“Thank you,” she replied. “But aside from you being a rake, I know nothing about you... though you do remind me of someone.”

“You could ask if you want,” he invited her, as his steps slowed.

Her gaze was steady, but by increments, her pupils expanded. A breath rushed out, and before she could draw in the next, he kissed her. It was no more than a flutter of butterfly wings, but it still rocked right through his body.

Her words were a whisper. “A gentleman would have asked first, but you are no

gentleman... are you?"

"Depends on what your definition of a gentleman is," he replied, his eyes coasting over her face and fighting the sense of familiarity. "May I kiss you, properly this time?"

She gave him the tiniest nod, and when her lips parted, he swept his tongue through her mouth, as he strangled the almost ungovernable need rising within her. His tongue slid against hers, and a molten wave washed through him at her soft moan.

The kiss tangled, growing hotter and hotter, and before he hoisted her upon a balustrade to feast on her, he left her lips to suckle her earlobe, to lick his way down her neck.

He fixed his mouth over a patch of skin beneath her ear, then licked and sucked gently, then with too much passion. A cry left her throat, helpless, as she arched against his mouth and buried her fingers in his hair.

Deciding to leave a mark on her skin, he mistook the tugs on his hair for passion, but when he realized she was pulling him away, he jerked his head back instantly.

Her bosom was rising and falling at an accelerated rate, an aroused blush made her face rosy, and her lips were already looking kiss-swollen. Staying in place, he waited as she lifted her hands between his, grasped his mask, then gently lifted it off his face.

The moment her eyes latched onto his face, they filled with fear and she stumbled back. "It's... it's you!"

What does that mean?

"Me?" he echoed. "What do you—"

“Stop, please—” she swallowed. “I need to leave.”

A hollow echo or a church bell rang midnight as she spun on her heel and lurched away—but not before his fingers slipped under the thin links of her necklace, causing it to snap as she darted away, leaving the necklace dangling from his fingers.

Standing still as she disappeared around the corner, his hand closed over the soft oval locket at the end. “She is not versed in kissing is she...” he murmured, “... and tastes like...innocence.”

The startling realization made his mind dart back to the night in the alley... could it be her? If it was the Miss in the alley, her fright would make sense.

As a brisk breeze chilled his skin, he belatedly realized that, once again, he had not learned her name. But if she was the same person as the one he had kissed in that alley, he would find her.

“All I have to do is shadow Lord Hansen,” he vowed, then looked at the locket. Prying it open with one hand, he read, “ To my dearest sister Bridget. Love, Frederick .”

Snapping it close, he dropped it in his inside pocket, “We shall see each other again... my dear Bridget.”

“Goodness gracious, Bridget—” Ellie grasped her skirts as they hurried to her carriage, her half boots clacking on the cobblestones. “—What is the matter?”

“I’m sorry,” Bridget gasped as the footman jumped down and opened the door. “But we need to leave. I—I—” kissed a rogue I should not have , “—may have endeared myself to a few ladies, which reminds me why I find these events unappetizing to say the least.”

After the footman helped Ellie in, Bridget took her seat across from her friend and finally felt some relief. Now she knew why that needling feeling about him being familiar had jingled in her mind. The Beast of Brookhaven had taken another kiss from her and it felt wrong, completely insane for her to feel so... enticed by him.

The first kiss had come about from her shock.

The second one had come about because she was curious.

What would cause a third?

There will never be a third because I must stay away from him. Rakehells like him are danger. If I get entrapped with him, I am the only one who would come away scathed.

"If that is the case, my dear, why do you look so flushed?" Ellie asked. "Surely, no insult can make you so red. I have seen you brush off humiliating comments with nothing more than a smile."

"These ones got to me," Bridget lied while opening the window shade. The cool air felt good on her skin. "It is hard to keep a bright smile when all around you are insults."

Ellie sighed. "I had wished the anonymity of this night would change things, that the mystery of the night would prevail for you. That, for once, the muses of fate would extend a well-needed boon."

"Well... I did meet Lord Hansen," Bridget admitted and nearly cringed at her friend's delightful cry. "He seems intrigued by the very things that set the other ladies on edge. I spoke about the cruel intentions some ladies have when it comes to their marital ambitions and how it destroys innocent souls."

“You did right,” Ellie shrugged. “Everyone knows it is the truth, but no one will admit it. You’ve done well, Bridget, he is a staid match and a sensible one. If you two do marry, I am sure everything will be as right as rain.”

Bridget thought back to the moment the Duke’s lips had touched hers—and felt her chest go tight. She could not breathe. Pressing a hand to her chest, she sucked in a breath.

This was not right.

This man could not—should not be affecting her this deeply.

I must forget him. He is no good for me. A rake like him is the exact sort of man any respectable lady must avoid. Who knows how many wild oats he has sown up and down the English coast?

At least I will not be another notch on his bedpost.

“I think,” she paused. “I should reach out to Hansen first, but it would be best to send him a letter with your residence. If it does go on, I will explain the truth of my circumstances to him and hope he does not turn away.”

Ellie smiled and patted her hand. “I will do anything I can for you, Bridget, you know that.”

“Thank you, Ellie,” Bridget swallowed over the tight knot in her throat. “I am so grateful for your help.”

“You can repay me by marrying well,” Ellie replied. “And Lord Hansen is the ticket. Believe me, Bridget, you won’t be sorry marrying him.”

I hope you are right.

CHAPTER 8

Even sequestered away in a little room by himself, William could hear the roar of the crowd assembled for his first match. Bracing his hands on the edge of the rickety table, he gazed at himself in the dusty brass mirror.

A gentleman boxer was unheard of in the ton but no one—aside from his two friends, manager, and valet—knew about his secret identity.

Whatever the case, he found himself immune to social scrutiny. It wasn't as if anyone saw him as a gentleman, after all. All they saw was the image he made sure they needed to see—that of a charming, arrogant, and indolent rake.

Now, though, when he saw himself, shirtless and clad in leather breeches and boots with his hands wrapped in white strips, he didn't know which persona he preferred.

“Arlington,” Silas strode into the room. “It is nearly time. Are you ready?”

Pulling away from the mirror, he reached for the leather hood with the eyeholes cut out, and tugged it over his head, and tied it. “I'm ready.”

“Remember the strategy,” Silas said. “They're starting you off with a brawler and not a real boxer but beware, Brooks is flashy but still a brute, so you remember to keep your guard up. He will pander to the crowd before delivering—”

“Uppercuts, I know,” William nodded. “It's his signature move.”

“He’s rung more than a few bells with that uppercut,” Silas added. “When he goes high, don’t go low, because that second hook will come out of nowhere to clock you in the sternum.”

“I’m aware.” William felt his heartbeat increase. “Let’s begin. I am eager to finish this battle before round five.”

“Well, power to you on that,” Silas grunted. “Just get through it alive, man.”

Though the match had not yet begun, the roar of the rabble was already deafening as he left the room and headed out into the night air. The mob on a corner off James Street in Covent Garden was larger than any he'd seen at his previous fights.

It was the best location as the Bow Street chaps hardly bothered with Covent Garden, deeming it a place unworthy of their attention as Spitalfields, Whitechapel, and other slums in Greater London.

Four stakes roped off the eight-foot square where the match would be held, and surrounding the ring were men, bet-takers with boxes of money and books open, pens flying. Beyond them, men—holding bottles of Blue Ruin and rum—were spreading as far as the eye could see.

“Move yer asses!” Silas hollered, his cockney accent loud and snapping. “The champion is coming through! Move!”

With practiced precision, he avoided the grubby hands grabbing at him and ducked under ropes to stand inside the ring. With the time handed to him, he took stock of the ring, the crowd, and the line of dark carriages in the far-off and sucked in a breath.

The Masked Marauder had no enemies that would try to assassinate him.

The Duke of Arlington did.

“The challenger approaches!” Someone else screamed out and like Moses standing in front of the Red Sea, the crowd parted for Brooks to come through.

The man was a beast; over six feet tall and with at least four stones of burly muscles over William. Before he entered the ring, Brooks raised his ham-sized fists, punching the air, and the crowd erupted in cheers and screams.

“All show, no substance,” William muttered.

Brawlers did not know the same technique wrestlers did, they were really the bottom of the pole when it came to prizefighting, and they employed brute force more than any strategy.

There was strategy in the punches, strategy in his breathing and footwork, and most importantly, strategy in knowing how to draw out a match and when to end it.

“Look at this mongrel!” Brooks shouted. “Before the night is done, I will have him collared and leashed.”

Resisting from rolling his eyes, William rested his arms on the ropes, flexing his tightly bound fingers, and assessed where best to land his blows. He noticed Brooks flexing shoulder, as if there was a tense knot there, and how his left ankle had a small limp. Was the man injured?

“Any reply, Masked Man?” Brooks guffawed.

William looked up. “The only dog I see here is you. You will be groveling by the end.”

He's all brute strength and no skill. You can take him.

Growling, Brooks jumped into the ring, cracking his knuckles and approaching William. "At the end, you will have my foot on the back of your head. I'll rip that mask off yer face and show everyone who you truly are."

"We'll see about that," William flexed his shoulder, then gave Silas the eyes. "Start the match—" then he looked at Brooks, "—and may the best brute win."

"Black and blue does not look good on you," Andrew said as he handed William a congratulatory glass of whiskey before sitting in the other armchair. "At least it's not on your face."

"That would be a tragedy." William pressed the cold crystal to the side of his face while he flexed his smarting shoulder. It was the one firm blow Brooks had laid on him with those ham-fists before William had unleashed his timed plan to take the man down. "Have I told you, I have insured my face?"

With Brooks being such a lummoX, he had little versatility or agility, and William stayed light on his feet, ducking blows and landing his own in at the man's weak points. It was not looked down upon to fight dirty in this arena and William used Barnes's disadvantages to his advantage.

In three rounds, he had Brooks up against the ropes, and by the fifth, the man's bluster proved to be all steam. A clock to Brooks' temple sent him down to the floor and that time, he stayed down.

"No, you did not," Andrew scoffed. "What did you earn this time?"

"A thousand and a hundred pounds altogether," William replied. "Enough to cancel a debt of mine that I need gone."

“Are you at any level concerned that you might seriously injure yourself or die?” Andrew asked.

“I’ve been on death’s door before,” William shrugged. “I am not that afraid.”

Leaning in, Andrew furrowed his brows. The light from the waning sunset through the window glinted over his cufflinks and the pocket watch’s chain.

“I knew you were a hellhound for years but being so blasé with your life concerns me, William. Where is this... ennui coming from? Do you not want to have a stable life? A relationship, a wife? Or is bed hopping the only intimacy you desire?”

Swirling his drink, William replied, “I have never lived a conventional life, Sutton, and moreover, I never wanted a conventional life. It's boring, it’s tedium, it's routine, and I have had enough of that from Eton and Oxford. And coming from one rake to another, is that not a tad hypocritical.”

“Just be glad my escapades have hidden all of yours,” William laughed. “They were all so agog with my jumping out of windows and scaling balconies to look at you entreating three women at Vauxhall.”

Sighing, Andrew sat back. “I am... deeply concerned for you, old boy, you know that.”

“I only have myself to blame,” William lifted a shoulder. “You know what they say about hitting rock-bottom.”

“I do,” Andrew nodded. “But is this the best way to go up, I wonder?”

“Meaning what?” he scoffed. “I won’t be plying myself out to a rich heiress to get blunt to shore up the hole I have dug for myself. A man fixes his mistakes when he

realizes he has made them. A boy's response is to have someone else fix them for him. I am the furthest thing from a boy."

Rubbing the back of his neck, Andrew added, "I have told you before, I can loan you the money—"

"And I have told you before, I need to fix my other debt before I get myself back into one." William took the last sip of his only glass and sat it on the coffee table. "It is not pride, as I know you are going to accuse me of parading around, but it is simply common sense."

Reaching for the bottle, Andrew poured another glass and lifted the bottle, wordlessly asking William if he wanted another. Waving his hand, William pressed his fingertips into the bruise and knew a long bath was scheduled for him later that night.

"When is the next match?" Andrew asked.

"In six days," William replied. "At least word has gotten out now that I am a contender for the Circuit's grand prize, and I know the harder competition will come my way. Along with it the better coin. Brooks was a brawler, a novice if you will, and seasoned boxers will be coming out of the woodwork."

"You must be exhausted," Andrew canted his head. "I will leave you be. I cannot imagine brawling, much less bare-knuckling another man."

"That's because the hardest work you do is scribbling your name on an investment account," William laughed.

"You forget that I fence," Andrew smirked. "It is a gentleman's sport."

"Swinging a foil around is not awe-inspiring," he scoffed. "Nor would I bet a ten-

pound note on a match to see two men dance around each other.”

“And that—” Andrew chuckled, getting to his feet and reaching for his jacket. “—is my cue to leave, before I call you every disrespectful name in the book.”

“Wouldn’t be anything I have not heard before.” William stood as well, moving to his room. “Please don’t call tomorrow, I will be comatose.”

After Andrew left, William made for his room and called for a bath while gently reclining on an armchair. The moment he closed his eyes, another face bloomed on the back of his lids *mademoiselle mystérieux*, her eyes vibrant, and her mouth ripe and trembling—she'd been enticing beyond words.

His instincts told him he had only scratched the surface of who the angelic Miss was. She was like a rare pearl just shucked from the ocean, a clean, unsullied, innocent gem on the inside, though her outer shell was hardened.

Why?

William knew he would have ample time to dissuade the girl from hanging her hat on Hansen—thank God he had honed his seductive wiles a long time ago, she would fall, he knew that.

But what happens after that?

He avoided that question like the plague.

Ten minutes later, with the help of his valet, Oliver, he sunk into the copper tub full of steaming water and relaxing lavender and sage oil, another tip his mentor had taught him.

The hot water penetrated his muscles and pulled out a sigh of satisfaction. His eyes grew heavy-lidded as the soothing scent infused his nostrils and the oils loosened the knots in his back and legs. Resting his head on the rolled-up towel behind him, he grimaced at knowing that a brawler had taken this much out of him.

Long mornings at Gentleman Jacks loomed over him, but he knew it was too late to pull out of this competition.

“Pardon me, Your Grace,” Oliver Lane knocked and entered. “A young lad is here to see you. Says his name is Ralph.”

“Oh, Ralphie,” William rolled his neck and winced at the cracks. “An intrepid young man who vacillates between honest work and whatever is on the fringes of society that will pay him but not get him sent to Tyburn Tree. Show him in please, and order the maids to keep an eye on the silver.”

When the lad, not more than twelve or thirteen, came in, he was sporting a tailored jacket, waistcoat, and breeches, the suit he used to pickpocket on Mayfair Street. Looking like that, the urchin could pass for the son of a well-to-do family.

“What news do you have, Ralfie?”

“I thought ye’d give me a better job than following a dowdy fob around town an’ spy on his mail.” The lad’s top lip lifted in scorn. “Anyway, it seems that the guv had got ‘imself an invitation to a singalong at Almacks to meet a lady next week, Friday night. I suppose it’s the same genteel lady you told me to be on the lookout for.”

“And was she there?”

“Nah,” he shrugged, “Ne’er seen a lady nowhere.”

“And where did you get this information about the sing-a-long from, Ralfie?” William asked.

“From a scullery girl named Anna,” Ralfie’s grin was wolfish. “She’s sweet on me, ya’know.”

“I’d imagine,” William’s smile was wry. “When did you say this singalong is happening?”

“I dunno,” he shrugged. “I’d ask Almack's that.”

“Anything else?” he asked the boy, “Or is extra information another penny?”

“Not this time,” Ralphie shrugged. “Y’ever been good to me mi’lord, so this is another tuppence of information with no fee attached. Anna told me the letter came from Lady Eleanor Pembroke’s estate.”

“I see,” William sat up. “Lane, give the lad a half-crown for his troubles and see him out.”

When the two left, William ruminated over what he had just been told. Lady Eleanor was an unassuming wallflower, sister to his friend Andrew, who lived alone and had the choice to marry or not, for her grandfather had left her a healthy inheritance. She was not the build nor the color of the lady he had kissed that night—if she were, Andrew would have his throat... so what was happening here?

“Well, the lad is off and the silver is safe,” Oliver said as he returned. “How are the muscles coming along and do I need to get some salve?”

“No, the water is working,” William replied.

“This Almack’s performance, Your Grace,” the valet asked. “Why are you attending when you despise those things?”

“The same reason Samson killed a thousand Philistines and why Jacob served fourteen years in indentured servitude for his two wives,” William replied. “A lady, of course.”

CHAPTER 9

“ I t shall be fine, Bridget,” Eleanor repeated for what felt like the tenth time. “Lord Hansen will be utterly charmed by your demeanor and brilliance, smitten by your appearance in your lovely gown, and if I were you, I would not be surprised if I had a marriage proposal by tonight.”

“You overestimate my charm, Ellie,” Bridget said.

It was a sennight after the masquerade and her first meeting with Lord Hansen. They were on the way to Almacks for a sing-along and she forced herself not to fiddle with her gloves.

Her peach dress trimmed with new pink ribbon and lace, and a matching pink underskirt, was another relic of the days she had graced many ballrooms and assemblies.

The streets of London were packed with carriages and pedestrians, and by the time they arrived at the assembly house, she was afraid they were terribly late.

To her relief, the moment they stepped onto the main floor, people were mingling with drinks in hand, casually in a chatter. Relief washed through her like a river breaking its banks.

Lord Hansen was not there and her heart sank with disappointment at this discovery— he’s not here yet, do not lose hope — when she saw another familiar face, and this one far less welcome. In the midst of the crowd of gentlemen of worthy

townsfolk stood the one man she had hoped never to run into again.

The Devil.

The Beast of Brookhaven.

The man who had seduced her with a look and a kiss.

Even while he was chatting with other lords, and not noticing her at all, she wanted to sink below the floorboards. Granted, when that kiss had happened, she had kept her mask on while she had removed his; he would not know her, while she did know him.

“Bridget, dear?” Ellie asked. “Are you ill? Your face is suddenly flushed.”

Her head snapped from the Duke to her friend while battling the heat surging to her face. “Oh, yes, yes. I am just... there is quite a bit of heat in here, isn’t there?”

Ellie frowned. “It is as chilly as winter. Are you sure you are all right?”

“I am,” she reassured her friend as much as she reminded herself to ignore the lout. “I am excited about tonight. I hope I can make a more profound impact with Lord Hansen.”

“As far as I have seen, you are doing an impeccable job of it,” Ellie fluttered her fan. “Your authenticity is your biggest selling point, Bridget. Keep being your true self and he will...”

Bridget found her attention split into thirds; one mind was focused on the timing for the program, the second worried about Lord Hansen, and the last... she could not stop stealing glances at the Duke of Debauchery if she tried.

What right did he have to be so handsome and charming, sophisticated and... He wiped a thumb over his lips, swiping a rouge droplet of champagne away, and her core fluttered, as she pressed her thighs together against a sudden lick of heat.

“He’s here,” Ellie said, her voice awash with admiration. “He is so handsome! No wonder he is one of this season’s most sought-after bachelors.”

Rising to her feet, Bridget risked a peek over at the object of her attention, who was now surrounded by a bevy of debutantes. His charcoal dinner-jacket and plum waistcoat, like all his garments, fit flawlessly on his lean, muscular frame.

Lord Hansen is a solid choice, he is a sensible one, not like His Grace.

Scapegrace is more like it.

The Earl broke away from the gaggle of admirers before he headed over to her and bowed. “I apologize for making you wait,” he kissed the back of her hand. “I think you have seen that I am like a hunted man.”

“The room does take on a different air when you enter it,” she replied after a sweeping curtsy.

“I should be saying that to you,” Lord Hansen smiled as he gestured to their seats. “May we?”

“Yes, please,” she replied, then turned and said, “May I introduce Lady Eleanor Pembroke, daughter of Marquess Pearson and my dearest friend.”

“Would this happen to be the lady you were to report to the night of the masquerade?” Lord Hansen bowed. “I am delighted to meet you.”

“As am I, your lordship,” Ellie replied as a tinkling bell rang through the room. “I think the program is about to begin.”

Before the program began, Bridget spotted a few heated glares spearing her way and swallowed; clearly, no one liked this nobody newcomer possessing the Earl’s attention and time.

Notch your head up, pay them no mind, she reminded herself. He is here with you, not them.

At the hour intermission, Lord Hansen genially offered his arm and they lingered at the refreshment table. She could barely taste the rich champagne for the thunder in her ears. “I hope you have not canceled any important meetings or outings for this night.”

“Not to worry,” he said, one hand stuck in a pocket of his trousers. “I would have sent notice if I had previous plans. Your friend there, are you staying with her for the season, then? I noticed the invitation came from her estate.”

“Ah, yes, I am,” Bridget lied. “Otherwise, I would have to travel far to be here. We met in finishing school, my lord, and she was one of the few who understood my need to be around books instead of people.”

“Let me guess, you loved the Bard’s romantic tales,” Hansen teased.

“I did,” she admitted, “But I loved *A Tale of a Thousand and One Night* more.”

“You are a romantic,” he guessed. “You wish for a Schahriar to your Scheherazade.”

“At times,” she replied honestly, her chin notched up. “But there comes a time when practicality is more prudent than such lofty dreams. One can have their heads in the

clouds but one must make sure their feet are firmly on the ground as well.”

“Those are the most prudent words I have ever heard a lady of the ton say,” Graham muttered, his brows lowering. “You are a breath of fresh air in a room of cloying perfume.”

She expelled a breath. “I am an open book, aren’t I?”

“It is part of your charm, my dear.”

While sipping, she noticed how the ladies in particular slid appreciative glances at her companion. “My lord, may I ask you a deeply personal question? Be free to not answer if you do not feel comfortable.”

“Unless you ask me the contents of my coffers, I don’t think anything you ask would be out of order. Ask away.”

“You are three-and-thirty, are you not?” she swallowed over her pulsing nerves. “Surely you should have found a wife by now? How is it that you have avoided marriage for so long?”

“I was traveling for a while,” he said, gesturing with his glass. “America, the West Indies, the Far East too. Most lords stayed here, gambling, racing, sowing their wild oats, and such things, but I had wanderlust, my lady. I decided to pursue a more academic and educational life.

“When I returned, I involved myself in the arts, in theater, in music, and donating to orphanages and sponsoring promising young men to Oxford,” he said. “It was only after I decided it was time to marry. I courted a few but I found most of them were just as you described earlier, with their heads in the clouds.”

Setting the glass to the side, Bridget excused herself. "I have to visit the retiring room for a moment, my lord. Shall we reconvene this conversation when I return?"

"Absolutely, for I have the same question for you," he smiled.

Turning, she headed off to the room and inside the water closet. Just as she entered, she heard a husky male voice slide through the slots. "He will never be your Sultan."

Startled, she almost dropped the ceramic bourdaloue.

Who was that?

Sauntering up to Lord Hansen, William greeted him. "Well, if it is not the saints of the arts himself. I shouldn't be surprised to see you here."

"But I am," Hansen grinned. "You avoid these things like the plague. How are you here? I pity the poor lady who is going to be under your sights."

William sipped his champagne. "Can a gentleman not simply enjoy the arts? Enjoy a change of scenery and some eclectic company for once?"

"A gentleman can," Hansen replied. "But your reputation precedes you, Your Grace, or was your title as London's most feckless rake a misunderstanding?"

"No, that one was accurate," he shrugged.

"Has no lady ever found the strength to change you?" Hansen asked. "Surely, shuffling beds like cards is tedious business."

"The reformation of rakes is the stuff of fiction, of those pretty words the Bard made us believe, the stuff of operas and ballads and songs." William threw back the rest of

his drink.

“In real life, a woman, no matter how virtuous she is, can no more change a man’s heart than a leopard can rearrange its spots. Speaking of ladies, were you not speaking to one a while ago, a petite little thing?”

“ Lady Bridget Wycliff ,” Hansen said, unsuspecting. “She is a lovely lady, Your Grace, please refrain from terming her as a little thing . We are courting, if you must know.”

“So, you are joining the marriage mart,” William said indolently, pivoting on his feet to look over the room. “It seems most of the men here are leg-shackled or are in the way to be. I do wish you well on your upcoming nuptials.”

“You can tell her yourself,” Hansen said, waving a hand. “She is coming this way now.”

Just as I had bargained.

Clad in a dressing gown of peach satin, her dark hair pinned atop her head, Bridget looked as radiant as Aphrodite. Her eyes widened a fraction before the expression was wiped off her face and replaced with genial calm.

“My Lords,” she curtsied.

“Actually, Lady Bridget, this is His Grace, William Hartwell, Duke of Arlington,” Hansen said, dropping a hand to her waist. “Or as others call him, the Beast of Brookhaven .”

Her eyelashes fluttered up and his chest took a wallop at the wonder-struck expression in her eyes, from the passion shining there... and the innocence. But then,

her eyes narrowed warily while her voice remained as sweet as honey.

“Oh, my sincerest apologies, Your Grace,” she said, dipping her head, “I am not well-versed on the crème-de-la-crème of London.”

This time, William feigned curiosity and inclined his head while staring at her intently, eyes shifting all over her face. She shifted uncomfortably in the long, drawn silence. “Have I met you before?”

She notched her head up. “No, Your Grace, I do not believe we have ever crossed paths before.”

“Are you sure?” He decided to play with her a little. “Please turn your head for me?”

Bridget balked. “Why, Your Grace?”

“I want to see if you have pierced ears,” he asked.

“I do not, Your Grace,” she said stiffly.

“Humor me,” William posted on his most charming smile, one that had women swooning and shedding their clothes.

Her jaw stiffened obstinately, and her eyes flashed with defiance, but he knew she would never disobey a Duke; her name would be struck black. Her lips pressed tight, but she angled her head and moved the tendrils of hair from her temples, showing her unmarred lobes.

“My apologies,” he said. “But thank you for humoring me. Well, Hansen, my felicitations on your upcoming... engagements. Please, excuse me.”

Turning away, he felt her eyes land on the back of his neck and just to rile her, pivoted, met her eyes, held her gaze, and after a moment, wickedly winked. She went bright red.

He snagged another glass of champagne from a passing waiter. The night was a success, he could leave. The hook was dangling, the bait was already set, and soon she would come nibbling. Until then, he had training to do.

CHAPTER 10

Sleep never came to Bridget that night as her mind was awirl with that boulder—Duke Arlington. The man who had kissed her twice and who had just stared at her with wolfish eyes, and damned if she did not feel like a doe under its stare.

The more she thought about it, the more she grew angry and inconsolable, but she did not know who she was angrier at, the man for kissing her, or at herself for accepting it.

Turning on her bed, she punched her pillow back into shape and dropped her head back down, scowling. From the moment the duke had sauntered off, her concentration had crumpled.

It had taken a lot for her to keep Lord Hansen unsuspecting, and though he hadn't seemed aware, and they had parted that night on good terms, she still felt like the night had failed.

At least the fire was built, warming the room and imbuing it with a cozy glow, but it couldn't battle the growing dread in her heart.

"His Grace," she huffed. "Scapegrace more like it."

But there was no point in spending the rest of her night wallowing in despair. It would only lead to overwrought nerves and spoil her final precious days with the Earl. Rising from her bed, she convinced herself that a visit to the library might do

her a bit of good.

One hand firmly grasped a brass candlestick to her right, its delicate flame flickering in the soft breeze, while the other hand quivered slightly as she pushed open the heavy oak door of her bedchamber.

She walked down the dimly lit hallway, her footsteps echoing deeply against the wood-paneled walls, frowning at how the carpet under her feet had changed from brown to blue.

Pushing in the door, she pursed her lips—it was the library Ellie had shown her. But where were the bookshelves and the chaise near the row of bow windows for a day of reading? Instead, she saw a flickering marble fireplace and a dark Aubusson rug with a wingback facing it.

She jerked to a stop— why was there a trousered leg stretched out from it, a pair of boots near it, and a male foot flexing before the fire? A muscled forearm then fell over the armrest and the hand was holding a wineglass by the bowl.

“It is about time you came,” the man’s voice was smoky. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

“Who—” she stepped forward and circled the chair. “—are you?”

His face was shrouded in shadow, and the fine linen stretched across his wide shoulders, draping over his narrow hips. It was unlaced at the collar, revealing the corded column of his throat, an intriguing glimpse of his muscled chest.

“You know who I am, Bridget ,” he said, leaning forward and she jumped back. “Or have you kissed so many men you cannot remember your first?”

“You—” her hand trembled. “You’re a scoundrel!”

“I am,” he raked her over with a slow glance. “But you are a wicked, wicked girl, meant for wicked things,” he murmured.

She bristled. “I am not!”

As attractive and as tempting as the man before her was, she could not allow herself to succumb to his blatant attempts of seduction. If she allowed him to tempt her from her good sense once, she would lose the only chance of doing what she wished—finding a husband—everything would come crumbling down and it would be snatched away from her.

“It would be wise if we parted ways and I do not see or hear from you again. We have been wholly inappropriate, and I cannot risk my future with a man like you,” she quickly said with all the courage she could muster.

He reached up and pulled the lamp from her hand, set it aside, and in the next moment—he hauled her into his lap.

“Bridget,” he murmured, the pads of his fingertips grazing her cheek. “Now, you know you cannot deny this—” he cupped her face in his hand and angled his head as he pressed closer, closer, and much closer, until she could feel his breath teasing her lips. “—is what you want.”

His lips touched hers and it was tender at first, no more than a brush of mouths, his kiss softer than she had expected and remembered, then his mouth settled on hers more firmly, a hand sliding to her nape to grip the base of her head, demanding her response.

His tongue traced the line where her lips met, demanded entrance and when she parted them, he pressed his advantage, sinking his tongue into her mouth.

A tide of pleasure washed over her, and her lips clung desperately to him. The kiss grew even more potent as she sighed and leaned into him, winding her arms around his neck, threading her fingers through his slightly too-long hair.

He explored her mouth as though intent on learning her, on owning her, on claiming every nook and cranny, and she allowed herself to relax into him, lost in a sensual haze. In turn, she touched her tongue to his, tasting him and letting all the new feelings wash over her.

He fixed both hands on her rear and pulled her flush on him, and resting over his groin, she felt a thick bulge against her thigh. Her cheeks bloomed with a rosy hue and his fingers brushed her lips, while his eyes were dark.

“Stop lying to yourself,” he murmured, both hands now cupping her unfettered breasts, giving them a proprietary squeeze. “Say whatever you want but you’re mine .”

She moaned as his hands molded her breasts, teasing the tight nipples beneath the fabric. “My darling, curious girl,” he coaxed, “all you have to do is admit it.”

The sharp pinch of his finger—had her snapping up in bed, gasping. Her vision swam, the fluttering curtains doubling and splitting into two and four before her eyes.

Dear God—have I had a wicked dream about that damned duke?

Stumbling from the bed, she went to the nearby washroom and dunked her hands into the basin of icy water, splashing her face and shocking herself into reality. Her hands were trembling, not from the cold, but the truth of how deeply those interactions with the duke had sunk under her skin.

In sleep, she had no control over her will, and she had let him do everything he had

wanted, his hands, his mouth, his command. He had owned her breath, her body, her soul— and in her dreams, she had never felt freer.

She felt the trickle of perspiration between the valley of her breasts, and the tips of her pebbled nipples, to her mortification, as her woman's place was throbbing and slick with dew.

Pressing a towel to her face, she dropped it and braced her hands on the basin. "I must avoid him. He is a danger to me and my future."

This time, however, in fear of dreaming of the boulder again, she pulled a wrapper on and headed to the library—and this time, the shelves she remembered stood firm in the gloom. It made her sigh in relief as she approached a shelf.

No wicked dream this time.

"Bridget, dear," Ellie handed her a card over their breakfast of crumpets and preserves. "This is for you."

Wiping her hands, she took the card and smiled at the Earl's seal—the crossed swords over a shield looked very medieval. She turned the card over and smiled at Graham's firm hand.

"My dear Lady Bridget," she read out. "I would be the most fortunate man alive if you would accompany me for a stroll through Hyde Park this Sunday. I love speaking with you and I am amazed by your fresh perspective on current matters that others blind themselves to. Would you deign to accompany me?"

"Lord Hansen invited me to Hyde Park," she set the card to the side, unwilling to sully it with a smudge. "I'm happy to hear from him."

“So am I,” Ellie smiled, reaching for a milk boat. “I am assured he is the best lord around who has the kind demeanor to overlook your circumstances and see you as who you are.”

Returning to her tea, Bridget nodded. “I am starting to sense that too.”

“However, last night,” Ellie added. “There were moments when you were severely distracted. What happened to shift your attention?”

Taking a sip to delay her response, Bridget wondered if her friend would accept the usual excuse, I am uncomfortable around the other members of the ton . She swallowed, “I thought I’d seen a lord who had once professed his desire to court me,” she lied, “I was nervous.”

“Oh,” Ellie blinked. “Was it him?”

“After an hour of trying to see if it was him, I realized it wasn’t,” Bridget said. “But by then, I’d begun to worry if Lord Hansen had noticed my inattention and I feared I’d lost him.”

She tapped the card, “Well, this says differently.”

“Thank goodness,” Bridget replied. “I must get back to the shop today, Ellie. Would your driver be so kind as to take me home?”

“Of course,” her friend nodded. “He is at your disposal whenever you need.”

“Thank you,” she replied, smiling. “So, what do you plan for the rest of the day?”

His side was hurting like the Devil had rammed his blistering fork into it and twisted, but William could only grin and bear it. He sipped his drink, the one for a week, as

Tollerman counted the pound notes.

“One thousand and seventy pounds to the letter,” the viscount dropped the last note. “Your debt is cleared, Your Grace.”

“Thank god for that,” he mumbled into the whiskey. “Now, I have four more to go.”

Shifting the money to the side, Tollerman reached for his glass as well. “Should I ask where you came into such a windfall in such a short time or is it better for my sanity not to know?”

“The latter,” William replied while forcing his face to stay stoic as his bruised rib smarted.

Brows lowering, the older man asked, “Arlington, I am worried. Are you doing well?”

“What do you define as doing well ?” William drawled dryly.

“Are you resting, eating well, or are you slaving over ledgers at night, robbing Peter to pay Paul?” Tollerman asked. “When you pay off your debts, are you going to start over again?”

“If you mean recklessly gambling and drinking myself into a wheelbarrow, no,” William replied. “Those days are behind me, but I sense you are begging to know if I will choose a lady, pay the pied piper, and get leg-shackled like every other lord in London.”

“I am.”

A flash of wide blue eyes, an innocent face, plush lips, and a soft kiss ran through his

mind. Bridget Wycliff was the lady he now knew was the one he had kissed that night in the alley and the angel at the masquerade.

I want her again.

“The answer to that is no. I am an unrepentant bachelor, and I will stay that way.”

“What of the dukedom?”

“What of it?” William shrugged. “It will survive, or it won’t.”

Sighing, the viscount sagged into his seat, his fingers fiddling with a corner of a ledger. “That is the most pitiful thing I have ever heard. Do you not believe in love, or companionship? That you, of all people, can have the best of the best?”

Companionship in bed, yes.

Looking into the glass, William wished the amber liquid would turn into an oracle and tell him what he needed to say. He didn’t think the other man would understand—or accept—when William told him, he was not too keen on the being a Duke part.

Everyone, ladies most prominently, saw the ducal title as prestige, but he felt it was purgatory. He had been born into the life, but it was not one he genuinely wanted.

He got to his feet and sat the cup down, “You wouldn’t believe the truth if I told you. Take care of yourself, Tolleran. I have another engagement I need to address.”

“Have I complimented you on your dress, my lady?” Lord Hansen said as they avoided another couple on the path.

Hyde Park at a fashionable hour felt like a circus instead of a promenade—all vied to see and be seen. They were strolling along Rotten Row, the most fashionable stretch of Hyde Park, and at this time of the afternoon, all the way to seven, members of the ton crammed the tree-lined path.

“One time or three,” Bridget smiled up at him from under her ribboned leghorn hat. “But I will pretend that I have heard it for the first time. Thank you, my lord.”

Lords descended from a cluster of gleaming carriages, helping glamorous ladies out to walk on foot whilst other bachelors paraded on horseback.

Under the mild sunlight, Hansen cut a dashing figure in his dark cut-away coat, crisp silver-gray waistcoat hugging his trim torso, his dark buff breeches perfectly fitted to his sinewy legs. A gem winked in pristine maize-silk cravat. The sun glinted off the rich auburn hair curling over his ears whilst his boots reflected a mirror’s shine.

Knowing she had won his attention and hopefully affection, she ought to have been prancing with joy to be at his side. Instead, that troubling dream kept interrupting what ought to have been a prime opportunity to advance her acquaintance with the viscount.

She should not give a fiddle about Brookhaven, or Arlington, or whatever he went by; all she knew was that it was best to avoid him.

Think how smug he would be if he knew you were thinking about him.

“Have you ever been to Rotten Row?” she asked.

His brow quirked. “My dear, we are on Rotten Row.”

Laughing, she reworded her question. “I was trying to be subtle, but I am asking if

you ever participated in latching phaetons to swift-footed stallions to make the dust surge sky-high.”

“Racing in the middle of midnight with bets thrown into a bag by wild young men who are completely bored with regular life?” Hansen teased. “Surely not. And they were not dappled grays, dear, they were chestnut beasts higher than my head.”

Giggling, she lifted her skirts to avoid a clump of dirt, before adding, “Surely not. You have no vices; such things are for men with no ambition or responsibilities.”

“If you have any more questions about my alleged vices, I shall direct you to my solicitor,” Hansen laughed. “But I promise you, my dear, my madcap days are behind me. As a matter of fact, a near miss with another phaeton has spurred my need to travel and consider my purpose in life. Do not judge me for being daring.”

“I would never judge you,” she said, shaking her head. “Daring is one thing, being a scapegrace is another—” Then, noting her faux-pas, rushed to add, “I am not calling you one, at all, I am—oh dear,” she sucked in a breath.

To her mortification, he chuckled, “I know what you meant, and no, I am not a scapegrace, but I know some who are. Speak of the Devil, one heads our way now.”

Her head snapped around and her heart fell to her feet—the deuced duke was heading her way. Had her thoughts summoned him? Was she cursed to always run into the man?

Her hands balled inside her butter-smooth gloves, and her cheeks grew uncomfortably warm. Why did the man affect her so? It made no sense. Even if she found him the teensiest bit attractive, it was no excuse for her actions. She had acted like a trollop with him.

Her heart thudded as she recalled the sensations he had elicited in her, not only when he touched her but even in her dreams; so strong... and intense.

His ink-black jacket and tan breeches were exquisitely tailored, molding to his long, virile lines. Above the bronze waistcoat, his cravat held a perfect knot, but what drew her eye—and everyone else's—were the two enormous Bloodhounds trotting at his side.

She forced a smile.

CHAPTER 11

Her eyes shot sparks at him, while her smile was as sweet as an angel, but he pretended not to notice. “Lord Hansen and Lady Brianna.”

“Bridget,” Hansen corrected him coolly.

“My apologies,” William said blithely. “What were the chances of crossing paths here?”

“Well, it is a Sunday and the touted fashionable hour, so I would assume the chances are high,” Hansen replied, his tone dry. “However, I have never seen you here before. Another miracle, is it not?”

“Divine intervention,” William said.

When one of his dogs nosed at Bridget’s hand, his tongue shot out, she eeped and nearly flew into Hansen’s arms—something he did not want.

“Atlas, Perses—down.” At their master’s sharp command, the dogs obeyed; their rumps hit the ground. “I am sorry for that. They are usually friendly boys. Did he bite you?”

“N-no,” she said.

“Humor me,” he grasped her hand and examined her soft gray glove. The moment he swept his thumb over the lines of her palm, she snatched her hand away as if his

touch scorched her.

“No damage, Your Grace,” she said, chin notched up, cheeks coloring defiantly. “Thank you for your concern.”

Hansen was getting cross and William knew it was time to move on... for now. “No damage,” he pulled away. “Enjoy your evening. Boys, come.”

Bypassing them, he headed off, while keeping an eye on the two. Bridget looked to Hansen and said something to which he nodded, and they headed off to another part of the park, less trafficked by the rest of the ton, with a maid strolling behind them.

Of course, he would find them again, by taking the opposite way.

The gall of the man! What a conceited nodcock!

“I apologize on behalf of Duke Arlington,” Graham’s lips pressed tight. “He is unschooled in ways of propriety.”

“Is he?” Bridget asked quietly as they strolled down the lesser traveled eastern end. “Or is it that he knows and flouts them?”

“Your guess would probably be more accurate,” the lord replied.

“His kind paint all the lords in London with a broad brush. Rakehells like him make everyone think a decent lord is a ruiner of ladies and the women are on guard when a lord comes to court her.

“In the back of her mind she thinks he is a scapegrace or a fortune hunter and it makes decent men have to strive twice as hard to prove themselves worthy,” he said stiffly.

“He is not aware, but I was in his year at Oxford and the rumors about him, how indolent he was, his devil-may-care outlook and his reckless bed-hopping with women hither and yon reviled me.”

“It would disgust anyone,” she said.

They rounded a corner that was near a medium-deep part of the lake when a shout had her head jerking. A hound—the Duke’s hound—was pummeling down the walk like a shot from a gun and was barreling right into Bridget.

Hansen twisted so the force would take him but panicked, she released his arm, felt his boot snag on something and her balance shifted. Her arms swung wildly in the air, the ground vanished beneath her—and the last thing she saw before she hit the water was Hansen’s hand flinging out to her.

Freezing water rushed over her head and burned her lungs as she fell, submerging her entire upper body in the pond, her screams lost in an icy abyss.

Seeing Bridget tip into the water made ice thread through his veins. That was not supposed to happen.

Without direct thought, he shucked his jacket off and dove head first into the water, and after three strokes, fixed his arms around Bridget, and pushing his boots off the bottom, swam them to the surface.

The moment she broke through the surface, she gasped in a lungful of air and spluttered, water trickling from her nose as her chest heaved. She was shivering too, and the moment he got them back on the trail, Hansen had his jacket off and was ready to wrap her into it just as her boots hit the pebbled ground.

William kept her in his arms. “Go get your carriage.”

“What?” he snapped. “No.”

“So, do you want to parade her, wet and shivering, before all the members of the ton?” William growled. “Do you want to mortify her?”

“You should have controlled your hounds,” Hansen grounded out.

“M-my l-l-lord,” Bridget shivered, as she hung onto William’s neck, “Please, please get the carriage.”

“Give her to me,” Hansen ordered.

“And leave me to fetch your carriage for you?” William asked. “That does not make a lick of sense. Do you want to dally and force her to contract consumption, or do you not find it prudent to carry her home so a physician can attend to her.”

Hansen’s face was a blustering thundercloud as he spun on his heel and headed to the other side of the park. William sighed and plucked his jacket before wrapping it around her and looking down at the girl shivering in his arms. “I am sorry. I never intended this.”

Her clumped lashes swept up. “Meaning y-you i-i-intended something else?”

“This way,” Hansen called as he strode to them. “The carriage is just beyond this pass. Hurry, we won’t have the solitude for long.”

Holding her tight to his chest, he took the trail through the tree cover until they reached the far side of the pond where they could continue a straight path and reach the drive—and in that instant, an entire group of ladies and two men rounded the corner.

Devil and Damnation!

The hush that fell over them knifed under William's skin, but he paid them no mind as he sat her in the carriage. "I'll have my physician sent for you."

"I'll take care of that," Hansen rebuffed him.

"No, you will not," William said, his tone steeled with authority, eyes narrowed in defiance. "This is my responsibility. My dogs were at fault here." Turning to her, he added. "Dr. Falderal will be with you by sundown, Lady Bridget."

"Y-you got my name r-right," she muttered as he exited and closed the door.

As he stepped away, his hand dropped onto Atlas' head while Guilt wrenched his gut—if it was not already so knotted, he might have felt the other feeling burgeoning under his breastbone.

Sucking in a breath, he ignored the gossiping group and headed to his carriage. His driver's brows shot up and the two footmen exchanged glances as he let the dogs leap into the carriage before him. "Just another day in the torrid life of Duke Arlington, my good men. Just another day."

"He did what!" Eleanor gaped as Bridget came from her warm bath. "That rascal!"

"It was not his fault," Bridget defended as her borrowed maid curled her dried hair in cloth strips. "Well, it was his dogs, but he did not push me into the river. Besides, he jumped in to fetch me from it. That should count for something, shouldn't it? And he sent his personal physician to assess me."

"I don't think that matters," Josephine said quietly. "This is the second interaction

you have had with him, is it not?"

She frowned. "Yes, but why does that matter?" He does not know it was me at the masquerade. Her eyes flickered between her two friends. "Do you think there is some sort of master plot afoot? It was a coincidence, you two. If anything, he might have been more inclined to annoy Grah— Lord Hansen . His Lordship told me he actively reviled His Grace when they attended Oxford."

Shifting to put her book to the side, Ellie asked, "You truly think this was a coincidence?"

"An unhappy one, but yes," Bridget sighed. "I cannot fathom what the gossip and rumors will be by tomorrow."

"Hmph," Eleanor snorted. "If he had any decency, he would rubbish any rumors and keep your reputation spotless. Lord Hansen, without a doubt, would make sure that everyone knew there was no impropriety. Even more, you had your chaperone with you. No one would dare call your character into question."

"Pardon me, my ladies," the maid said. "I am finished. Is there anything else I may do for you?"

"Yes, would you please place the medicine Dr. Falderal left for me on the end table of my room? Thank you," Bridget said kindly as the young girl curtsied and hurried off.

"Regardless, tomorrow we shall see the outcome," Ellie replied. "And if the devil duke does not defend you, we shall have words."

Giggling at her friend's righteous anger, Bridget said, "I would love to see you go toe-to-toe with a duke."

“My shoes have heels on them, dear,” Ellie smirked. “Toe-to-toe is not accurate; he will be at a disadvantage.”

An hour later, when Bridget retired to her rooms, she went to the chair where Duke Arlington’s jacket was thrown over the back of it. The dark jacket, made from the best cloth, was dry now, and, without clear reason, she lifted it to her face.

Even faded, his subtle, expensive cologne drifted into her nostrils, but as tantalizing as it was, his scent sparked her irritation—why did he have to smell like the very essence of virility?

She remembered hitting the water and sinking by a pounding heartbeat. Then—hard arms closed over her and suddenly, she was reversing direction. The veil of murky darkness shattered, exposing her to harsh brightness and cold air.

She blinked up into a halo of light. Was she dead? Was this heaven?

“Do not let go,” a deep voice commanded her. “I will not let you go.”

Dropping the jacket back in place, she left for her bed and slipped between the sheets. Her eyes grew hot and gritty. She did not know why the man affected her so profoundly.

She had not known the duke for long and yet... she dreamed of him almost every night and thought about him during the day, but not for the best reasons. She could not deny the intense attraction she felt toward him; his raw masculinity was irresistible, but he was the very opposite of the man she should yearn for.

Hansen was just as entitled, just as handsome, and certainly just as smart—so why did she feel the pull toward the duke?

Maybe it's because he was my first kiss.

He is a wicked man—but he saved my life.

He kissed me with such passion and tenderness—but for a rake like him, he probably kissed women like that all the time.

Turning on her belly, she pressed her face into the down-filled pillow and refrained from screaming in frustration. What had been his reasoning for kissing her the second time? It was not as if she had managed to give him a distraction in a dark alley for him to escape two cutthroats, no, what had happened at the masquerade was a mystery.

Was it for him to establish his dominance—and her showcase her inexperience—when it came to sexual matters? If so, he'd succeeded spectacularly.

Her lips pressed together. Fool me once.

“Keep your thoughts on Hansen,” she repeated to herself. “He is the only reasonable match for you.”

She drifted off with those words circulating through her mind, but then woke in the misty hours of the morning, and while her head was convinced, her heart was still at war. Even worse, when she washed and headed to breakfast, her steps slowed at knowing the gossip columns would have her name splashed all over them.

Ellie was in the breakfast room when she entered and her friend smiled. “Have you girded your loins?”

“Is it that bad?” she asked while making her tea. After sitting, she reached for that morning's issue of the Times and turned to the scandal pages.

“Wet Dukes and Drenched Debutantes,” Bridget kept her voice calm, as befitted a lady. “The readers of this newspaper will be familiar with the name William Hartwell, the Duke of Arlington, or as many know him, the Devil Duke, the Beast of Brookhaven, or the Rakehell of London, but none of us knows the young Lady Bridget Wycliff.

The lady is an anomaly which makes us question how she came into contact with the most profligate rake in Town. Witnesses recount seeing the Duke carrying the drenched and disheveled lady—drenched himself, by-the-by—to Lord Hansen’s carriage.

She put no intonation onto the words, “Because of the remote location, so removed from the grand walk, was it an assignation that was interrupted and the only escape was to jump into the pond? Is the lady trapped between two lovers? We do not speculate about what would cause the duke to be carrying the lady, but many ladies have mentioned feeling drenched in the duke’s presence—a frolic in the water is still a strange way to go about it.”

Bridget felt there was an innuendo somewhere in there but had no idea where to identify it and what the innuendo meant.

She folded the newspaper and put it aside before reaching for her cup. That horrible columnist. Her stomach felt upside down and uneasy. This would certainly draw her unwanted attention and—she feared—sour Lord Hansen’s attention.

“I think I will stay away from London for the next few days,” Bridget sighed.

“Actually, I think the opposite might be best,” Ellie replied. “Avoiding the issue makes you look guilty, but if you have nothing to hide, why keep hidden?”

Bridget bit her lips and wondered if her friend was right.

A commotion right outside William's bedchamber had the groggy duke stirring and Atlas growling from his place at the foot of the bed. The affable dog only had one grouse, which had William huffing.

Good god, couldn't he have a moment to relive his dream? The feel of the lady's skin under his, the taste of her lips, and her breathy moans in his ears—it was only when he woke he knew, that lady was Bridget.

“Please, Sir,” Oliver's dulcet tone came through the door. “Will you please let me wake His Grace—”

“I will wake my ne'er-do-well nephew myself,” came the stiff, clipped tones of his venerable Uncle Ambrose Hartwell, the Earl of Cranshaw.

Sitting up, William sighed, “Just let him in, Lane, and find me some coffee.”

The door pushed in, and the lord walked inside. At two-and-fifty, the Earl still cut a dashing figure. tall, well-built, his hair was rusty red, the clipped waves gleaming around his handsome, chiseled features. In contrast, his sharp copper-hazel eyes were the only feature he and William had in common.

“This place is as dark as Hades,” Ambrose muttered, then succinctly flung the dark drapes apart, making William wince. “How do you live in such murk?”

“Good morning to you too, Uncle,” he muttered, rubbing his face.

“Are you drunk, boy?”

“No,” William grew irate. “And I am the furthest thing from a boy.”

“When you decide to make a man's decisions, manage your money, stay away from

getting soured every night, and stop hopping from one bed to another, it would tell me you have matured,” Ambrose’s tone was flat. “Did you have a woman in here?”

“If I had company in here, do you think I would have allowed you in?” William slid his feet from under the covers and reached for his robe. “What do you need, Uncle, and could we please talk in the breakfast room?”

Instead of replying, Ambrose pulled a folded newspaper from his inner pocket. “Do you care to explain why you were seen, soaking wet, carrying a lady out of the Serpentine River?”

“God help me,” William mumbled while rubbing his eyes.

“It’s a bit too late for that, isn’t it?” Ambrose said dryly as William led them from his bedroom to the quaint breakfast room a story down.

Thankfully, the sidebar was already stocked with a hot kettle and a tin Biggin Pots, filled with coffee. William poured his, then sunk to a seat and unfolded the paper. The headline on the scandal page made him splutter. White Knight or Devil Duke?

It did not take him long to realize all of London was abuzz with the incident between him, Lady Bridget, and that toff Hansen. Dropping the paper, he said, “This was a series of unfortunate events. My dog startled her, she was in the worst possible place she could be and tumbled over into the river. It was only right that I went to fish her out of it.”

“Have you thought about clarifying the story so the masses do not think there was anything unsavory about the incident?” Ambrose asked, eyes narrowing. “The lady deserves her innocence.”

“I never touched her,” William said, his terseness growing. “Why does everyone

think I am some profligate ruiner—”

“You are one.”

“I was one,” William stressed. “I am sticking to the terms of our agreement, to stay on the straight and narrow road of redemption.”

“Then do the honorable thing and make sure she is not drawn into your web of shadow and shame,” Ambrose tapped the newspaper. “Get your writing materials—now.”

“Can it wait?” William hated feeling like a puppet while his uncle pulled his strings until he could get his hands on his inheritance. Even as the words left his mouth, he knew the answer.

Flatly, Ambrose said, “No. And after you write the letter, find the lady and apologize, preferably with others around.”

His fists clenched. That would put a hammer in the declaration of her innocence. All he had to do was find her, clear her name so she could run off with Hansen. It was the best thing to do, it was the most decent thing to do, but knowing it would end up with her and Hansen firmly hand-in-hand, made his heart rebel.

What do you want?

And is it with her that you want it with?

CHAPTER 12

This is the last chance to prove myself to Graham before I tell him the truth of my life.

“Have you ever been to Vauxhall, my dear?” Lord Hansen asked as the carriage trundled over the bridge.

“No,” Bridget clenched the fan in her hand. “It is not a place for proper young ladies, unchaperoned, and certainly not at night. I have heard stories that do not sit well with me.”

“Well, we are properly supervised,” Graham nodded while drumming his fingers on the windowsill. “Speaking of stories, I commended Duke Arlington for sending his recount of the incident to the Times. It certainly did much to clear you of any lingering suspicion, not that there was any to begin with.”

Remembering the letter that the newspaper had printed three days ago, Bridget agreed. “That was kind of him, but I... frankly, I had not expected it from him.”

“Neither had I, but he may have a kernel of decency that was buried deep inside,” Gregory rubbed her hand. “But thank goodness for that. I had hoped the clarification I had sent them would have sealed the issue away, but these days, rumors and scandals are the meat Londoners vie for.”

Bridget gave him a soft smile, unwilling to accept that Hansen’s touch was warm and comforting... but did not have a fraction of the heat that a mere brush of Arlington’s

fingers made her feel.

He is the best choice. He is sensible. He is a good man.

“And thank you for including the maid’s recount as well in your letter to the press,” Bridget replied. “It meant the world to me.”

“I am happy you were not ill,” Hansen nodded. “Otherwise, seeing the Cascade would not be a happy occasion. Moreover, I doubt your lovely gown would survive another submerging.”

Her eyes dropped to the soft peach silk dress—a gift from Ellie—that gathered under the bosom, but parted to reveal a simple silk under-skirt, and fell in a soft, graceful column. To accompany the dress, her maid had coaxed her hair into curls and piled them high, leaving a few tendrils to frame her face.

She laughed quietly, “I don’t think so either.”

“Do you like fireworks, my lady?” he asked.

“I adore them,” she gasped. “Aren’t they set off late though?”

“They are, but no fear,” Graham quickly added. “We’ll wait in the Rotunda, or pass the time at the Supper Boxes. I have rented one by the way—” he checked his pocket watch, “—it is three in the afternoon, we shan’t be too long waiting.”

“May I ask about your family, my lord?” she asked.

“Graham, please,” he began. “My family is truncated, my father passed when I was at Eton at the age of nine, and my uncle stepped in to manage the earldom until I came into my majority and took over. I have an elder sister who is happily married,

and I have two twin nephews who are absolute gremlins, though I love them to death.”

“You adore children then,” she smiled.

“When they are not being an absolute terror, of course. And you, my lady? Are children a part of your ambitions?”

“With a happy marriage, yes,” Bridget sighed. “My lord, I... I fear I should tell you before we get any further. My... my family’s situation is not a happy one. My father passed away three years ago, and my brother, who had returned from the Peninsular War, sadly gambled away the little fortune we had inherited—” she swallowed, hating to admit the last part, “—including my dowry.”

Her words sounded like a death knell. How well would an eligible lord, with many fortunate ladies nipping at his heels, take it to know the lady he was courting was penniless?

She wanted to curl into a ball and die of embarrassment. Heat burned behind her eyes. A finger tipped her chin up and with her heart firmly lodged in her throat, she felt confused by his smile.

“You needn’t be afraid to tell me such a thing,” he replied. “I do not need a lady’s dowry, my dear. Matter of fact, I am not swayed by it either. A fortune hunter might be, but not I. See, there are some women who have money yet no personality. I prefer personality to riches.”

She swallowed. This could not be true.

“You—you don’t mind?” Bridget whispered.

“Not at all,” Graham replied, retracting his hand. “You are a sweet, bright, beautiful lady. What is not to admire?”

Could he be any more perfect?

She blushed but kept her head up. “That’s so very kind of you to say, my—Graham. I appreciate your gentle sentiments.”

“And I promise you, if we do wed, I will make sure Duke Arlington stays ten leagues away from you,” he laughed. “That man is nothing but trouble.”

I know it.

The carriage halted and Graham descended first, assisted her out, and soon they were on the Grande Walk heading to the Cascade, an artificial waterfall made with tin sheets and fog from ice.

Attuned to him, Bridget wrapped her shawl around her arms and took his arm as they strolled. Her head kept swinging from left to right, eagerly taking in all the sights; the triumphal arches along the South Walk and an excellent replica of Grecian ruins, the Rotunda , a grand two-story structure, constructed of glowing white marble.

Hundreds of globe lamps glowed from the edges of the dome-shaped roof, and the colored paper lamps dangled from tree limbs, the light twinkling like rainbow fireflies while the gas lamps on the walk were pale yellow.

“This is delightful,” she breathed. “I truly have done myself a disservice by not visiting even once. I must correct that when I have the chance.”

“With proper chaperones, I expect,” Graham added teasingly.

“Of course,” she finished. “I would not dare do anything else.”

“Shall we,” he led her to the platform where the production was to begin, and happily, she leaned her temple onto his shoulder.

“Whoever designed that display has a keen mind,” Bridget said while seated in a supper box and cutting into her savory meat pie, a trademark Vauxhall delicacy, then added, “I admire such minds.”

“And to think its debut was sixty-five years ago,” Graham mused while sipping his drink. “Certainly ingenious.”

Picking up her wineglass, Bridget took a bracing sip of the arrack punch. “Have you ever created something you are proud of?”

“Goodness no,” he laughed. “I have not one creative bone in my body. I starkly remember the masters at Eton urging me to not try to draw anything, for the one time I tried to sketch a tree, they assured me it was a splinter of wood with gorgon hair roots.

“You, however, seem to be creative.” Graham nodded. “Have you created something unique?”

“Hmm. I once wrote a pianoforte piece inspired by Master Bach’s fugue in C-minor,” Bridget said modestly.

“That’s brilliant,” his brows shot up. “I would love to hear it one day.”

“I’d love to show you,” she replied brightly.

Wiping his mouth, Graham said, “I think it is time for the fireworks. Will you come

with me?”

“Yes, please,” she smiled.

As they left the supper boxes and headed to the place for the fireworks, and as she tilted her head to the sky—something, or rather, someone, snagged her reticule.

Gasping, she turned to see a boy, clad in breeches, the tails of his jacket flapping in the wind as he darted from her.

“Give that back!” She grasped her skirt and ran after him in panic. The boy darted through bushes, and she followed.

Twigs from the thick canopies of giant elms and dense foliage of bushes tugged at her hair but she couldn’t stop. The sounds of the gay crowd faded into the distance, as she rushed, barely hearing Graham’s shouts behind her.

Devil and blast, he should not have come.

When the spies told William about Hansen taking Bridget to Vauxhall, he had debated on what to do, as while he knew he was intrigued by the lady, he still did not have a solid reason for what he wanted from her.

In the back of his mind, he knew the girl was not the sort to have a romp in the bed without a care—no. She was a proper virgin and would never compromise her integrity to please his passing whims.

Virginity held no special appeal for him—he preferred bed partners with experience—but the thought of being the first man to show her what carnal pleasure was, was a strong temptation.

Having not seen the lady or the lord, he'd almost indulged with a lady friend inside a private hedge in the Lovers Walk. Alas, it had been put to an end rather abruptly by himself, for he could not get his mind off his golden-haired beauty. Now, unsatiated and disheveled, he stumbled out of the bushes—only to have a child run right into him.

He grabbed the lad. “Whoa there, boy. Where is the rush?”

The boy squirmed, and that was when William spotted the pearl-studded reticule dangling from his hand. “Curious artifact you have there lad. Is the new fashion for boys to wear women’s purses or did you snatch it from some hapless young lady?”

“Where are you, you thieving—”

Lady Bridget, the aforementioned hapless lady, came stumbling inside the cove, and William groaned inside his throat. This was not good—was it? Was he cursed to keep meeting her like this?

“You,” she gasped.

“Good day, my lady,” he stated wryly. “We do have to stop meeting like this.”

Her glorious gaze narrowed. “What are you doing here?”

“I had a private tête-à-tête ,” William replied off-handedly. “Did this urchin steal your purse?”

“Yes,” she snagged it from the boy’s hand. “And how was it that he happened to run into you? You set this up, didn’t you?”

His lips quirked. “I did not, but thank you for such an idea.”

Huffing, she turned and left the cove, then stepped on the broad part of the South Walk, while William followed after hefting the lad under his arm. “What do you want me to do with this boy?”

“Lady Bridget,” Hansen strode to her, his face blustering with anger at seeing William. Or was it his rumpled clothes, disheveled appearance, cravat askew and hair raked through with needy fingers? He did not know—nor did he care.

“Are you all right?” he asked, his eyes flinging towards Bridget. “What happened?”

“A pickpocket,” she replied. “A brazen one. But I have my reticule, thanks in part to His Grace.”

Hansen’s face was stony. “I find this to be a bit too coincidental.”

“I thought so too, but it appears he is here on alternate business,” Bridget defended, then turned and curtsied. “Thank you, Your Grace, you can let the boy go now.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, ignoring the balking passersby.

“Yes, Your Grace,” she said tightly. “I have my reticule now. No harm done.”

Shrugging, William let the lad go, who took off like a bat from the depths of hell. He fixed his jacket and undid his cravat, finding it a bother. “I am sorry to disrupt your night, so please excuse me. Enjoy the fireworks, or whatever is left of them, that is. I suppose the display is done now.”

He turned and headed off, only for Bridget to ask, “How did you know that?”

Pivoting, he responded, “My lady, it is after ten in the night. Unless you were here for an assignation, the only conclusion is that you are here for the nighttime show.” With

a half bow, he spun and walked off.

Against the velvety night sky, the moonlight gleaming on his skewed locks, Duke Arlington looked more like Lancelot than King Arthur. Rugged, dashing, and mysterious.

“That cur,” Graham muttered. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

Swallowing, she nodded, “I am. I must apologize for ruining our night though. It was rude and unladylike of me to run off like that.”

“No worries,” he said, pulling her in. This close, she could see the emotion running through his eyes. “Are you sure?”

She gave him the most reassuring smile she could, and Graham dipped his head, “May I kiss you?”

Before she could respond, his lips touched hers: the kiss was refined, smooth, skilled. It was pleasant... and as exciting as tepid tea. Instantly, her heart sank. This was not what she had envisioned for their first kiss.

Where was the passion? The excitement? Why did her heart pound beneath her breastbone at the mere thought of the wicked duke, yet a kiss from the proper lord made her gut twist in disappointment?

His lips ticked down. “Not experienced in kissing, are we? Not to fear, we will be correcting that soon enough.”

“I—” She didn’t know what to say. “I do not have a history of courting.”

“Never fear,” he said in a strange tone. It sounded smug, almost. “We’ll correct that

in good time.”

That wasn't nice, was it?

He took her hand and she walked off with him, but she could not stop looking over her shoulder to look into the shrouded lane where Duke Arlington had disappeared into.

“Oh goodness no,” Bridget heard Ellie groan as she entered the breakfast room the following morning.

Concerned, Bridget approached her friend, “What is the matter?”

Gesturing to the newspaper, Ellie huffed, “These scandalmongers! They will not let you live in peace.”

Frightened, Bridget took the paper up and spun it to the scandal sheets, heart in her throat. “ Readers of this newspaper will be familiar with the names Duke Arlington and Lady Bridget Wycliff who were spotted soaked from head to toe a few days ago.

Now, other news has reached us, and multiple witnesses can attest to this—the Devil and the lady emerged, disheveled, from the dense brush of an undoubtedly lover's nook, in Vauxhall.

No passerby could give details of something untoward that might have happened between the two, and while we do not speculate about why this occurrence happened so closely to the other one, one can only assume something more. A romance? Lovers trapped together, that's always interesting .”

Her legs went weak, and Bridget dropped into the nearest chair like a bag of potatoes. “Of course these witnesses would not mention the pickpocket boy, or Lord Hansen,

who had found me moments later, because they only want to spur gossip,” she groaned. “Good heavens! Now half of London is assured something untoward had happened between me and the duke.”

“Did... did something untoward happen?” Ellie asked.

“No!” Bridget refused vehemently, while hating that she was lying to her friend. “No such thing. What happened—what keeps happening seems to be only a string of unfortunate events. I have my heart set on Lord Hansen.”

“Good,” Ellie nodded decisively. “That is best. I have luncheon with Lady Herringer later today. Would you like to come along?”

“No, but thank you,” Bridget smiled softly. “I think I will rest today before I go home with Aunt.”

Fixing her tea, Ellie smiled. “Sure, dear, but remember, we have Lady Darlington’s ball next week. And I am almost certain Hansen will ask you for your hand in marriage then too.”

Looking down, Bridget felt her heart start to hammer... but not in anticipation... but anxiety.

CHAPTER 13

C lad in one of the drabest frocks she owned and with a cloak thrown over it, Bridget stepped into the hackney. When the indifferent driver had asked where she was headed, the words “ Brookhaven Castle ” had made the man a little less indifferent.

“Are y’ sure about that, lady?” he’d asked.

“Very,” Bridget had replied.

Taking advantage of Ellie’s absence, she’d slipped out of the house and hailed a hackney to the present address. As much as she hated deceiving her friend, she had no choice. She had to tell the duke, in no uncertain terms, to stay away from her and leave her in peace.

As the hackney rolled up the long drive, she observed the privacy afforded by the towering trees and hedges, and the estate perched on the hill in the distance.

The driver let her off at the open gates of the Tudor-style mansion and she stepped under the magnificent sweeping arched entrance before heading for the house. As she approached, she realized that the house was not as grand as she initially thought—part of it looked a touch ramshackle.

The front lawns were impeccable, but around the sides, she saw overgrown hedges and cracked stones. The marble steps were faded, and the columns had a thin coat of whitewash on them.

“I guess appearances are deceiving,” she whispered to herself.

When she rang the bell, a man in his senior years answered—his black suit, graying hair, and tailored insignia told her he was the butler. “How may I help you, Miss?”

“I am Bridget Wycliff and I need to speak with Duke Arlington.”

His brows lifted. “Do you have an appointment, Miss?”

“No, but he will want to see me,” she muttered. “You must know about the newspaper flashing my name with his and I cannot afford for him to smear my name anymore.”

“Dear me,” the man muttered. “Come in, please. I will see if His Grace is—”

“No need, Lane,” the duke’s voice came from the landing atop the sweeping staircase. “Send her up.”

Drawing the cowl from her head, Bridget gazed up to see him and was shocked to catch him improperly dressed. When the butler led her up to the landing, she swallowed a little at seeing his thick arms bared.

He looked like he had rolled out of bed and dunked his head into a basin of water to shock himself into wakefulness, with how his midnight hair curled at the collar of his brocade dressing robe. The deep V of his lapels showed the corded column of his throat, an intriguing glimpse of his muscled chest.

Levering from the balustrade, he asked, “No chaperone?”

“I did not think I needed one,” Bridget notched her head up. “I figured I only needed to spend less than a quarter-hour to get my point across.”

“Well, speak your piece then,” the duke said, while they stepped into a breakfast room, the sideboard oddly scant. “I would offer you tea but I do not think we have any. Coffee, perhaps?”

She wrinkled her nose. “No, thank you.”

“Suit yourself,” he shrugged, while pouring a cup and slumping into a wingback, head lolling to the side. “What do you need?”

“I need you to stop ruining my life,” Bridget declared emphatically while pulling out the folded newspaper and dropping it on his lap. “After last night, half of London mistakenly believes we’re... involved.”

The duke didn’t even spare a glance at the paper. “Aren’t we though?”

Her head jerked back. What did he mean by that? Nervously, she added, “No, we are not.”

“So, we have not kissed twice already?” He pinned her with a knowing look. “The alley and the masquerade, hm?”

Her heart sank and her blood chilled. He knew, and it felt like he had known all along. Still, she did not want to admit it. “N-no, we have not.”

Lifting a single shoulder, he scoffed. “Stop trying to deceive yourself, my lady.”

After swallowing her shock—and pride—she finally confessed, “I hoped you didn’t know, Your Grace. You acted like you did not for so long.”

“You would be hard-pressed to find something I don’t know,” he grinned wickedly. “And call me William, since we are already acquainted. As for how I knew who you

were, I hired spies to tail Hansen which eventually led me back to you. And as for me acting like I didn't know you—" He shrugged again. "—it was fun."

"You—" She gaped, irritation sparking in her chest. "You—you—"

"If you are seeking a word to insult me, my dear, you will have a time of trying," William said indolently. "I have been called some things that are worse than your delicate sensibilities could ever imagine, and they have slid off me like water off a duck's back."

Irrked and mortified, she still bit back, "Nevertheless, I need you to not interfere with me and Lord Hansen. Leave us alone."

He looked up, his eyes liquid amber as he swirled his drink. "I will do so... if you tell me one thing. Does his kiss light you up inside?"

Startled, she asked, "What does that have to do with anything?"

Setting the cup on the side table, he stood and approached her. With every step he took forward, she retreated measuredly, until her back met a wall and his both palms planted on either side of her shoulders, trapping her.

His body blocked the light from the window, so in the flickering dimness, a wildfire turned his eyes into faceted amber gems. Intensity pulsed off him in waves of barely-controlled flames, and every drop of blood in her body responded to his potent energy.

"Do not lie to me," his tone was dark. "Does his kiss spin your eyes to the back of your head? Does it make your toes curl in your slippers? Does it make your heart beat like a drum under your breastbone?"

The word slipped out in a whisper. “No.”

“Then why the hell will you marry him?” William pressed closer.

Her eyes flashed in defiance, “It is not as if I can marry you, can I?”

“What if I asked you to,” William declared, his eyes flitting from one of her eyes to the other. “Would you marry me?”

Her mouth dropped. “W-what? Are you... are you mad?”

“Possibly,” William grinned.

The air crackled with the intensity of his stare. He cupped her cheeks between his large hands, bent his head, and slanted his mouth over hers.

Her mouth was open as his lips landed on her. He pressed his advantage to steal soft kisses but the gentle mood vanished when he threaded his finger through the soft hairs in the back of her head, tilted her jaw, and ravished her mouth with exquisite thoroughness.

He relished her dainty and limber frame, how easily he could wrench her up and down his manhood, holding her aloft with the thrusts of his hardness.

Her hands speared into his hair, and she pressed her mouth to his, kissing and kissing him as she took him deep inside. He drove in deeper still, yearning to be as close in body as he could.

William’s fingers steadily removed the pins from her coiffure, tumbling her hair to her shoulders, allowing it to fall to her mid-back.

“Your hair is like a curtain of waterfall,” he murmured against her mouth. “Beautiful.”

Lashes fluttering, Bridget stared at him, and slowly the haze over her eyes faded and panic suffused her face. Bracing her hands on his chest, she pushed him away—but he did not budge. “You are mad.”

“You have not answered my question,” William replied, knowing she was right. Where had that offer come from?

Her face reddened like a copper pot on fire. “Lord knows why you want to marry me. We have nothing in common. You are a Duke, and I’m a country Miss—”

“You can learn to be a Duchess.”

“You’re a rakehell and your reputation is in the mud,” she said, hands balling into fists. “I have no interest in being married to a man who will eventually get bored of me and look elsewhere. Besides, I have dreams of my own, a purpose to fulfill—”

“I can help with anything you want,” William replied.

Her breath left her in a loud stream. “Why do you want to marry me? You... you don’t love me. You don’t even know me.”

“No, I don’t,” he said neutrally.

“Then what do you want?” Frustration was tearing at her words.

“Simply put, you ,” he replied.

She forced the words out of her tight throat. “You are proposing a marriage of

convenience?”

“Yes.”

Swallowing, she admitted, “I have no dowry.”

“I do not need one,” William finally pushed away. “When I marry, my uncle will release the bulk of my fortune he is holding in trust. You shall have more than you ever bargained for.”

“You seek to marry me so you can gain a fortune and have me as an ornament on your arm, while I would be free to do as I please?” Bridget’s tone was stiff, her posture unyielding.

“Well. There is something you are overlooking.” His voice lowered to a seductive timbre. Stepping away, he sunk back to his seat and took his cup again, eyes dark and seductive as he swirled his drink. “Given our attraction to one another, I dare say we shall have enjoyable bedsport.”

Like a kettle bursting its top, she went vivid red. “That’s enough . You bounder! I—I will never— I-let me go!”

He looked up, lip curling. “Sweetheart, there is nothing holding you here.”

Bridget’s eyes shot to the doorway in shock, then she spun and ran.

“Dearest,” Eleanor murmured, her brows dipping as Bridget tugged her coat on and fixed her hat—all without looking once to her friend. “Are you sure you are all right?”

“P-perfectly fine.” This time, Bridget did look up— but it was more of a flicker than

a true look—before she resumed fidgeting with her coat. “Why do you ask?”

“Because you have avoided looking at me, and I know you are nervous when you start stuttering,” Ellie replied. “Did something happen while I was away? Are you feeling unwell?”

“No,” Bridget sighed, then met her friend’s eyes. “I am just upset... and worried. I am afraid that his continuous business with Duke Arlington will set Lord Hansen’s heart against me and I will lose him. While you were away, I kept reading the newspaper articles and I—I feel like there is this hollow sensation in my chest.”

“Oh,” Ellie’s expression cleared. “Lord Hansen is not that sort, Ellie. He is not one to look at minor issues when the truth is clear. Unusual circumstances happen and these run-ins with the duke are clearly just that. He will see through those.”

Bridget’s shoulders slumped. “You must forgive me, Ellie. I have not been in this situation for so long, I am anxious and double-guessing myself every moment of it.”

Sighing, Ellie enveloped Bridget in a warm hug. “You will be fine, dearest. If it is to be, it will be, but do not push yourself so far that you risk breaking something precious. Look at it as a glass bauble in your hand, dear. If you drop it, it will shatter, and you do not want that, do you?”

“Certainly not,” Bridget replied while pulling away. “Thank you, Ellie, I shall remember that.”

“Pardon me, my ladies,” a footman announced with a bow. “The carriage has arrived for you, Lady Bridget.”

“Thank you,” Bridget said, smiling at both the footman and Ellie. “I will be back next week.”

“You are welcome anytime,” Eleanor smiled as Bridget headed to the door. “I wish you a safe journey home.”

Safe is one thing, but holding onto my sanity is another.

Ribald cheers and shouts around the boxing ring rose in a rush of heat and noise, that it slightly threw William off for a moment. It was a good thing that this opponent was down, half sprawled on the ground, reeling from the uppercut William had just delivered.

The second match of the Circuit Rounds was underway and William was set on making this a quick win. Blood was sprinkled and splattered around the ring, but as far as William could make out, most of it was not his. He had managed to land only a few hits, but the ones he did land were heavy ones, or so he could only assume because his damned mind was otherwise occupied.

Bridget.

He knew it was unwise and dangerous to lose concentration in a match that could lend him grievous harm. Especially here in the alley in the backstreets of London, inside a square of fraying rope around a makeshift ring.

If the men clamoring in the stands had seen where he had learned to box, Oxford , they would know this was no ring. The flickering light from the weak gas lamps did not help his concentration either.

The opponent today was a young man with a wiry frame—perhaps too wiry—with light brown hair and dark blue eyes. The man had scars all over his body and while it was not unusual for streetfighters or brawlers to be so marked, the abundance of them made William wonder.

Was he—

William lurched to the side, just missing an errant fist flying in his direction by a very thin hair. Damn this distraction!

His opponent grinned, blood oozing from his nose. He dragged his wrapped wrist under his flared nostrils and began setting up for another punch.

“That was a close one!” Someone screamed.

Another shouted, “Hit him, Masked Man! Take him down!”

William circled slowly around the ring, conjuring a plan of attack before his eyes. “Ready to concede?” he taunted his opponent, wiping sweat from his brows so he could see the man clearly. “You look ready to collapse.”

“Don’t worry about me,” the other man spat, lurching forward, and William barely missed a blow to his chest, which would have been most injurious to his overall health—and his purpose, while grabbing the rope. “Worry about yourself.”

Just about done with this charade, William darted toward his opponent and delivered a complex set of punches on already purpling spots while batting away retaliatory blows.

He felt no pleasure as his opponent collapsed to the ground, clutching at his chest, but the crowd erupted nevertheless. The man tried to stand but his knee buckled, and he hit the ground with the force of a heavy sack.

“Don’t try to move anymore, lad,” William exhaled. “It’s best if you stay down and catch your breath.”

“With seven to three, the match goes to the Masked Marauder!” one of the umpires shouted.

After about a minute, the man finally stood and rubbed his heaving chest, then pinned William with unsettlingly familiar blue eyes. With a straining voice, he muttered. “You—you will see me again.”

“Hopefully not,” William huffed while ducking out of the ropes. “Get some rest lad, you’ll need it.”

Silas accosted him the moment he stepped out and tossed him a towel. “You survived another match and the takings for this one were about two thousand pounds.”

“I need to head home,” William grunted.

“What?” Silas gaped. “The night is still young.”

“Not for me,” he headed to the alley mouth where his hired hackney waited. “I need a stiff drink and a warm bath.”

“And a woman?”

“Don’t you dare?” William glared.

CHAPTER 14

A nother day was winding down at the seamstress shop, and Bridget was putting the needles and thread spools away when a familiar face popped in through the door.

“Is there a little lady named Bridget in here?” Adam teased as he stepped into the store. “And does she have any particular penchant toward a tin of lemon drops?”

“Adam!” Bridget did away with the formality of his title since no one was around. “I am so happy to see you, but you do not have to bribe me every time you come around.”

“Why not?” he grinned. “I enjoy bribing you. Maybe one day you will succumb to my charms and marry me.”

She blushed, “Adam, as much as I appreciate the offer, I am—”

“Head over heels in love with Lord Hansen,” Adam smiled unaffectedly. “I know dear, it is all over the newspapers as of late. I do not fault you for looking high, but this business with Duke Arlington is troubling. Why does he keep appearing?”

Slumping into a curricule chair, Bridget sighed. “It’s not on purpose, Adam. Every interaction I have had with him was.... a sequence of horrible events.”

“I see,” Adam’s face twisted. “Speaking of horrible events, I made good on my promise to look for Frederick. He is gone, Bridget. The manor house is abandoned and emptied, and word on the street is that your brother fled to some rookeries to hide

from his cutthroat moneylenders seeking him to pay his debts.”

Her heart punched against her ribs. Adam’s expression was stark and solemn. Pressing her hand to her chest, she swallowed over the tightness in her throat. “Is he... is he dead?”

“No! Well, not from what I have learned,” Adam’s face fell. “There are so many rumors, some say he took a ship to the Americas or the West Indies, or that he’d fled to the Highlands. But most of the ones I have heard that are credible say he is simply hiding in the rookeries and slums to avoid the moneylenders.”

“Financiers have eyes in every rookery and slum, everywhere,” she said emptyly. “They will find him before we do. Do you know where he might be?”

Russet brows lifted high. “Are you thinking of... finding him yourself? Bridget, dear, goodness no. You cannot go anywhere near those tenements. The blackguards will see that you are different a mile away and they will press their advantage.”

“Then what do we do?” Bridget felt ill. “We have to find him, Adam. He might die out there. You know he came back from war with a heart condition.”

“I do,” Adam patted her hand comfortingly. “But while I will try, I do not have the manpower to search every rookery in and around London. Only some with the clout of a duke or the regent himself can do such a thing.”

Dread coiled like a snake in the pit of her stomach. “I—” She sucked in a breath. “I cannot allow him to die. As painful as it seems, I would rather see him in debtors’ prison than find him cold in a ditch somewhere.”

His expression dimmed even more. “I know it is hard. I won’t give up, but we have to face the truth. We could be too late.”

And because she looked like she needed it, he gave her a hug, and since he was much taller, she wrapped her arms around his waist, tucking her head against his striped waistcoat. After a heartbeat, his arms circled her, nearly squeezing her, but her grief was more crushing.

“We will find a way, Bridget,” Adam promised, pulling away.

“Thank you,” she breathed.

After Adam left, Bridget closed the doors and headed home in the darkening dusk. Thankfully, no lord in distress was being assaulted in alleys anymore and she arrived home without any issues—but what the baron had said plagued her mind.

Only some with the clout of a duke or the regent himself can do such a thing.

“Bridget?” Aunt Lydia chimed, opening the door. “Are you all right?”

Jarred out of her thoughts, Bridget nodded. “I am. Why?”

“I heard you enter the yard from the kitchens, but you stopped on the stoop for longer than I believed it would take you to enter,” her godmother began while stepping away. “Ooh, I know that look. You were woolgathering again. What is it about this time, dear?”

Stepping inside, she closed the door and latched it. Bridget undid her coat, hung it, then found a seat. “It is about Frederick, Aunt,” she sucked in a breath, hating that this bad news would upset her frail godmother. “Adam came by today and told me he... Frederick is nowhere to be found because his creditors are looking for him.”

“He fled,” Lydia sighed. “Such a foolish young man. I had such hopes for him to be better off than any of the other scoundrels around. I prayed night and day, but I

suppose my pleas went unanswered.”

“He was a different man when he returned from the war,” Bridget looked down at her hands. “He was surly, fidgety, he hardly slept and was out every night drinking. I pleaded with him, Mr. Simmonds, our butler pleaded with him, even his wife tried her hand, but he never listened.”

Clucking her tongue, Lydia stood and went to the kitchen nook, then set a pot on the stove. “I am sorry that this burden is on you, but he made his bed and lie in it he must.”

Biting her lip, Bridget considered her options, and one striking promise stood stark in her mind. The Beast of Brookhaven is forever in your debt .

When he had uttered those words, Bridget had never considered any occasion for her to pull on his promise—heaven knew she had never expected to see the man again, but knowing the bind she was in... maybe it was time for the duke to pay up on his promise.

“Your Grace,” Oliver bowed, his dark figure a contrast to the light morning rays. “You have a visitor.”

Looking up from the ledger on his desk, William sat the quill on its blotter and rolled his neck. The accounts were starting to add up, something he had not seen in a long while. “Tell Lightholder I will be with him shortly, and please send up another carafe. I have a feeling the bloke is three sheets to the wind.”

“It is not Baron Thornbury, Your Grace, it is Lady Bridget,” the valet said unflappably.

William’s brows shot up. “She’s here? Why? After our last discussion, to put it

mildly, I'd think she would stay half the continent away from me."

"So would I," the valet replied, lips flickering. "Shall I send her up?"

"Please," William answered. "Do we have any tea?"

"My daughter has some Ceylon," Oliver said. "Shall I send her up with a pot?"

"Only if dear Lucy does not soak the carpet with the precious brew," William put in wryly, remembering how clumsy the young woman could be at times.

"I assure you, she will take one step at a time," Oliver guaranteed him with a bow.

Returning to his books, William settled another column, before he heard the soft footsteps of slippers approaching.

He glanced up.

She wore a smart gray dress with a white lace collar. Oddly enough, the severity of the dress displayed her slender, vulnerable femininity to perfection.

"Lady Bridget. To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?" he asked, returning his gaze to the other column. "Have you come to accept my proposal?"

"No," she stated flatly. "And you need to give up on such a dream. We will not marry."

Snapping the ledger shut, he shifted it to the side, leaned forward, and steepled his hands before his chin. "Why did you come then?"

"To seek your help in finding my brother," she declared matter-of-factly.

His brow arched. “And why would I do that, without incentive?”

Her lips curved. “I frankly remember a certain Beast of Brookhaven telling me he was forever in my debt. I have come to call in that debt.”

William was shocked. Shocked that she had not only remembered his off-the-cuff remark but that she had found the gumption to hold him to his word. “Ah...” he sat back and drummed his fingers on the table. “And where could this brother possibly be?”

“I do not know,” her lips twisted. “But our guess is that he is hiding in the rookeries and slums around London—”

“Dodging creditors, I assume,” William nodded as Oliver opened the door and his daughter carried in the tea tray. He watched intently as the young woman set the tray on the coffee table and curtsied.

“Thank you, Miss Lane. Would you please make her cup,” he nodded toward Bridget.

After telling her how she took her tea, the two left—and William, decisively ignoring Oliver’s pointed stare all the while, asked Bridget, “Tell me about your brother.”

Her shoulders sunk and her gaze strayed to the window, face mired in sorrow and defeat. “My brother fought in the Peninsular War and came back a different man,” she began.

“He started drinking whatever spirits he could get his hands on. He spent on fine whiskey until he could afford it no more, and then moved on to Blue Ruin. He gambled too, and when he lost, which was more than he won, the debts kept piling up.”

Sounds familiar, I too squandered a lot of money via similar means.

“It got so bad that after our parents passed, I left to live with my godmother and he kept on with the manor. Only yesterday, I found that the house is empty and he is gone. He had a heart condition, and I fear he will die out there alone.”

“Possibly drinking himself to death too,” William muttered.

Her eyes darted to him. “Pardon me?”

“Nothing.”

Narrowing her gaze, she continued, “It did not sound like nothing. Did you say he is out there drinking himself to death?”

“It is likely true,” William said. “Speaking as one who almost ended in that same predicament, I can tell you. Well, not truly because I do not know the horrors of war and I can assume whilst my insouciance indulgence came from flagrant disregard for propriety, his might have come from the urge to forget the atrocities he had to commit.”

“You are a rake,” she said flatly. “He is not.”

“Despite that, the tricks to hide from creditors and to still earn money for drink are the same,” William muttered darkly. “And none of them are ones palatable to a gentlewoman’s ears.”

She notched her head up. “Nevertheless, will you help me find him?”

Cocking his head, William replied, “I find it interesting that you did not go to your beloved Lord Hansen for this matter, but you came to me instead.”

Her eyes flew open, and he saw the moment the penny dropped. She went red. Staring at her, all he could think about was how supple she had felt in his arms.

If her face was so soft, he could only guess that beneath that bland gray frock lay the softest, silkiest skin. “Oh, how remiss of me. Have I complimented you on your dress? It is rather delectable.”

“I am not fishing for compliments,” she murmured. “And the reason I did not go to Hansen is because he did not promise me anything. You did, and I expect you to fulfill it.”

Leaning in, he pinned her with a hard, unflinching stare. “You might doubt me, but because of my past, I know the rookeries, I know the slums. But if I am going to search through them, I am going to be risking my life. My life over a simple promise is not fair, is it? I want something more.”

The eyes that met his were wide and thickly lashed, and the color; blue, vivid, and pure, the shade of a summer sky in a painting. She glared. “And I didn’t risk my life drawing the attention from you that night?”

Quick thinker, isn’t she . “Touché.”

“Then what, you won’t do it?” she huffed, standing. “I see that I made a mistake coming here.”

“No, you did not,” his tone sharpened. “ Sit .”

He hid his surprise when her bottom promptly met the seat. With what she was asking of him, he would have to renegotiate their terms.

William was assured he knew the rookeries in London, and he would fish her brother

out of whatever hole he had buried himself in, but he needed her loyalty secured first and the only way he could do that was to have her as his fiancée.

With her as his wife, he would receive his inheritance quicker, she would have her brother, and he would give her a hefty sum as thanks for her service. A win-win as far as he was concerned; but she was a stubborn one, and if he wanted to get what he wanted, he would have to convince her.

I may have no choice but to seduce her.

“And what terms would these be?” she asked coldly.

Don't rush your fences, man. Remember, she is an innocent. Go slow.

CHAPTER 15

“ I have three options for you. Option one, I send the Runners to find him, which will probably end up with him in debtor’s prison where he will likely perish. Option two, I will have a search done of the rookeries for him and report back, but for this one, we will have to be courting,” William gauged her expression; she looked startled but not overly so.

“And for option three, I will personally find him, bring him back to you on a lovely silver platter, but for this one... you must accept my hand in marriage.”

Those were words he knew Bridget had not expected to hear and she certainly did not accept them now. “No.”

“Rest assured; it is only temporary. We will amicably dissolve our marriage soon enough, you’ll have your brother, I will have the fortune that was held from me, and we’ll part ways with your reputation untouched.”

She gaped and the tea in her cup sloshed to the rim. “ Pardon ? You are the Beast of Brookhaven, the man every mama warns their daughter to avoid with a wide berth. My reputation will be in tatters , not simply untouched .”

Satisfaction expanded his chest. “Admit the attraction between us is mutual.”

“It is the furthest thing from it.”

“You are lying.”

“I am not.”

“Hells teeth you are a stubborn one,” he grated out.

“And you, Sir, do not play fair,” she replied. “I have a proper marriage in the works.”

“To a staid man who will probably write a schedule for you each morning and only have intimate relations with you on Wednesday nights after his drink at Whites,” William teased.

“You are horrid,” she huffed.

“I am practical. Think; how else would you explain to others when reports blow through Town about us being together? How will your precious Hansen react to it? Do you want your brother, or do you want to pall around with this milksop of a lord? What is more important?”

William sat back, knowing he was breaking his own rule from earlier. He was hardly the epitome of morality, yet he had never forced himself on an innocent. If he wanted this to work, she would have to come to him on her own terms.

While she was the furthest thing from naïve, she held a strong passion. William had no doubt that she would accept his offer— out of loyalty to her brother, for one, but also out of curiosity to feel real desire.

Seasoned in debauchery, he knew what it meant when a woman’s bosom rose and fell when he neared, what certain flushes on her cheek meant, and how those pillowy lips of hers parted with each breath. Though she might not recognize the welcoming signs of her own body, he certainly did.

He only needed her to see it for herself.

Her frustration boiled over. “That is so unfair!” she burst out. “I have my future on the line. You cannot ask me to choose, and you made me a promise.”

“A promise, yes, but I did not say the promise was *carte blanche*,” William replied smoothly. “Your heart is set on Hansen, I know,” he began softly while rounding the table and striding to her seat. “But what if I offer you something to sweeten the arrangement?”

“Arrangement? You mean this courtship or marriage?” she asked, eyelids fluttering.

“Yes,” he continued. He moved even closer now and whispered against her ears, “Agree to the last and I will restore your house to you, clear your brother’s debts, and while we wait out the period to break the marriage, I promise I... will not touch you unless you explicitly ask for it.”

She looked taken aback. “You would do all that?”

William grinned. “As my wife, you’ll find that you’ll want for nothing and will have everything my wealth and status could provide. Even after the separation, you will be taken care of.”

Her eyes flew open, and she stared into the mesmerizing depths of his hazel orbs in shock. He must have seen something else in her expression that gave him the confidence to continue.

“I gave you the options on how to find your brother,” he began sincerely. “But irrespective of which option you choose, news of our courtship, true or not, will come out sooner or later, because there is no way we can be seen together again without stirring gossip—the ton will not take it so lightly any longer. Thus, if you do intend to follow through with any of this, it is best to let Hansen down now before you get deeper into it,” he cajoled her.

Her head bowed and he could see the war brewing on her face. She was considering and comparing her present and her future, he would bet. She set the cup down. “You cannot expect me to choose right now.”

“Of course not,” he said, curling a finger beneath her chin. “But perhaps some incentive would help?”

Their faces drew closer, like a shard of iron to a lodestone, each breath a mere whisper, their lips only inches apart, and William could feel her warmth against his body.

When their lips met, the kiss was soft and careful, her body relaxing in the tranquility of it all. One hand gently grasped the back of her neck, long fingers spanning to the skin under her throat.

Bridget released a soft moan from her lips, which William bit down on, subduing her senses. His kiss deepened, and he was already erect—something he could not control in her presence—and he was only getting harder.

He did not cease his intense assault against her mouth and instead, his other hand enclosed around her neck, ever so lightly, enough for a foreign and unfamiliar surge of intoxicating craving to pump through his veins.

As he broke apart their kiss, her cheeks bloomed with a rosy hue and her fingers brushed her lips, possibly reliving the memory of their forbidden kiss. “I’ve been wanting to do that for the longest time,” he murmured. “And more.”

Easing from the chair, he said, “Send me a letter with your decision. You have three days to do so... and when you are finished here, Lane will see you out.”

She had slid a forefinger between her lips and was biting down on it. Acting as if he

hadn't seen it—nor the flush that had gone up to her ears—he casually spun the ledger open and went back to work.

Two days later, Bridget was curled up at a window seat in Eleanor's smaller drawing room, watching the rain—the grim feeling that she was running out of time heavy on her heart and mind. She had not sent the duke the letter yet because her heart and mind were at odds with each other.

Yesterday, she had gone for another outing with the Earl of Hansen, and she had felt uneasy the entire time. Every moment found her comparing the earl and the duke; their mannerisms, the cadence of their voice, the expressions in their eyes when they looked at her.

Graham's gaze held genial companionship.

The Duke's gaze held amusement, fiery temptation, and sin.

Lodged between the two, it was as if the rose-colored spectacles she wore had been peeled away and she saw an unfiltered reality for the first time. She could choose the acceptable route, become Lord Hansen's wife and have an unmarred reputation... or let her baser sensibilities come out and allow the duke his whims.

So why is his offer so tempting...

"What has been bothering you so, Bridget," Ellie sauntered in, "And for the millionth time, do not dare tell me it is nothing because I have known you from the schoolroom and I can read your face like a novel."

"I—" She shifted around. "I was thinking about Guinevere."

It took her friend a hair longer than she normally would to catch on but when she did,

Ellie tightened the belt of her robe and asked, “As in King Arthur’s Guinevere?”

“Yes,” Bridget assembled her thoughts. “We know she loves Arthur, the good man, the honorable knight and the benevolent king, who always does right by his people and here. But then there was Lancelot, the enticing one, the man who tempted her into sin.

“We don’t know much about Guinevere, but I’d imagine her to be a calm, rational-headed Miss who would know that it was wrong to be tempted by trouble... though she still allowed it to happen.”

“I feel there is a question somewhere in there, but first...” Ellie sat beside her. “We have to realize both men were not entirely good nor entirely evil. Lancelot was a knight, who stood by Arthur’s side and did many gallant deeds, but his fallible desire for her makes us all paint him as a villain. The same can go for the King too.”

Chewing her lip, Bridget searched for the right question. “Given that both have their faults, how do you know when you’ve met the right gentleman?”

“I wish I knew, dear, or I would be married by now, but I suppose the socially endorsed response is for you to choose the man with the spotless reputation, who does not easily fall into the vices, has a good bloodline, and does not want for money.

“If both parties are attracted to each other, that is lovely, but I would settle for mutual respect and dignity.”

From that perspective, Lord Hansen is the right choice. He is titled and wealthy, not to mention very handsome. He is everything I should want.

Ellie continued, “But my family was not one to fall into those lines so much. While my mother and father did have a marriage of convenience, they made sure to tell me

that money and status are not everything. There are things that cannot be solved by having blue blood or Midas' coffers.

"I, personally, would rather live with a man who values me as a person, who understands and accepts me for who I am, faults and all, where I can be free to be angry or sad, or vulnerable without being judged or shunted to the side."

Ellie sighed. "I suppose feeling his kiss down to my toes would help too. Someone who knows his way around a woman's body."

Bridget gaped. "But that would mean—"

"We all secretly desire it but outwardly condemn a man for seducing a woman," Ellie snorted. "The hypocrisy, I tell you."

The silence that descended over them was soft and melded into the contemplative air the two shared. Bridget could not help but compare the kisses—and felt ashamed when she acknowledged that Duke Arlington won by a mile.

"Are you having doubts about Hansen?" Ellie forged on. "...and seeing as you were comparing Arthur and Lancelot, is there another gentleman in the kerfuffle? Do you want to tell me who he is?"

"I cannot," Bridget sighed. "Or, I would rather not, because it's ... complicated."

"Let us make this a hypothetical situation then," Ellie said calmly.

Warily, Bridget nodded. "Go on."

"Is it that you have found yourself attracted to a gentleman you ought not be attracted to and wish these imprudent feelings would be for a proper man instead, and would

that other gentleman happen to be... the Duke of Arlington?"

Bridget's head snapped up. "What? N-no, I could n-never—"

Ellie's pointed brow had Bridget clamping her lips fast enough, her teeth clicked shut. She then sighed, shoulders slumping, looking everywhere but at her friend. "It's a long story and you might not believe me."

"That's what I expected," her friend laughed. "Should I call for tea... or something stronger?"

"Wine," Bridget told her. "I think for what I shall tell you, wine is best."

A quarter of an hour later and with all secrets divulged, Bridget kept her eyes down, not ready to see her friend's face or the judgment it might carry.

"I must say," Ellie cleared her throat finally. "That certainly is a tale."

"I must be apple-pated to ask him for such a favor," Bridget bemoaned, hiding her face with both hands. "I should have gone to Graham instead. What was I thinking?"

"Mayhaps how well he kissed, paired with the fact that he owed you a debt," Ellie teased.

Covering her face in her hands, Bridget groaned. "Please help me. I do not have the faintest inkling of what to do here."

"What were the options Duke Arlington has given you again?" Ellie added a splash of wine to her glass and after Bridget reiterated them, the lady sighed. She gave Bridget an unwelcome grimace. "I know you do not want to hear this, but the third option is the best."

“But Lord Hansen!” Bridget’s mouth dropped. “He is—”

“He will understand if you outline the situation to him as you have done with me,” Ellie counseled. “Lady Prudence Warrington is holding a ball tomorrow night. I have it on good authority that the ball is going to be a crush and the crème-de-la-crème of the ton will be attending. Talk to him there.”

“Ellie,” Bridget’s voice was wavering. “I am three-and-twenty, on the cusp of spinsterhood. If I do not marry now...”

“You will be fine,” Ellie said strongly. “As I said, explain it to him. If he is still willing to be with you, he will offer to do these things for you! If not, invite him to attend these meetings with the duke and yourself. Find a loophole in the situation, just like the duke did. Honestly, Bridget, the duke’s offer supersedes anything Hansen could ever give you.”

“But... why are you telling me this now?” Bridget asked, confused. “You told me to see out Hansen.”

“That was before I knew the truth about you and Arlington, and it seems to me you have already made up your mind on who to choose, whether you want to accept it or not,” Ellie smiled weakly. “I am so sorry, dear.”

Squeezing her eyes shut, Bridget hated to accept that truth... that deep down, she knew full well, her friend was not wrong.

CHAPTER 16

Dark emotions flickered in William's eyes, the muscles of his neck cording with tension as he downed the contents of his glass and snagged another glass from a passing waiter; crushes were not his forte.

With a cynical eye, he looked over the teeming masses, the women clad in all shades of the rainbow and the men, most of them—barring a few dandies in embroidered velvet suits and colored cravats—clad in dark ball ensembles.

“Look at these beauties,” Andrew marveled. “I think I just spotted Lady Amelie, this season's Diamond of the First Water.”

William grunted.

He had no intention of seeing anyone, dancing or god forbid being forced to woo a lady—as was his uncle's intention when he had shown up at William's doorstep, invitation in hand and a frank order on his lips.

“Good god man,” Colin bookended William's other side. “Could you be any less of a troglodyte for one night?”

“I find no pleasure in the violent delights,” he murmured. “Besides, I have a fight tomorrow evening.”

“All the more reasons to enjoy yourself now before you become a sight the devil wouldn't like to look at the following day,” Colin laughed. “You're not handsome

otherwise anyway.”

“The women who graced my bed would disagree with you,” William slid an eye to the man he was reconsidering calling his friend. “Besides, I am here under duress, not of my own volition. My uncle forced me to come, saying he needed me to meet some lady. The daughter of this Lady Ruthless, I believe.”

Colin whistled. “I do not envy you there, old boy. The lady’s moniker should tell you what you need to know already.”

“Speak of the devil,” Andrew nodded to a lady, slender and clad in a turquoise silk tea gown, her hair curling in waves down her shoulders. “There is Lady Cassandra, the sole daughter of Lady Ruthless. Rumor says the lady wants nothing less than a duke to wed her daughter. She has turned away earls, viscounts, and she breaks out in rashes if a merchant even comes within six yards of her.”

Rolling his eyes, William turned away; he had no interest in another ton lady, one he was sure was trained in coy mind-games and manipulation. As he pivoted on his feet—Bridget was descending the stairs.

A few tendrils had flown loose from her pinned curls, her white satin puffy sleeves had slipped further down each shoulder, and her empire waist gown with a low v-cut neckline exposed two creamy white swells. Her cream gown billowed behind her with a cloud-like grace.

Just looking at her made his arousal stir.

She was not on the arm of that fop Hansen—yet. Good.

Turning, he kept an eye out for his uncle, hoping he would have time to speak with Bridget before the old hawk arrived. She was looking around and he stared at her,

willing her eyes to meet his. He even shifted around a group of men to make the task simpler, and when her gaze did land on him, her jaw hardened and her narrowed eyes said, stay away.

He smiled as he stepped back suavely. "Let the games begin. I will find you soon," he whispered.

With that in mind, he began to view the ball in a different light and while meandering around, talking to lords and flirting with ladies, he kept Bridget in his periphery. To his acrimony, Hansen did appear, and soon enough swept Bridget off to the ballroom.

The endearing look she gave him made William's fists clench and unclench at the sides of his thighs. It took everything in him not to walk over to the two, grab Hansen by his collar, and toss him out of the hall.

Bridget tilted her head back and laughed at something Hansen said. With her head back, eyes closed, and her mouth slightly parted, William could not help but stare and start to imagine another setting with her and what he would like to be doing with those lush lips.

In that moment, he was struck with the realization that he couldn't simply let her walk away. Instead, he bode his time, brushing off the subtle invitations to ask a lady to dance while keeping an eye on Bridget.

The two had danced twice and William was not going to allow them to have a third; besides, he and Bridget needed to have a talk. It was the third day, where was her answer?

Hansen had meandered off somewhere, just as the orchestra stirred to life with a lively tune for the second waltz. He sat his glass down, strode over to Bridget, circled an arm around her waist, and spun her onto the floor.

“Where is my answer?” he took her hand.

Her lips were pinched, “Did you care to ask me to dance like an ordinary gentleman?”

“I am the furthest thing from an ordinary gentleman before you,” William glowered.

“Clearly,” she murmured. “You do realize that this dance will not be helping amend our reputations?”

“Who cares?” He spun her around. “Depending on what your answer is, it will be a moot point.”

The music swelled around them, and he felt her stiffen in his embrace—as they glided through the steps, William found himself entranced, captivated by her radiant but reserved beauty.

A faint blush colored her cheeks as she kept her gaze downcast. The cream gown accentuated her figure and the candlelight danced on her skin, casting a warm glow on her delicate features. A loose curl had escaped her pinned hair and framed her face, and William fought the urge to tuck it behind her ear.

Bridget’s gaze finally lifted to meet his, and her eyes shimmered with a mixture of curiosity and vulnerability. With another elegant twirl, he felt the many eyes of society upon them, but he had grown impervious to stares a long time ago.

“Do you have an answer for me?” he asked.

“I need to speak with Lord Hansen first,” she replied.

Irked, William added, “Why do you need to pull him into this?”

“I want to keep my image clear of any wrongdoing,” she tilted her head up. “You found a way around your promise, and I intend to do the same.”

“Ah, you want to have your cake and eat it too,” William felt impressed. “It will not work, but I encourage you to try.”

The light in her eyes dimmed, and for several moments, she remained silent. He led her in her graceful spins and twirls, and those long lashes swept down, cloaking her expression from him. “It is best if I do explain it to Hansen, but... I am considering accepting your third—”

“Even if it threatens a scandal?”

Regret clouded her gaze. “He does not...” she bit her lip, “...affect me the way you do.”

“Finally, the truth enters the light.” William felt his chest expand. “We will marry as soon as possible, play up this charade for a while or so, and then the marriage shall be annulled.”

Her eyes widened. “What did you just say, Your Grace?”

“I promised you I would not touch you unless you gave me permission. I’m afraid I may not be able to resist that impulse if we were to remain together. You seem to have your future organized, so I will also not stand in the way of that,” he repeated. “And again, please do not call me Your Grace , I prefer my Christian name, William .”

She swallowed and nodded, indicating to him that she understood, but he needed verbal consent. “I want to hear you say it,” he said.

“...I shall call you William,” she repeated.

“ Good . Now, the rest of the rules are just as simple, you may not inquire about my business, activities, or any of my past relationships, and I will return the courtesy, although I believe such a list is either not long or nonexistent.”

“Well, thank you for the courtesy,” Bridget muttered wryly. “And it is the latter, if you must know.”

“We will dine together and for your comfort, we will sleep in separate chambers throughout our stay together. You will have your own maid, spending money, carriage what-have-you to purchase whatever frippery you ladies fawn over and so on.”

“Please stop forging on.,” she murmured. “I said I was considering it.”

“Either way, this is where I stand,” William spun them in a series of dizzying turns and at the end, she was almost resting on his chest. He took advantage of her close proximity. “I am going to leave the ballroom in a few minutes. Follow me to the second floor. The third door on the right. We shall talk further on it.”

Her eyes flitted between his. “I do not think that is wise.”

“No, it’s not,” he agreed. “But I hope you will consider it anyhow.”

The dance came to a close, but he pulled her closer than socially acceptable and searched her eyes. When he found what he was looking for, he extended his arm and took her to the sidelines, ignoring the clusters of ladies and gentlemen who cast speculative glances in his direction.

The nosy bodies of the ton were already wondering at their connection, and just as he

offered to get drinks for them— his uncle came around the corner with two women behind him; one, a tall slender shrew who looked like everyone near her smelled of fish, and the younger one, lovely and polished.

Lady Cassandra.

He already knew she was the one he was to court.

No. Not now.

The Earl of Cranshaw's brows inched up at seeing him with Bridget, while Bridget went as still as stone on his arm. With a quick glance, he found her face was white as ash as she looked on at the women.

“You?” Lady Ruth gaped. “What are you doing here, girl ?”

Anger swelled inside William, but he held his composure. “I would appreciate it if you would address my fiancée with proper manners, my lady.”

A round of horrified gasps rang through the room, and absently, he heard a glass shatter at someone's feet.

“You cannot be serious, Your Grace!” Lady Ruthless gasped. “She is a penniless wretch masquerading as a lady. For heaven's sake, she works as a seamstress and carries the stench of shop with her. You are marrying the help!”

William's gaze was icy, as was his tone. “Throwing stones in your glass castle, madam? Need I remind you; your first love was a stableboy, and your second affair was with a merchant's son? Lady Bridget is the daughter of a Viscount and her blood runs as blue as yours. I, however, cannot say the same for your genteel daughter.”

“Excuse me, Your Grace!” The lady’s face was purpling. “What are you implying?”

“I’ll repeat if you need clarification,” William said calmly.

“William!” His uncle’s cutting tone stopped him, and the older man canted his head.

“Will you introduce me?”

“Come on, my dear,” the lady muttered, tightly grabbing her daughter’s hand and heaving her away. “We are needed elsewhere.”

“Uncle, this is Lady Bridget Wycliff. My lady, this is the Earl of Cranshaw, my late father’s only brother.”

“Pleased to meet you, your lordship,” Bridget said quietly.

Unaffected by the sudden burst of whispers around the room, William found Hansen staring at him, his face a rigor of fury and mortification. He then spun on his heel and stalked out.

In a single, shocking moment, several facts crashed into Bridget’s awareness. She had been unofficially declared wed to the devil duke, even though she had not fully agreed. The truth of her situation was now out in the ton and Lord Hansen looked struck over the head.

The blows felt like bullets and each one had hit a different part of her, her heart, her mind, and her gut. Embarrassment turned Bridget’s stomach as speculation rang through the throng of guests.

Through the cotton in her ears, she heard William apologize to his uncle. “We need to speak to a certain lord, uncle,” he finished smoothly. “Please excuse us.”

“I will be waiting in the billiards room,” the Earl muttered beneath his breath. “We must have a frank discussion, nephew, not the least of which of how you humiliated Lady Ruth just now.”

“I detest hypocrites,” William declared flatly. “An eye for an eye, and all that.”

The warmth of his hand permeated the thin silk of her glove as William led her out of the ballroom to the balcony where Hansen had left for. Holding onto his hand as an anchor, Bridget braced herself for the cold air outside, but wanted to curl in on herself with how hostile Hansen’s gaze was.

They stood in ripping, abrasive tension before Hansen began, “Is this some kind of joke?”

“Our marriage?” William replied. “It is the furthest thing from it. But there are some extenuating circumstances you are not aware of.”

“Like what?” Hansen asked mildly, his gaze flickering between the two.

“A while ago, the Duke and I had met under less-than-auspicious circumstances, and he made me a promise. A week ago, when I learned my brother was missing, I asked him to fulfill his promise to me,” Bridget said nervously. “I never lied to you Graham, I firmly believed you and I were a good fit, but—”

“He seduced you.”

“No,” William cut in. “There was no seduction, but I am uniquely fit to find her missing brother, a poor soul who came from war as another man. The reason for our ‘marriage’ is a red herring to dissuade others from looking closer as we search for him. Surely you can understand how we would draw suspicion if we are seen out and about with no acceptable explanation.”

“And you?” Hansen asked. “What do you get out of it? Amusement?”

“No,” William replied staidly. “My reasons are entirely selfish, but they are not any business of yours.”

Bridget felt trapped between the two, regretting that this was the way the situation had ultimately spiraled out. She could count on one hand the many points where she could have slipped away to speak with Hansen in private and cushion the blow, except now, this had become a scandal.

“The fact is, it is a done deal,” William replied coolly.

Hansen’s eyes flickered to Bridget and back to William. “If that is sincerely the case, then I will graciously bow out of the courtship we had begun. I wish you both the best.”

Her heart sank. As much as she wanted to stop him—it would not look right, and it would not result in anything good. It was best to not complicate anything more, and she stood silent and watched Hansen walk away.

Miserable, she wrapped her arms around her middle and trained her gaze away from William; all she wanted now was to vanish or sink into the floor. To be anywhere but here.

His fingers were cool beneath her chin, tilting her face up, and all traces of the cocky grin he had before were gone. Instead, he looked somber. “You do not have to be sad about him, Bridget. He was not a good match for you anyhow.”

“And you are?” she asked emptily. Her laugh was hollow. “If I had not been a pariah of our society before, I am now.”

“Our society is a twist and tangle of lies, hypocrisy, and deception, all wrapped up in pretty gowns and staid suits, pretend smiles and insincere greetings over glasses of champagne.

“The ugly truth is that the ladies will be your bosom friends until a man is called into the situation and they become sworn enemies, ready to stab you in the back as they go on to drink tea with pinkies lifted at your gravestone,” he muttered. “The lords are no better either.”

“The ton feeds on the misfortune of others and gobbles down scandals like they drink wine because they live hollow lives and do not want to see anyone in a better position than they are.

“Even worse, they abhor seeing those they consider as lesser stepping over their heads. You do not need to prove anything to any one of them, Bridget, their validation is not even valid,” he finished.

She swallowed, then nodded to the room beyond the French windows. “I am afraid to walk back in there.”

“Keep your head up,” he smiled warmly while pulling the handle. “You have nothing to be ashamed about. Do not look ashamed, do not look guilty, do not give these serpents any reason to strike. When we re-enter inside, we will speak to my uncle, dance one final waltz, and we will leave for your friend’s home.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, and notched her chin up, took his arm, and walked back into the room.

She forced herself not to look at anyone directly even while the skin on the side and back of her neck burned with the scalpel-like gazes fileting under her skin. Still, she kept her head up and even took a glass of arrack punch from William while a Minuet

dance was underway.

“Everyone is staring at us with varying degrees of shock and amusement,” William laughed over his glass. “Such ignorant fools. Are you ready to meet my uncle?”

After another fortifying sip of punch, she set the glass down. “As ready as I will ever be.”

“This way then.”

CHAPTER 17

The billiards room was empty of lords who would usually be sharpening sticks and rolling billiard balls over green baize. Presently, only his uncle stood, hands clasped behind his back, while staring out of a large, mullioned window.

Shutting the door behind him, William acknowledged the old man. “We are here, Uncle.”

The earl turned, and William saw a tremor of apprehension run over the man’s face, but it vanished in the next breath. His cool gaze traced over Bridget slowly, not in a judgmental way, but assessing . He then addressed William.

“Why do I doubt that this meek mouse of a lady is the one you truly want, nephew?”

“She is neither meek nor a mouse, Uncle,” William replied while guiding Bridget to a chair. “And I would appreciate it if you would refrain from categorizing her as either.”

“I see,” Ambrose murmured, then turned to Bridget. “Are you aware of the notable history my nephew has accumulated in the past years?”

“I am aware, yes, your lordship,” Bridget replied carefully. “He has not told me anything specific, but I do know.”

“So, you know he is a wastrel and a rake.”

“I would object to wastrel but yes, I am fully aware he is a rake,” Bridget responded. “However, he is not completely lost. Why do you press the issue, my lord?”

“Because I want you to be aware of the truth of your impending marriage,” Ambrose said calmly. “Listen to me: the reformation of rakes is the stuff of fiction. In real life, a pretty girl can no more change a man’s heart than a leopard can change its own spots. You will have to hold the supernatural powers of a saint to deal with him.”

A rumble of irritation brewed under William’s breastbone. “Are you implying that I will not hold to my vows, Uncle?”

“Will you?” Ambrose asked genially. “I do have my doubts, but let us see if this wallflower can perform a divine miracle and get you to toe the lines in the sand. I do hope you prove me wrong, son, and do right by your name, title, bloodline, and this genteel lady standing before me.”

He headed for the door, then paused, and twisted his head over his shoulder. “I will be watching.”

When the door closed, William let out a long breath, crossed the room, and found a bottle of brandy on a shelf, then poured out a glass. Throwing his head back, he swallowed the finger of drink, then pressed the crystal to his temple.

“God’s blood, that man irks me to no end,” he murmured, coming around and slumping into a chair. “I am sorry if he insulted you.”

“Thank you, but to your credit, you corrected him quickly,” she said quietly. “I am used to people underestimating me and determining the substance of my character after looking at me only once.”

“But you should not have to be so accustomed to it,” William replied straightly. “I

had hoped my uncle would have kept his opinions closer to his chest, but he did the opposite.”

Reaching over to him, she touched his arm, “I think I could say the same thing about you.”

“Can you?” he asked dryly. “I am indeed a rake, a rogue, a devil amongst men. The Beast of Brookhaven. It is why I have always been incredibly careful about never finding myself in the company of young ladies alone.”

“The news sheets were not entirely wrong then?” she asked.

“Oh, they’re right,” he nodded. “There were amplifications at times, but I will accede to the truth in the middle of the inventions. I am most definitely a rake,” he boasted. “I enjoy the companionship of women, but in particular, worldly women, not innocents.”

“Companionship,” she noted, hardly believing she was having such a conversation with him of all people. “That’s a very subtle way of putting it.”

“I don’t wish to discomfit your sensitive sensibilities.”

“Thank you. I do not want to be embarrassed either, but that does not mean I am not aware of who you are,” Bridget replied quietly. “I only ask that during our courtship, you do not parade these companions before me.”

“There will be no need,” he said, “I go to them; they do not come to me,” his mind ran to Lady Rosa, but he decided to deal with that arrangement and her in time. “I shall be applying for a special license tomorrow morning, and by the end of this week, we shall be wed.”

Her head snapped up. “That quickly?”

“I won’t allow any more rumors to spread,” he declared softly, standing to set the crystal aside. “Now, I think it’s time for our last waltz.”

The moment William whirled her onto the floor, Bridget had the unsettling feeling that her life would never be the same—but would it be for the better or the worse, she did not know.

The waves of murmurs that crested through the room surpassed the crowd’s earlier response and even those already on the dance floor gawked shamelessly. The violins leaped to life and the beautiful strains filled the ballroom. He took her into his arms as they soared around the room together.

William’s eyes were fixed on her, and it was a credit to his dancing master that he never missed a step. “Keep your eyes on me, Bridget. Do not give those harpies any flicker of discontent.”

“I do not think I should be overly happy either,” she whispered somberly. “As I have seen in the past few days, they will do anything to cast ignominy on my name. You, however, seem impervious.”

“My reputation precedes me,” William replied. “I have stained my name so filthily, there is not a spot left to sully. Believe me when I say, when we separate, I will heap all the blame upon myself. You will be unvilified.”

She knew she had to say something, but instead, she stared at him helplessly, so many feelings writhing inside—she was unable to separate them into any semblance of clarity.

He swung her, and she twirled, and the heat of his hands on her lower back burned

through her gown. The rest of society faded as they stared into each other's gazes, never once breaking.

"Tell me what you're thinking," he spoke softly as he steered them through the crowded floor.

She was quiet. "I don't know."

"Are you worried about the marriage?" he asked. "What I'll ask of you?"

"Partially," she admitted. "I'm not really afraid of what your uncle will say when we separate, if and how we'll find my brother, and what I'll do after all this is done..." She shook her head, trailing off. "I'm rather afraid of myself, to be honest."

William glanced down; confusion raw in his gaze. He twirled her expertly, steered them around another couple, and then pulled her close again. "Of yourself? Why?"

"You have an extraordinary talent to muddle my thoughts when I am near you," she confessed breathily.

"Are you saying that my seduction is working?" he grinned like a wolf.

"No," she lied. "I have not turned into a ninny with nothing but cotton and lace between her ears, I just find myself double-guessing my actions with you."

He twirled her again. "Do you want a confession of my own?" He drew in a little closer and lowered his voice to a breath, "I have never wanted a woman as badly as I want you."

Was it fair of him to tell her this?

“Really?”

“Real enough to keep me awake, several nights in a row. Real enough to cause me to think of nothing but you, even when other women are readily available. Real enough to be... painful at times,” William admitted.

Searching his eyes for a moment, Bridget frowned. “You speak the truth.”

“I don’t make it a habit to lie,” he replied, as the music swelled.

“Meaning you would twist the truth if need be,” she remarked as he took them in a swirl of turns that spun the dresses on the sideline into a swirl of colors. When they finally stopped, her skirts flared and brushed William’s trousers. Her lashes swept up. “You still have not detailed what the... erm... marriage duties... you would like from me to be.”

“We can talk about those in the carriage,” William smiled, taking her hand and kissing the back of it. He thumbed over her knuckles. “I’ll need to find a ring too.”

“They are staring again,” she whispered.

He slid his fingers between hers and pulled her off the dance floor and up the stairs. Crossing the foyer, he drew her into his side, then got her coat from a footman while his carriage came around.

The carriage rumbled to a halt in front of the majestic house, and he helped her inside. The moment the door closed, he tugged his jacket free and dropped it to the side bench.

Without indication or warning, he hauled her into his lap. “May I finally kiss you the way I want?”

“I—” She paused. “I suppose.”

She tensed, but his lips were gentle and brushed over hers first, a ghost of butterfly wings, time and again, coaxing a response. His mouth found hers, his lips soft.

Bravely, Bridget nipped his bottom lip and suckled over it, as his arm surrounded hers and cupped her nape, bringing her even closer. His tongue ran over the seam of her mouth and when her lips parted, he took the invitation to sweep his tongue against hers.

At first contact, she pulled her tongue away, but soon enough, she rubbed hers alongside his in gentle, slow strokes. Tender and erotic, the kiss allowed her natural sensuality time to overcome her shyness.

He drew away to let her breathe, then, like an injured animal, he groaned softly and dove back in, hungrily devouring her mouth. Bridget melted into his arms, entranced by the wicked sensations pouring through her body.

Parting from her lips, he dropped kisses along her jaw, then pressed his lips to the hollow below her ear lobe, and she shivered with sudden, fierce delight.

“God, that felt good,” he sighed. “As for your duties, it is both complicated and simple at the same time. You will have control of the house, but please, no renovations for the few rooms that are in use. Until I gain the inheritance my uncle is holding onto, things like a new wardrobe and jewels are out of the question.

“My small staff consists of my valet who takes on the butler role from time to time, a crotchety cook named Mrs. Crickstaff, two maids, and two footmen. I have two friends who have the worst habit of dropping in unannounced so do not be afraid if they come along.”

She nodded, biting her lip. “Anything else?”

“I know you are waiting to hear the most important one,” he breathed. “As I previously stated, no, you will not have to do wifely duties in the bedroom with me, but we will have to show affection in public... Though, if you do choose, we can explore a little intimacy,” William replied, tucking a lock of hair from her eyes. “However, at no point will I attempt to divest you of your virginity... unless you want it of me.”

Gently extricating herself from his hold and retaking her previous seat, she asked, “Do you honestly think anyone will want to marry me after we separate?”

“Yes,” William replied. “But only if you choose to marry. I am sure the funds I will give you will suffice to take care of you for the rest of your life.”

“Why was it made that you did not have your inheritance?” Bridget asked.

“My father passed when I was in my first year of Oxford, and I had not reached the age of majority then, so my uncle stepped in as caretaker. When I did get to one-and-twenty, I was given a fifty-thousand-pound allowance, but then I came to find out that my father had left a provision in his will that I would only get my inheritance, a sum of a million pounds and a few businesses, when I marry.”

Briget’s eyes widened to dinner plates upon hearing the sum. A mere fifty pounds was a fortune to her and the thought of a million pounds made gooseflesh burst over her skin.

“W-what happened to the fifty thousand?” Her voice was hushed in shock.

“I blew through it all like it was paper,” he admitted. “Drinking, betting, paying for companionship. I was a scoundrel back then.”

“You still are,” she mentioned.

He snorted. “Touché.”

“What about your debts?” she asked.

His eyes sharpened. “I’m taking care of those.”

His tone broke no leeway for her to press the issue, so she changed topics. “What about your mother? Is she present in your life?”

Rubbing his eyes, he said, “Mother is away from my mess, she lives up North, in the countryside of Carlisle as a merry Dowager. She writes and visits me once or twice a year, but she is not overbearing or pressuring me to marry.”

“But now you need to,” she affirmed.

“Yes.” The carriage broke free of London’s traffic and was running free to Lady Eleanor’s town home.

They slipped silently and the only sounds were the trundle of the carriage wheels, as she felt his gaze trail over her person. “I feel as if I have crushed a dream of yours, haven’t I? You seem to be the sort of lady who dreamed of her prince, a virtuous man who would shower you with love and affection.”

“Yes, once upon a time ,” she picked at her skirts. “But when our lives took a sudden turn and reality came knocking, I realized how fragile wealth and comfort are. I still do hope for love, but I will always choose comfort and ease over the toil of hardship. And isn’t that a horrible thing to say.”

“No, it is practical,” he attested. “Society has always made it clear that the

appropriate match has everything to do with proper breeding and money, but then Minerva Press and their novels have added romance and love to the equation, making ladies wanting all four.

“The truth is, only a fraction of those seeking a partner can find all four, and most will have to settle for two. One can either get wealth and comfortability or love and a mediocre life,” William replied. “It is rare that one can have both, though I have heard of a few.”

“One can only hope,” she replied quietly, glancing out of the window to see the townhouse approaching. “But I know the wisdom of being practical instead of holding onto a dream.”

“Most people in the ton have no notion of seeking an alliance based on tender feelings. Their union is one of mutual convenience, respect, and honor to each other,” William replied. “I should know, my parents had that sort of union.”

Dropping her eyes to her lap, Bridget did not know how tactfully to ask the question brewing in her heart, so she did the best she could. “What would happen if... attraction played into the equation?”

A strange look crossed over William’s face before his expression turned salacious. He leaned in, “Sweetheart, is that your roundabout way of telling me you’re attracted to me?”

Her eyes lowered to half-mast, “I think you already know the answer to that.”

“I do,” he grinned, and the shadows that crossed his face made him look lecherous. “But I would like to hear you say it.”

“You are arrogant, a lothario, insidiously charming, and decided on ruining your life,

but yes..." she paused. "I am attracted to you. You might not know this, but that night in the alley... you had taken my first kiss."

The carriage came to the doorway of the lady's house, and William descended before her to assist her down, but before handing her over to the waiting footman, kissed her cheek, then murmured in her ear, voice husky, "Let us see how many more firsts we can cross off the list."

CHAPTER 18

Dawn found Bridget unprepared and a touch reluctant knowing that she had a lot of explaining to do that day, not only with Eleanor, but with her godmother whom she was about to leave for.

She looked down at her packed bags when Ellie walked into the room, her face placid. “I suppose last night went well, then?”

She turned. “We’re engaged.”

Eleanor frowned. “You don’t mean Hansen—”

“No,” she looked away, “Duke Arlington.”

Bridget suddenly found herself enveloped in a warm hug and her mouth dropped in shock. Hesitantly, she hugged her friend back and tried to smile. “I take it you’re... happy?”

“Extremely,” Ellie replied, pulling away. “I know it is not the marriage you imagined you’d have but I truly believe the duke can put you in a position Hansen would never be able to do.”

“The Duke...” she paused. “He proposed a marriage of convenience, and after a while, he will separate us while he goes his way. He is leaving me to live a life I choose with a handsome purse.”

“Oh,” Ellie blinked. “Well, that’s good, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Bridget sunk into a nearby chair, her head lowering. “It is... if I didn’t find him so dratted attractive. He’s shown a part of himself he keeps away from others. Yes, he is the hard-boiled rakehell he has shown the world, but he is...” she fought to find the right words. “What he shows us is like armor around his true self.

“It is a part of him but, at the same time... it is a fa?ade,” she muttered. “I am not saying he is Shakespeare reborn or Byron in another suit, he is not a man of tender sentiment, but he is not a cold, unfeeling man either. And he is... he is lonely. I felt it from the start, and it had drawn me.”

Ellie canted her head. “I am surprised that you sensed that much in the little time you have known him.”

“He is like a faceted gem,” Bridget said softly. “And the curious thing is, I have yet to see the other sides of him.”

“Hm.” Ellie sounded sly. “Sounds to me that you want to see more of him. My, my, it sounds like you have—”

“Don’t you dare,” Bridget tried to glare but it fell flat. “It is just a means to an end and he is going to search for my brother as an additional benefit.”

“I know marriage should be about the mating of two souls, about love and passion, not the joining of business interests—but most ton marriages are based on practical considerations. I wish it were the other way around, but truthfully, Bridget, this is smart for you.

“’Tis only sad that he is such a hardened rake and men like him have a natural resistance against getting leg-shackled, but if he made the offer—” Ellie shrugged. “I

do hope you will have a genuine companionship during the time you are married though.”

“So do I,” Bridget exhaled, holding back on how attractive she found William and the feelings he evoked from her.

A footman came to the door just then, bowing. “Lady Bridget, Duke Arlington’s carriage has arrived for you.”

Nervously, she stood and handed the valise over to the footman, then hugged Ellie. “Thank you.”

“You are welcome, dear,” Ellie replied, “Josie and I will be taking you for a celebratory luncheon sometime this week. And I hope you will not succumb to His Grace’s insidious charm.”

Too late.

“I promise,” Bridget replied, her smile tremulous.

Stepping into the windy day, she gazed at the blue lacquered carriage, its thick navy drapes drawn, the ducal seal of a falcon, and swords glinting gold under the sunlight. As she glanced at the dappled set of four horses, she knew her life had taken a drastic turn.

The door opened and William descended—his fawn breeches and fine lawn shirt gave him a very casual look she had never seen before. It was avant-garde, and shocking, of the man to look so casual—some would say under-dressed—out in public.

“Surprised to see me this way?” His lips curved.

“Yes,” she replied breathily. “It’s not...”

“Appropriate?” he laughed, holding out his hand.

“Especially en route to meet the family of the lady you are about to marry,” Bridget countered.

“I realize, but then again, I am not one to conform to everyone else’s standards.”

“Those are the rules of the land, sir,” she replied dryly. “Especially those of the Upper Ten Thousand.”

He shrugged. “You already know how I feel about the ton.”

Hiding her smile, she took his assistance inside and sat facing him, noticing that his shirt looked loved, his breeches worn, and his boots scuffed; this was an outfit he had worn many times before. “Were you riding before you came for me?”

“Yes,” he replied. “It helps me think.”

“I can understand that,” she nodded. “Repetitive motions, things you can do without focusing too hard on them, do let your mind roam.”

“And what comes up when your mind does roam?” he asked cunningly.

“How to make meat pie,” she replied flatly.

He threw his head back and laughed. “I like a woman who can think on her feet and go toe-to-toe in a battle of wits.”

“I haven’t had the company to exercise that muscle much,” she admitted. “I like witty

banter but most of the ladies only concern themselves with the newest fashion or if silk is better than lace. No one wants to talk about the tiers of ancient Roman society or what was Alexander the Great's reason for dominating the East, spreading Hellenistic culture as he went."

His brows inched up. "You have those ideas ruminating in the back of your head?"

"Sometimes," she sighed. "I was the proud bluestocking of Lady Easton's School for Accomplished Ladies. My teachers adored me but the rest of the girls not so much."

"How did you know?"

"It is very telling when you approach a group of girls and they all fall silent the moment you are within five feet of them," Bridget replied matter-of-factly. "I did find two bosom friends though, Lady Eleanor and Lady Josephine. They stayed with me even after my family fell from grace."

"Hm," William trapped his fingertips on the windowsill. "I have had the same experience. My friends from Oxford and Eton have been with me since the worst of times."

She inclined her head. "How bad?"

"I was one-and-twenty. The very night I got my fifty thousand, I went to Whites, the so-called bastion of male camaraderie, and drank myself into a wheelbarrow—literally. I woke up on the banks of the Thames, wet, and had somehow decided to sleep in a rotten pushcart, half-naked."

"Oh, my word," she pressed a hand to her heart.

"When Colin Lightholder, Baron Thornbury, and Andrew Pembroke, Viscount

Sutton found me, stinking of brine, sick to my stomach, an inch away from contracting consumption, I was told I had gambled my estate away on a game of Faro, that luckily I'd won and the other lord had put up his house somewhere in Oxford that I'd won also."

She leaned in, eyes intent. "What did you do?"

"By right, I should have taken the house and used it to my benefit, but then the lord came begging, telling me his wife and incapacitated mother were in the house, and that he could not afford to lose it. So I left it in his hands." William shrugged. "He pays me a hundred pounds every year but that sum is set aside and I have not touched it."

"Why not?"

He shrugged. "No reason. Just not interested, I suppose."

I bet there is. Maybe you feel guilty about almost taking his home from him.

Sitting back, Bridget gazed at him with curiosity as another piece set itself into the puzzle that was the Beast of Brookhaven.

William, she reminded herself. There are two sides to him. The person he wants others to see is the Beast of Brookhaven, the person he wants me to see is William Hartwell.

He raised a brow. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

She wiped her face into a look of pure innocence. "Like what?"

"As if I am a mystery you are trying to solve," he replied. "What I present to you is

who I am.”

“Actually, no you are not,” she said quietly. “I have observed you from the moment we interacted. You have two lives, Sir . The rakehell is who you want others to see, a dissolute profligate void of norms and values, only seeking his own pleasure by whatever means necessary. But in private, you have heart, compassion, and a conscience.

“What circumstances have prevented you from showing this true, noble character? What is stopping you from showing yourself as a kind and decent man?”

His expression shifted from curiosity to nonchalance. “You are the first person who has ever accused me of such a thing. Be careful not to spread such fabrications around. I have a reputation to protect.”

“I see I will have a bit of time to get the truth out of you yet,” Bridget murmured. “I think I should add as stubborn as a bull to your repertoire.”

“Should I repay the favor?” William asked.

“Please,” Bridget bit back wryly.

“You have a soft demeanor, but circumstances have made you develop a core of steel,” he began. “Your life is a question of what the most prudent decision is to make but not what makes you happy.

“You would sacrifice your pride to survive another day, and while modesty is becoming—somehow along the way, you have begun to allow other’s views of you to shape how you see yourself. You are smart, but you diminish your ability to appease other’s opinions of you.”

“That is—”

Quick as a flash, William pulled the shade down and drew her onto his lap. Caging her face with both hands, he forced her eyes to meet his. “Your beauty outclasses every lady I have ever met. You are gorgeous, Bridget, but others have convinced you your poverty means you are undeserving of attention. Yet you are beautiful.”

He yanked her against him. A shocking collision of softness against hardness. Before she could gather her wits, his mouth sealed over hers, his kiss stealing her breath.

A possessive rumble rose from his throat, and then he was kissing her again. His hand cupped the back of her neck, holding her steady as he plundered her mouth, driving his tongue through her lips.

William’s heat, feel, cologne, infused her senses and fed his hunger, but her soft mewl of discontent halted him. Pulling away, he ground his teeth. “I am sorry. I got over amorous. If I overstepped—”

“No,” Bridget breathed, her face flushed. “It’s just, erm, you are... burgeoned. I feel you under my thigh... and I don’t want my godmother to see your state.”

A laugh burst from his lips, and he dropped his forehead to tuck it under her neck. His broad hands held her firmly, but his mirth kept coming. “Devil and damn,” he snorted. “I have never been in this position before.”

“...Burgeoned?”

“No,” he lifted his head. “Meeting a lady’s family.”

He drew a laugh from her. “I suppose those companions of yours did not merit such a meeting.”

“God no,” he chuckled while gently depositing her on her original seat. “You must pardon me for such inadequacies. I should have asked Colin about his tactic for meeting a lady’s family. He might be a seasoned rake, but he has courted before.”

“And not yet married?”

“The lady chose another over him, and I suppose, ever since, he decided courting was not worth the effort.” Reaching for a box to the side, he took out a cravat.

As he began to tie it, she asked, “You know the knots?”

He shrugged. “It wasn’t by choice, but necessity made sure I could take care of myself. While it was not the best of circumstances, I learned a lot of practical skills such as how to tie my cravat and trim my facial hair.”

“Those circumstances... meaning the days you were in debt up to your ears?” Bridget summarized.

“Perfectly put.” William tied his neckcloth into a precise waterfall, then pulled a jacket from a hook behind him. “Necessity is the mother of invention, or, well, education.”

The carriage was trotting up the lane to Bridget’s godmother’s home, and when the vehicle slowed to a halt at the cottage, he descended and helped her alight, before he tugged his jacket down. She fixed her skirts, then went to the door and unlocked it.

“Aunt?” she called. “Can you come down, please? Duke Arlington and I would like to speak to you.” She pulled her coat off and then turned to William. “Give me a minute.”

Heading up the stairs, she went to her godmother’s room and found the older lady

pulling her dressing robe on. "I am coming, dear."

Just in case, she stayed beside her aunt, though didn't have to help her aunt down, and when they finally came to the lower level, William was waiting for them at the landing, before he bowed and helped the older lady to her seat. "My lady."

Lydia's brows lifted. "Please excuse me for not curtsying, Your Grace, but my knees are not as they used to be."

"Completely understandable, ma'am," William replied warmly. "I think it's a simple courtesy to tell you that I have offered marriage to your lovely goddaughter, and she has accepted."

He then drew a suede bag from his inner pocket and pulled out a gold ring with a set of flawless white diamonds, creating a ring beyond compare. A ring fit for a Duchess.

"This is the last part of the agreement." He asked for Bridget's hand, and when she extended it, he slid the ring on, then rubbed over her knuckles. "It was my mothers."

"Duke Arlington," Lydia finally said. "Our firewood is running low. Would you be a dear and go chop some for us? The ax and firewood are out back, thank you."

It was clear it was not a request, but an order, and while William's brows lifted at realizing such a thing, he silently shrugged off his jacket and unfastened his cravat. "It would be my pleasure."

As he left the backdoor, Bridget asked, "Aunt, what did you do that for?"

"To allow us ladies a little privacy," Lydia replied, tapping her turban. "I have not been in the ton for years, but I can recognize a rake when I see one. I know he is a duke, my dear, but are you sure about this? Weren't you being courted by an eligible

young earl—”

“No, Aunt.” Taking a deep breath for courage, she added, “I am not interested in any other gentleman. It might not be a love match, but it is the one I have chosen.”

“You cannot mean with this man,” Lydia said sharply. “The man has the air of a dangerous scoundrel, a veritable blackguard.”

“He is not a blackguard,” Bridget countered, hurt for William’s sake. “He has a good heart, and I want you to have some time with him to see it’s true. Beyond all that, he has a true and noble character.”

“Listen to me, my dear, the reformation of rakes is the stuff of fiction. In real life, a pretty girl can no more change a man’s heart than a leopard can its own spots.”

Again, I hear the same lines.

Her aunt had a point, but Bridget could not— would not—budge on this; William was the only help she could get to find Frederick. Her eyes flickered out the window just as William was rolling up his sleeves.

The sun burnished the thick waves of his hair and the spattering of hair on his powerful forearms. As she watched, he grasped the worn ax, placed a log on the chopping block, and swung the ax in an efficient arc, splitting the wood neatly in two.

Turning back to her godmother, Bridget began, “I understand your concern, and how you might think me to be a na?f or that I am putting myself in danger of being utterly undone, but please hear me on this, Aunt, he is not what he seems.

“I know he is the sort every mama tells their daughters to run far from, but I see a part of him that no one else sees. I ask you to please trust me on this, Aunt. He is also my

only hope to find Frederick.”

“Oh, darling. My fear is that his attention will fade in time and your heart will shatter. It is clear by your face that you feel for this boy more than you would like to admit,” Lydia murmured, “while he might think of you as an amusement.”

“He is not like that,” Bridget replied, nervously twisting the ring. She felt the doubt in her words, because, in truth, she did not know William enough to say such positive words. “I know you have your doubts, Aunt, but please trust me to know my own mind.”

“What about the other lord?”

“Lord Hansen? I have gotten over him. He wasn’t at all the gentleman I thought he was.”

“How was he not a gentleman?” Lydia gaped at her. “Did he make inappropriate advances toward you?” Her cheeks burned.

“No, no, nothing like that! It is just... he never struck me the same way as William,” she replied slowly. “I... I chose what was in my heart in the end. And that was Duke Arlington.”

Her aunt did not look impressed, but her face mellowed. “I have to trust you to do what is right. But please, my dear, tread carefully.”

Somewhat pleased that her aunt had relented, Bridget slipped her ring off because she felt something inside and did not know what it was. “Confortentur.”

Was that... Latin?

The stomp of boots had her glancing up and William entered, his head almost eclipsed by the pile of precisely cut firewood. “I hope this will do.”

“Oh my,” Lydia nodded. “That will do handsomely. Thank you, Your Grace.”

Crouching on one knee, he rested them on the rack, and Bridget unashamedly admired the muscles popping under his breeches and the wiry strength of his forearms; his rock-hard virility quickened her breath.

Standing, he dusted his hands together and asked, “Would you like to come to the manor tonight and we wed in the morning, or would you rather stay here?”

It was completely unheard of for a lady to sleep in the lord’s house before marriage—but they were engaged, weren’t they? Nervously, she decided to do something unheard of. “I would like to stay with you.”

“Well, in that case, please pack some essentials, and I will send for the rest tomorrow. Ma’am,” William turned to her aunt, “the invitation is extended to you also.”

“Thank you, but I would much prefer to stay in my home,” Lydia replied.

“My personal carriage will come for you tomorrow so you can attend the wedding,” William promised.

Nervously, Bridget left the room to hastily pack the best dresses and nightwear she had that would serve for a few days, and carefully folded a blue silk dress into her bag—it would be her wedding gown.

Downstairs, she heard her aunt. “—don’t break her heart, Your Grace. The poor girl has had it ripped apart time after time.”

“I promise,” William replied steadily. “I realize I am the antithesis of the man you would prefer for your goddaughter, but I promise to make her life—and yours by extension—easier.”

“I will keep you to your word,” Lydia finished. “Do not disappoint me.”

CHAPTER 19

Keenly, William watched as Bridget investigated her new bedchamber, a room separate from his by a mere corridor and two doors. His staff had cobbled the interior together, raiding other rooms and the attic, to be cozy and welcoming, but he knew his masculine presence contrasted the primrose silk walls and Persian rugs.

The sight of the large tester bed in the master suite marked her face with anxiety—or was it anticipation?—and he felt the simmering anticipation in his own blood rise another notch himself.

Catching the way her glance darted to the bed, he hid a smile; the poor girl must be a bundle of nerves and he couldn't blame her. But he had given her his word and he was not going to renege on it—unless she wanted it, of course.

She slipped off her gloves, the ring catching the last rays of the day. It gleamed softly, as if heralding a promise of things to come.

“Pleased?”

“It is more—” she swallowed. “—than I expected.”

“Good,” he nodded. “This is yours, your haven of privacy. I will not enter here again until you ask me to do so.”

“Thank you,” she came closer and rested her hands on his upper arms. Levering up from where he had leaned on the doorjamb, he did not speak. He wanted her to act on

her impulses, not his orders.

Timidly, she tipped up on her toes and brought her mouth to his. Devil and damn, her lips were as plush as they looked, fitting perfectly to his firmer edges.

Even though he knew this wasn't their first kiss, her kiss was everything an innocent Miss's should be: soft and demure, a hint of wantonness in the way her tongue traced his lips. Her kiss spoke of a desire to please that aroused him utterly.

He could tell she wasn't used to being in command, for she was attuned to his slightest reactions, her instinct to follow his lead. When he tested this by running his tongue along her mouth's sweet seam, she parted her lips immediately, welcoming him in.

William kissed the way he did everything else: with absolute expertise... and handing over the initiative made her go pliant. His hands slid up to thumb over her nipples, and when her knees wobbled, he caught her securely against him.

"Oh no," she mumbled. "That was... mortifying."

"No, it was interesting," he corrected. "It showed me how responsive you are."

He lifted his hand, rubbing his thumb briefly over her bottom lip, which felt puffy from his kiss. "You did everything right. I will be away tonight, but we will marry in the morning."

Bridget's brows furrowed. "What is so important?"

"Remember our agreement," he reminded, pointedly. "You should not ask about—"

"Your business, I know," she mustered a small smile. "I suppose I will see you on the

morrow.”

Thumbing her chin again, he kissed her one last time, enjoying the soft mewl that left her mouth.

With a bow, he ducked out of the room—there was another fight tonight, and this one, he had to win.

Six matches down for the opening rounds, now, this; the next level.

As it was the second round, the fights were no longer in seedy back alleys and street corners—the rounds were now held on lords' well-ventilated rooftops.

The ropes squaring off the floor were rich velvet red instead of fraying, and the match-keepers and bookmakers were assembled already with mostly gentry men—and a few beside their wives—that made up the crowd.

“Are you ready for this?” Silas nodded pointedly to the ring. “The stakes are higher tonight. They’re allowing everyone to make bets.”

“Everyone?”

“Even you.”

“How much blunt did you get from the last take?” William asked. “And do you have it on you?”

“About seven hundred pounds,” Silas smirked. “Great minds think alike.”

While wrapping his wrists with thick strips of linen, he watched Silas go over and talk to the bookmaker who held a quill over the page. After a quick conversation, the

man took a pouch and counted the money, and Silas headed back to him.

“The other bounder, some blunder named Ricky from Kent, has put up his house,” Silas shrugged. “I guess he is out of blunt.”

“Another house, eh?” William said, tightening a strap. “It’s probably some tumbledown hut not even worth the land it’s on.”

“Either way,” Silas shrugged. “It is an asset you can sell off later. Just get your head on top of the game, old boy.”

The rules of prizefighting were simple: fight until you had the other man on his back. Certain maneuvers—such as hitting below the belt, once overlooked in the street brawls—were now prohibited, and the match ended when a fighter was knocked or thrown off his feet.

“Get that man out by the sixth round,” Silas advised. “If you have to, stretch it to the eighth and let the bets roll in, but that is it. Do not let the man get to round ten.”

Nodding decisively, William bounced on his feet, when a flicker from the corner of his eye had him turning—and he spotted a familiar face. The boy he had trounced a few weeks ago stepped into the ring. He did not look as sallow as he’d been before—he somehow looked... worse.

His skin was an ill yellow and his eyes were jumpy. His thin wiry frame had muscles, but William did not know if the lad could manage the intense bout about to begin.

“You ? How did you manage to get in?” William called over the crowd. “I was sure someone would have knocked you out of the Circuit by now.”

“I won all the matches after you,” Ricky sneered. “I am not the weakling you clearly

think I am.”

“My mistake, but are you sure about this, lad?” he asked.

“I am no lad ,” Ricky spat. “I came to win, and to prove it, I have my house up on the betting bridge.”

A part of William wanted to take it easy with the young man, but he knew both of them had come into this match knowing it was all or nothing—and both had to do whatever they could to win.

His competitive spirit rallied at the thought. He could not risk his stability and advancement for someone else’s comfort. He had to win this and then get to the finals. Preferably without any overt bruises or woundings on his face. “Well then—” He struck out his hands and their hands met in a firm grip. “Let’s begin.”

The bell rang and the umpire commenced the match, but Ricky did not try the usual testing jabs with William and threw himself into the fight, letting his fists fly. Startled, William found himself on the defensive end, fending off frenzied blows until his back was against the rope.

A round of jeers had William gritting his teeth; this was not good. He dodged a flying punch and used the flat of both fists to force Ricky to stumble back. He pressed his advantage, rushing in with a controlled force of blows, jab-hook-uppercut combinations.

Ricky avoided the first two, but the uppercut sent him flying.

“Round to Marauder!” the Umpire called.

Bouncing on his feet, William grasped the desperation reeking from Ricky. The man

was desperate to win, but William could not give him the pleasure. The umpire commenced the next round and William punched with precise, timed blows, landing them in a fierce, rhythmic staccato.

By round six, Ricky's eyes had taken on a manic edge and he moved without tactic, leaving himself open to blows—and unpredictable in delivering them.

When William's blow struck Ricky's shoulder, a blinding hook snapped his head back and he stumbled into the ropes. Lights blinked in his vision, and he barely heard the boos, hoots and shouts.

He shook the sweat from his eyes and rallied, swung, trying to trick Ricky into a feint, but the man knocked away the fake punch and drove in again with a barrage of jabs that battered his breastbone and abdomen. He made the mistake of twisting his head the wrong way and took a blow to his brow.

Stunted, he had to grab the rope to steady himself and felt a trickle of blood slip down his temple.

"Come on, William," he cursed himself as his head sang with pain. "You cannot lose, not now, not here."

"Round to Ricky," the Umpire shouted.

It was four to two, and William remembered Silas's advice; he had to cut this off, now.

He leaped in with a vengeance and layered a complex set of quick punches to prevent retaliatory strikes.

He had to get the man unsteady and off his feet and confused. William felt no

pleasure, only frustration, as his opponent stumbled to the ropes, clutching at his jaw and rubbing his chest. The crowd erupted, cheering and stamping, flinging adoration and encouragement to William who had decided on ending it now.

When Ricky came at him again, William levered a heavy punch that hit the side of his temple, a punch to his chest and the third on his stomach had Ricky doubling over—and then, he collapsed.

His body began to convulse, his chin tipping up and eyes rolling to the back of his head. Alarmed, William dropped to his knees, avoiding the flailing limbs while the man jerked uncontrollably. The crowd turned into a pandemonium of a different kind; shouts of fear instead of encouragement.

“Medic!” he shouted over the din, seizing the man to keep his head from slamming back on the rough floor. “Where is the damned medic!”

Ricky’s chest was heaving, the bulge of his ribs pushing out and spit dribbling from his mouth. He was grabbing at William, clutching at him, his words a mumble, head shaking, “...failed you, I-I f-failed you.”

What did that mean?

“Stay with me, man,” William held him tight. “Don’t give up now. Live, damn it, you have to live! Where is the damned medic! He’s dying!”

It was torturous, having the man flail and convulse, his chest heaving like a drowning man gasping for air. The speeding moments felt drawn out like hours and William held him tightly.

The place was clearing and he gripped Ricky's hand, frantic. Had he killed him? Had the blows to the chest been too much?

“Medic!” He screamed. “Hurry!”

Clutching his wrist with a tight grip William had not expected, Ricky stammered, “T-tell her I l-love her, I—I...” His eyes fluttered.

The moment the medic slid through the ropes, the man shooed him away, and helpless, William leaned on the ropes, unable to do anything but watch.

The medic tried to stabilize the man, trying to pump his chest, get him to drink water, put him on his side—but nothing worked. Ricky’s body jerked one final time, and his boots slapped on the floor as his head went slack.

William knew it was too late. The man was dead.

The deafening pub William stumbled into near-midnight... he barely made it to a chair before his knees gave out. The moment Ricky lost his life kept replaying itself in his mind’s eye as he gazed at the worn grain on the small round table.

“Need something, guv?” A buxom woman asked while passing with a tray of drink.

“Whisky,” he murmured.

She laughed. “Oh, no, sirrah, you’re in the wrong side of town. We’ve only got Blue Ruin, rum, and ale.”

“Ruin,” William leaned forward, gripping his hair.

“You got into a fight, luv?” the lady said as she moved away. “Yer knuckles are all busted up.”

While she went off, he looked at his knuckles, the bloody tips, the black and blue

skin, and the tiny cuts on his middle phalanx, but as he looked on, he could not believe his hands had sent that poor man to his death.

Guilt, horror, and shame warred inside him as death was the furthest thing he had imagined when he had started bare-knuckle boxing.

He thought back to the first time he had seen a boxer in that countryside fair, handsome and muscular, with hundreds of people cheering him on and dozens of ladies all throwing themselves at him.

William had only thought about the pomp and prestige. No one had warned him about death.

He barely looked up when the cup was placed before him.

“Hartwell!” Colin called while pressing his way through the throng of drunks. “Christ above, do you know how many hovels and alleys we searched thinking you went off and got mugged?”

Instead of facing his friend, William stared down at his cup. “I killed a man.”

Sliding into the chair beside him, Anthony let out a sigh. “We know, we saw. But I don’t think it was all your fault. The man looked... peaky when he entered the ring.”

Little comfort.

“And it was fate that my fist sealed the deal then?” William grunted, then threw back half his drink in one gulp. The burn felt like a pittance in contrast to the scorch of guilt in his breastbone. “I must be cursed.”

“No,” Colin muttered. “Believe me, he was gone before you touched him.”

They did not understand—they would never understand what it meant to deliver death to someone, the moment the light left their eyes. He swallowed the rest of his drink and pressed the heel of his hand to his eyes as he tried to shut out the memory.

“I need time to digest this,” William mumbled.

“Well,” Colin sighed, “if you’re going to drink, we’ll join you. We’re not letting you go through this alone, old boy.”

Andrew called the waiting girl over and requested his drink, then turned to William. “We’ll be right here, William. We’re not going anywhere.”

It was somewhere in the early hours of the morning she heard the familiar tread of boots over the corridor, and they paused right before her door. She waited—and then heard the other door open.

He is home then.

After a moment, she turned on her side and set her back to the door, deciding to speak with him in the morning.

Suddenly, there was a loud stumble and she spun around, ready to leap into action if William fell—but heard him continue into his room without a collapse.

Maybe he misstepped.

By morning, she was up and washing in the basin, her stomach twisting at knowing by noon, she would be a married woman.

Clad in her best robe, she left her chambers to find the breakfast room—that doubled as a supper room—but found William’s door ajar. Had he left it open last night?

And that was when she heard the noise. A faint splash. From the bathing room.

I should go. Leave him to his privacy .

She intended to head to the breakfast room—but her feet fell rooted at his door. After a long moment, instead of heading off, she entered his room, feeling oddly like she was trespassing, when she had not felt that way last night.

Nearing the open door of the bathing chamber, she felt the warm wisps of citrus-scented steam drifting out and the gentle lap of water drew her closer.

William was lying in the large copper tub while a fire crackled in the hearth behind him. From her vantage point, she could see his side profile, his dark, wet hair pushed back from his chiseled face. His eyes were closed, his head resting against the back lip of the tub...

Oh my goodness. Her heart shot into her throat.

Dear Lord in Heaven—purple bruises darkened one of his perfect cheekbones, he had a split lip and a blackening eye. His long eyelashes lay in shadowed crescents against his pale skin, and dark stubble covered his jaw.

Even while injured, he was beautiful.

Perhaps beautiful was the wrong word. Elegant. Dangerous. Unpredictable... but still beautiful.

Silently, she breezed through the open door and made her way toward him. Slowly, she knelt beside his prone figure, her heart lurching at the sight of dried blood clinging to his left temple.

“William, oh God... William, what happened?”

Had he gotten into a brawl? Had he been mugged?

With tender care, she plucked a rag from a nearby rack and wiped the towel gently over his damaged temple. “William? Are you conscious? Please... answer me.”

CHAPTER 20

His eyes flitted open and the depths of the blue mesmerized her for a moment before a corner of his lips curled. Quick as lightning, he grasped her and hauled her into the tub as if she weighed nothing.

Soaked right through, she barely had a moment to gasp when his mouth was on hers; the kiss was hot, heady, spiced with brandy and desire. When his tongue stroked the seam of her mouth, she let him in eagerly, his masculine flavor saturating her senses.

His mouth left hers to explore her cheeks and jaw. When he found the rim of her ear, she shivered, squirming as his tongue investigated the delicate shell. Her fingers dug into his shoulders as he licked the sensitive lobe, then suckled upon it.

“How about some fun before we get leg shackled? Hm?” He tugged her further into his body.

And then, she sucked in another breath—for he was naked and erect, and with the slip of nothing between her, her nightgown was completely translucent, the gray was now gauze.

Heat slammed into Bridget as William lowered his head and ran his tongue up her breast, teasing the aching flesh before taking the hard bead of her nipple into his mouth through the thin cloth. She was awash with pleasure.

“W-William. You’re d-drunk,” she tried to reason with him, but there was no getting through to him.

“No,” his hands glided down her hips to cup her derrière. “I assure you I’m not.”

He kissed her again. This time, it was slow and heated, a torturous pleasure that sent liquid heat through her veins. Fighting through the sensation inside, she gently pushed against his steely chest and searched his eyes. His gaze had a glaze over them, but it was like a door had opened—the guard she ordinarily saw in his eyes was gone.

“Are you all right?”

“Perfectly fine,” he replied.

The back of his finger skimmed over her breasts before trailing down to her clenching belly. “We’re getting married today,” he murmured before taking both hands and resting them on her shoulders. “Do you want to taste the meal before you take it?”

“Meal?” She tried to keep the air light, even while the situation was decidedly heavy. “Are you an apéritif or... dessert?”

He chuckled. “Whatever you decide, my sweet, just touch me and I will do the same.”

Hesitating at first, she started with the broad breadth of his arms, the corded muscles of his shoulders, the little scars on his skin, and then slowly drifted to his chest. His breath came faster as she ran her hands down the rigid muscles and the light fur on his pectorals. Her fingers teased over the flat discs of his nipples.

The pleasure had him tipping his head back, his grasp tightening on her hips. His hands slipped from her rear to slide her silk nightgown up to her waist, to run through the curls only she had ever touched.

Her eyes immediately widened and her lips were trapped between her teeth.

“William—”

“Trust me,” he whispered again as his hand moved lower to stroke the soft petals between her legs, soft caresses that drove a whimper to her lips. “Just feel, sweet.”

He kissed her lush breasts again, laving her nipples through her wet gown as she arched into his mouth, and he swept a finger over the tight bud between her thighs. She jerked forward in shock as he circled it slowly.

She is an innocent, he reminded himself, trying to pull back, determined not to terrify her with the fierce passions inside him.

Using his knees, he parted her trembling thighs, and carded his fingers amidst soft and silky dark curls, perfectly untouched. Slipping a finger inside her sheath, he began to stroke her softly.

Her moans made his passions soar, yet he wanted this for her—and himself— needed her climax, craved seeing her pleasure.

“So... beautiful,” William whispered, easing his fingers inside her. He watched her eyes, watched for any sign she did not like the sensation, but they were glazed with sensual heat.

Her soft, pale skin, long silken limbs flush on his, made his body hard with need and blood thundered through him. Pushing a cloud of dark curls over her shoulder, he took her mouth once more. Kissing Bridget, showing her sensations she had never experienced before, stirred his soul.

Her spine bowed as he found and penetrated her most vulnerable place. His finger slid all the way in, as if he belonged there. He watched her face intently, as if she were the only thing in the world that existed.

“Work yourself against my finger,” he instructed. “Show me your pleasure.”

His wicked words made her giddy with arousal, but she obeyed, her need mounting as she rode his hand. As she hit her stride, she transformed into a nymph rising from the water, her body undulating over his touch, her breasts so seductively covered in wet silk, her nipples, dark berries, praying to be suckled.

He leaned down, and using his nose to push away the wet fabric, captured a bare tip in his mouth. He suckled in rhythm with his pistoning fisting, driving her on, making her wild in her pursuit of that vital finish. When his thumb skated over her hidden bud, the race careened out of her control.

“Come for me, now.” His forceful command propelled her over the edge. With a cry, she shattered around him, gripping his shoulders as her body succumbed to her first climax, but his fingers still coaxed out spasm after soaring spasm.

He drank it in like it was the elixir to life.

When she wilted against his chest, he rubbed the back of her neck, “You are so angelic when you come apart.”

She shivered, breathless. “I... I did not think this would be happening on my wedding day...”

“Did you think it would happen tonight?” he asked, finding the warm burn of his manhood resting thickly on his thigh oddly titillating. “I told you I would not debauch you... well, not entirely.”

“You’re... still aroused,” she whispered.

“I know,” he cocked his head. “Do you want to help me with it?”

“How can I?”

He took her small hands and placed both palms on his chest, then gently guided them lower while keeping his eyes latched onto hers. He noted her quick intake of breath when she brushed over his flat nipples, and then down over the flat ridges of his abdomen.

Drawing them from his body, he swept his thumbs over her palms before he wrapped her right hand around his turgid length. Under her silken touch, he swelled even larger.

William’s eyes held hers as he moved their hands over him, teaching her to stroke him the way he liked. She learned how much pressure he enjoyed; what rhythm tore sounds from the back of his throat.

Her grip tightened over his weeping head and William hissed, and she eased her hold, then touched a tentative finger to the base of the purple-veined shaft. Instinctively, her other hand closed over his base, curling around the thick rod.

“You are so... thick.” She could barely contain him within her circling fingers.

His head rolled back, “Never heard any complaint about that before.”

Bravely, she reached with her other hand to cup lower, finding him heavy and surprisingly supple.

“You’re doing just... fine.” His neck arched as he savored her firm yet gentle strokes. “Stop being such a polite young Miss. I am not going to break under your hand,” he muttered, a muscle in his cheek jumping.

“All right, then.”

She fixed her grip and her fist glided faster and faster along that thick truncheon of flesh; the water around them sloshed harder. She would not have dared to stroke him with such ferocity if he had not especially asked for it—but after last night, he did not need tender touches.

Pleasure jabbed through him like a red-hot stab of lightning and his blood swept through his body in a rush. With his heart pounding, he felt like a stallion nearing his finish at the Derby.

Peeling his eyes open, he saw the tip of her tongue clamped between her teeth; her hair was askew, and the steam misted her skin into a pearlescent sheen . Devil and damn , she was a sight to behold.

Her fists tightened around him. Her breasts quivered as she stroked him faster, harder—his vision blurred. “Bridget, I—!”

He yelled out as his seed shot up his shaft. The climax erupted from him, surging through him in a rush of heat and thick pleasure. His head fell back on the towel behind him as he sucked air into his lungs, dispelling the burn in his chest.

When he regained his senses, he gazed upon her. Satisfaction hummed in his veins, and yet his pulse took a wayward leap at how she examined her fingers. “Your hands are devious, sweetling.”

She giggled coyly, then asked, “What happened last night?”

His stomach roiled at the memory of the man he had—with no other explanation—killed in the ring last night, and the tortured message Ricky had whispered to him. He had won the match by default, but something about the ensuing victory felt hollow.

“Were you assaulted?”

“No.”

“I hardly think you slipped and fell hard enough to make you black-and-blue,” she pressed. “Did someone try to rob you?”

His gaze sharpened, “Cease from asking me these questions. It is no matter of yours!”

His angered snap stunned the both of them, and Bridget’s head jerked back as if she had been slapped. She sat back, staring at him white-faced. Exhaling, he said more calmly, “Do not press me further on this, please.”

Collecting herself, Bridget gingerly climbed out of the tub, her garments wet and dripping. “I suppose we will see each other at the church then.”

“Take a towel,” he added, calmer than before. “You do not want to catch a cold, not today.”

Silently, she took a towel from the rack and wrapped it around herself, then headed out.

Aggrieved, conflicted, and tired beyond measure, William slumped back to the towel pillow. “Happy wedding day to me.”

With the Special License acquired, the choice to have the wedding ceremony in a chapel or at his estate had come about, and William had instinctively chosen his home. Presently, he was glad for that choice, especially since he was rather conspicuously bruised and battered. While dressing, he pointedly avoided his reflection, and when Lane came to assist with the rest, his valet did not even blink an eye.

“I would ask if you had a rough night but the answer to that question appears rather

evident, Your Grace,” Lane remarked while reaching for his silver brocade waistcoat. “How bad was the bout, and does your new wife-to-be know about your... secondary occupation.”

William reached for his cufflinks and stared at the emeralds set in gold. His jaw clenched, “I killed a man, Lane.”

From the corner of his eyes, he saw Lane’s hands clench on the clothing. “That is.... unfortunate.”

Dropping the cufflinks into the velvet box, William braced his palms on the edge of the dresser and ground his teeth. “Even worse, he gave me a message to give to some woman, but I have no idea who she is or where to find her.”

His manservant came closer to rest a hand on his shoulder. “I am sorry that... happened, but you must persevere. You have a wedding to attend, a new wife to attend to, and the rest of the competition to finish.”

“I—” William did not want to admit how much seeing the poor lad collapse and die before him had affected him, and the little smidge of bliss from early had him sinking to a chair and gazing out the window.

The hedges were overgrown, the outdoor buildings tumbledown and the walls had ivy as tangled as the emotions in his heart. He barely recognized when Lane returned and sat a glass of whisky before him.

“For courage,” Lane replied.

Reaching for it, William asked, “When you married your dear wife, did you feel... inadequate?”

“Undoubtedly,” Lane uttered. “My Hannah was a gentleman’s daughter, and I, a retired army man, but she loved me anyway, and her father was gracious enough to see that and allowed us to marry. We shared twenty-three years of happiness and were graced with a beautiful daughter, until she eventually passed on from this life. But heading to the altar on that special day long ago certainly had me questioning my character many a time.”

Sighing, William threw back the drink and reached for his cufflinks again. “The day I thought would never come has finally arrived. I wonder what else I thought would never happen will someday happen.”

“Oh, Bridget,” Josephine exclaimed as she stepped into the dressing room Bridget was waiting in. “You look... beautiful!”

Reflexively, she looked down at her wedding gown made of blue silk. It swept off her shoulders and cinched just below her bosom, highlighting the ample curve of her bustline. Miss Lane had pulled her hair back into a soft coif at her nape, allowing a few artful pieces to dance about her neck and shoulders, with a few fresh flowers tucked into the bun.

“She is absolutely right,” Ellie swept into the room not a moment later—her pale peach gown had blue silk trimming that complimented Bridget’s gown. “You are radiant.”

“My wedding.” She gave a rueful sigh. “Who would have thought this day would come? It was not planned, but I’m so glad to have made it to this moment.”

“A little gift,” Ellie pinned a gold brooch of a lily to Bridget’s bosom and gave her friend a peck on the cheek. “We are so happy to be here. We’ll go take our seats. I’d wish you luck, but you haven’t needed it thus far.”

“I pray this union will be more than a simple business arrangement,” Josie gently fixed her purple gown. “I hope the two of you find love somehow.”

I highly doubt that.

“We’ll see,” she replied vaguely. “I’ll be down shortly.”

With her two friends gone, she sat and allowed Miss Lane to line her eyes with kohl and a bit of color on her lips. “You are truly radiant. His Grace will love the sight of you.”

Bridget smiled warmly. “I hope so.”

A couple of minutes later, and with her maid's help, she descended the stairs to approach the sunroom, and upon stepping inside, she spotted William at the end of the room, standing before a makeshift altar. He was in a dapper dark suit and blue waistcoat, and two men she had never met stood at his side, both handsome men in dark suits and silver waistcoats.

These must be the friends he mentioned—the other rakes.

Her groom-to-be locked eyes with her and she gave him a timid smile. The other two shared a look that she could not decipher as admiration or dismissal.

Not the time for that now.

Whoever had arranged the room had clearly taken inspiration from the garden beyond, as the aroma of the jasmine and gardenia plants did double duty, filling the room with their sweet fragrance.

When William finally took her hand, she joined him before the priest.

His eyes had changed—they were shuttered, a varied difference from how open they had been before. She would have vastly preferred to see a glimmer of interest in his eyes or even the wicked gleam she had seen a few times in the past.

Why is he so... distant? Isn't this what he wanted?

CHAPTER 21

Pull yourself together man. This is your wedding day.

Forcing himself back into the present, William admired his wife-to-be's figure in her soft blue gown that shimmered silver in the gentle light. Her hair was rich and made her skin glow.

Strangely, his breath caught as he glanced across at her, solemnly reciting her vows. She meant them, the look in her eyes showing him that she was not merely repeating as the ceremony demanded but giving herself into his care.

For a woman like her, independent, courageous, and capable, he felt oddly humbled. She could have chosen someone else, but while he had offered her more than any other could, he felt unworthy.

"Your Grace," the priest asked, "May I have the rings?"

Colin handed the box over and the priest unlatched it to reveal inside a ring with a frame shaped like a delicate golden rose, its body a pink faceted diamond.

"I, William Hartwell, do give you this ring as a symbol of my vow, and with all that I am, and all that I have, I honor you," William repeated after the priest, before slipping the ring onto Bridget's slender finger. It was a perfect fit.

She took the plainer version of the ring from the box, a flat sedate gold band with a thin diamond sliver running through the middle, and slid it onto his finger.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Those whom God has joined together, let no one put asunder.”

Reminiscing the heat from earlier that morning, William ached for a scintillating kiss from his new wife. Unfortunately, he had to settle for a tame, barely-there kiss that only made him hungry for more.

He drew away a touch, before finding himself unconsciously whispering in her ear, “Forgive me for being distant. I am exhausted.”

And in disbelief. Marriage is something I have been running from my whole life and now I am a husband.

Bridget’s smile was sweet and forgiving, which only made the guilt in his gut grow worse. He forced a smile and extended his arm, leading her to the room for the wedding breakfast. “You’re gorgeous, Duchess Arlington.”

“I’d say the same for you, Your Grace.”

“ William , please,” he corrected, biting back the reason he felt unfit to be called a duke.

In the hallway, he paused. “If you want to skip breakfast, I will oblige you. My friends are a bit... like a stiff drink, hard to swallow at first.”

“No,” she shook her head vehemently. “I would like to meet your friends and I would like for you to meet mine. I will be alright, I promise.”

The side tables were all covered with delicate foods, cakes, pies, coffee and tea kettles, and even to the side, a separate table of whisky, brandy, and scotch. Colin and Andrew were already working on the spirits and William bit back a warning. He

didn't think his friends would get apple-pated at his wedding... but he wouldn't put it past them.

"And the ill-fated groom approaches," Colin lifted his glass to his lips before murmuring.

"Thank you, Lightholder," William replied wryly, "I often find myself in need of reminding that you matured at the age of ten."

Raising his glass higher, Colin grinned. "I turn eleven tomorrow."

He introduced the two to Bridget, and Andrew bowed with a flourish as she curtsied. "I must say, Your Grace, you have worked a veritable miracle with this pile of scruff. You've turned him into a gentleman with worthy ambitions."

One of Bridget's thin brows arched. "Worthy meaning... marriageable?"

"Getting him to the altar at all," Andrew smirked. "It was something unheard of. I am sure minstrels a hundred years from now will say it never happened."

"Enough," William grunted. "You can jest all you want later on, at your homes or when you take the pedestal at Whites, but not on my wedding day."

"I see," Bridget smiled warmly. "Would you please excuse me, my lords?"

As she went off to her friends, a striking blond—who happened to be his friend's younger sister, and a demure brunette, he admired her with a lingering stare, then faced his two friends. "Don't start."

"On what, precisely," Colin teased. "The other miracle that you're falling in love with h—"

“Bite your tongue.” William huffed, pouring a glass of brandy. “If you utter that word, you shall meet me at dawn.”

“It might not be that, but it is definitely something,” Andrew added, sticking a hand in his trouser pocket. “You care for her.”

“This is a strictly business arrangement,” William deflected. “We get married as was ordered by my father, until I get my hands on my inheritance. After that, we part ways and go on with our separate lives.”

Colin winced. “That is quite... clinical.”

“It’s efficient and practical,” William replied, his eyes spotting his wife and her two friends heading to them. “And be quiet about it. We have company.”

The three ladies came forward and the two curtsied. “My lords, may I introduce Lady Eleanor Pembroke and Miss Josephine Simons. We have known each other from the schoolroom.”

It was a mere flicker and if William had not been looking at that direct moment, he would have missed it; Colin looked moonstruck at the sight of Miss Josephine—but in the next breath, the look was wiped from his face and his easy-going, devil-may-care mask dropped over his visage.

“I appreciate the gesture, Your Grace, but there is no need to re-acquaint myself with my sister, Eleanor. Though funny you should mention the schoolroom,” Andrew pointed a finger to William while holding his glass. “I met this one at Eton and let me tell you, he was the scrawniest, weakest grunt of the litter, half my size, and had knocking knees.”

“I could still floor you with a punch,” William replied affably.

“You were a scrappy little hell-born-babe, true,” Andrew admitted. “A trait he carried right on to adulthood.”

William narrowed his eyes warningly even while guilt churned in his gut. He had not told Bridget about him being a boxer but that was his secret to tell, not theirs. Andrew must have understood the unspoken message and clamped his mouth shut.

Bridget’s attention, however, seemed focused elsewhere entirely. “Apologies, my lord, I had not known that Eleanor was your sister.”

Her words were met with tight smiles between both siblings.

Between the toasts, dances, and general merriment, the wedding breakfast had gone on until nearly suppertime, when William announced that the newlyweds were about to leave.

“I hope I am not too late,” a strange voice said while entering the room.

A young man with coiffed flaxen hair and blue eyes bowed. “Beg your pardon, Your Grace. Miss Lydia Turner extended the invitation to—”

“Adam!” Bridget exclaimed.

William saw the moment she nearly leaped into the man’s arms but stopped herself—and damn if jealousy didn’t slash his nerves to splinters. She turned to him.

“Baron Howell, this is my husband, William Hartwell, Duke Arlington. William, Adam is my brother’s closest friend from before he went to war. Adam, I am so delighted you could make it!”

“Of course,” the man smiled, “I could never miss this day. Your brother would have

had my guts for garters if I had. May I give you a decorous hug?”

Bridget looked to William first and while his heart rebelled, he nodded permission, and this Adam wrapped her up in a long, aggravating hug. William ground his back teeth but masked the expression by pressing a glass to his lips.

“ Careful ,” Colin murmured while passing. “An ugly emotion called jealousy is showing.”

He ground his teeth even harder. The moment the embrace broke, he intervened. “Please excuse us. We have a dance to attend before the occasion ends.”

Guiding her suavely to the dancefloor, William drew his wife in right against his chest, ignoring the gasps of impropriety; he did not need to heed them anymore. Thighs brushing, breath mating, heat flowing, he understood why the waltz was considered scandalous.

Bridget’s lashes lifted, her gaze seizing his, and William realized something he had never felt before. He’d never desired anyone so fiercely—and so severely against his will.

While his pulse hammered, and he tried to unravel what was happening to him, he absurdly took time to count the almost invisible freckles on her nose. Seven . The locks of tresses that had come loose from her chignon. Three.

Her eyes shifted between blue and green depending on her mood and flashed verdigris fire when she was angry, her features delicate and fresh, her figure enticingly petite.

“Look at me,” he whispered, his senses rioting.

She did... and lost her step.

He caught her, bringing her closer and his length strained against superfine trousers until he feared his shaft would pop his buttons. Perhaps he'd just been celibate too long. He hadn't been with a woman in months but he hadn't wanted distractions while he was finding his footing in The Circuit.

They slowed to a halt in a triangle of light spilling from a bay window, the music from the pianoforte and harpists surging to a crescendo. He twirled her a second time, then pulled her in. "Have I told you how beautiful you are?"

"You've mentioned it once or twice," Bridget smiled, smoothing a hand down his lapels. "Thank you."

Wrapping his arm around hers, he turned to the guests. "Sadly, this is the point we say adieu. Please enjoy the rest of the afternoon at your pleasure."

One of Bridget's friends hugged her and he saw how she secretly pressed a small flat box into Bridget's hand. "French letters, for the wedding night. He'll know how to use them," the lady whispered, and William could not hide his smirk.

Bridget's face went vivid red. "Erm, merci , Ellie."

He pretended to ignore the two but when the lady turned, he winked; unflappable, Lady Eleanor lifted her champagne to her lips.

With a final bow, he led Bridget out of the room, unsure how his new bride wanted things to proceed from there.

"Your chambers are already arranged if you wish to retire," William said, motioning in the direction of her rooms.

He could swear he noticed a hint of disappointment cross her expression, before she said, “Erm... that’s all?”

Teasingly, he plucked the box from her hands, then twiddled it in the air. “Were you planning on putting these to use?”

She went fetching red again. “Perhaps.”

Caging her chin and cheek with finger and thumb, his mouth found hers, and he felt need shiver through her. This embrace burned with a new intensity. He felt desire, not a boy’s fledgling ardor... but a man’s hunger, and every part of her responded.

Her lips parted to the thrust of his tongue, and her delicate, feminine flavor infused his senses. She tasted right, smelled right, felt right... she moaned as his lean length pressed into her stomach.

Inches from her mouth, he whispered, “I told you, if you want more, the decision is entirely yours. But for now, perhaps I should take some time to remind you of the rules we—”

“I am well aware of the rules,” Bridget interrupted him desperately. “I do not need to be reminded, but perhaps... we could bend them a little?”

William struggled to make sense of his emotions at that moment. They were a mixture of hesitation, lust, and insecurity, and he was unable to distinguish between them presently.

She asked...

Anticipation simmering, he paused, wondering where exactly he could draw the line. Bridget was no casual tumble; she was his wife, and this was their wedding night.

“Go inside,” he muttered. “Have a bath and change into something comfortable. I’ll be along presently.”

Her eyes dipped to the box, “What will you do with those?”

William pressed them into her hand, “Keep them for me.”

An hour later, Bridget found herself clad in another slip of silk, a peach nightgown, and a matching wrapper—more relics of her older life—and paced the room, wondering what William had planned for them.

When she had mentioned bending the rules, she had not given him any boundaries pertaining to those words and was now afraid of what she had thrust herself into.

The door opened and William stepped in, dressed in dark breeches, a black shirt, and over his arm was a cloak. Her eyes flickered to it questioningly, but he rested it over a chair.

Settling on a chaise, he reclined indolently. “Please, come here.”

Hesitant, she did as asked and paused before his knees. Leaning in, William skimmed his hands up her thighs, making gooseflesh erupt over her skin, before he cupped the back of her knees and drew her forward. Taking the hint, she climbed over him, straddling his hips, her loose hair cascading around her face. As scandalous as it was, she didn’t feel ashamed.

“Do you want lessons in seduction, sweet one?” he asked, both hands traveling up her waist and holding her under her sternum. “I don’t think you need them; you are artlessly doing better than any courtesan.”

“Liar,” she laughed. “As someone who knows female companionship , surely I am

lacking.”

“Hardly,” his hands shifted, and his thumbs found her unfettered breasts. Bravely, she did not shy away, and when he caught her earlobe between his teeth, suckling it, Bridget grasped his shoulders, squirming.

Her breath hitched when his large hand squeezed her breasts, adept fingers finding the straining peak beneath the layers of fabric. He strummed her nipples, and stars flashed.

Doing it again, and again until the motions felt unending, Bridget felt pleasure strum through her body and her gaze grew cloudy, her spine arching, wordlessly begging for his caress. He kept an accompanying rhythm on her other breast, his fingers circling, pinching with just enough pressure to drive her mad with want.

“Wanton and wicked girl,” he whispered wolfishly.

She couldn’t even think to protest as his hand drifted up her stocking-clad leg, past her garter, over her bare thigh, and then—dear God, then...

She gasped when he drew one sensitive bud into his mouth. When his tongue curled, the sensation shot deep between her thighs.

Fingers spearing into his thick hair, a low moan tore from her throat. “Don’t stop. Just... don’t stop.”

“Easy, my sweet. I’m not going anywhere.” Even his voice aroused her, the shape of his words pressed against her taut, throbbing peak. “I will never leave you wanting.”

Easing from the chaise with her in hand, he crossed the room to lay her on her bed and gently peeled every slip of clothing from her body. When her woman’s place was

laid bare, her hands shot over to cover herself, but he grabbed both, pressing them to her sides.

“No hiding, my sweet. Let me see all of you.”

Her eyes shut tight, yet she acquiesced.

“Remember what I said,” he whispered, the bed dipping as he pressed a knee on the mattress. “Eyes on me.”

She would have argued, but his lips fixed onto her other nipple, her eyes flew open, and the heat inside her grew to a feverish pitch. Her skin seemed afire, wet heat blazing from her core as his hot lips trailed their way down the path between the hollow of her breasts.

With his hands caging her hips, his tongue dipped into a small divot of navel, and her hands fisted in the coverlet at the intense, unfamiliar sensation, and her lungs struggled for air. Her woman’s place was throbbing, aching, shockingly damp.

“I’m... I’m... wet,” she ended in a whisper.

The smile that curved his lips was playful but seemed to understand something she didn’t. “Yes, you are. Very . And it’s all for me.”

Through the sensation spiraling through her body, she realized something—William’s trajectory.

Surely, he could not be going there , could he?

“William, what are you—”

His hands fixed under her thighs.

Raising his head to look at her, he asked with a wicked grin, “What does it look like? I am honored to be the first to kiss you here.”

“Surely, you cannot—” He swiped his tongue through the very core of her and she jolted off the bed.

Holding her gaze, he wiggled his tongue from her folds to a spot that sent sensation streaking through her. As he licked and suckled, coherent speech became hopeless.

His tongue was warm and firm, expertly appeasing her growing ache. Bridget’s blood thundered in her ears as pleasure suffused her body. She writhed and bucked, breaking out in a fine sheen of sweat in spite of the chilly room.

Pleasure built inside her, a storm that pushed the very boundaries of her soul. He licked upwards, latching onto her pearl and suckling hard.

When he licked and sucked at the peak of her sensation, her desire went from a simmer to a boil. His tongue circled her opening... then thrust inside. He slipped a hand under her derrière to tilt her pelvis. The new position catapulted her back up the mountain. As his rhythm increased, so did her pleasure.

“Please, faster... I can almost... harder... I’m almost... William, please...”

She screamed as a shattering climax beset her body and endless bliss wracked through her soul, the pinnacle of pleasure a blinding light behind her eyes. Dimly, she felt William tug the sheets over her and she opened her eyes as he dropped a kiss on her cheek before he donned his cloak.

“William?” she asked. “You’re leaving?”

“Yes,” he replied, tugging an arm down and flicking the cowl over his head. “You completed your part of the bargain. Now, it is time for me to do mine.”

CHAPTER 22

The indifferent hackney William had hired dropped him in the midst of Spitalfields, specifically a tavern named the Red Lion Inn, a packed East End public house that catered to the laboring class but had cutthroats, thieves, and moneylenders sprinkled in. On a Friday night, he knew there would be a host of sources ready for the picking.

Even before he approached the tavern, the raucous pounding of an ill-tuned pianoforte and screeching singing greeted him. Two drunks stumbled out of the doorway, grabbing at each other and sloshing rank Blue Ruin from their pewter tankards.

Sidestepping them, he entered the dim room and was about to make out the patrons when he noticed a man in a lurid blue velvet jacket banging away at a popular song, while at least a dozen men and a handful of women sang along. Half of the patrons of the pub sang with them, and the mood of the place was jolly, wild, and uninhibited.

God knows I do not want to be revisiting this place.

Alas, he had little choice in the matter. According to his sources, here should be a moneylender named Giuseppe Alfonso, a slimy snake with black eyes, who made this bar his headquarters. The man had grown as rich as Croesus on the back of poor schmucks who had got themselves neck-deep in gambling, drinks, and whores. He could guarantee anyone who was in debt would come to this man.

I know, for I had been one.

Circling the room, his eyes skimmed over the men carousing with brightly painted courtesans, the men throwing dice on tables, and wrinkled his nose at the cloying tobacco smoke.

At the far back, sheathed mostly in murk, he spotted Giuseppe , the large carnelian ring he often donned flashing bloody red in the low light.

William went over and stopped at the foot of the table. “Ah, Giuseppe, old chap. I must have a word with you.”

“Pah!” the man leaned forward, his eyes glinting like onyx in the light—his French accent warped his words into a serpentlike twist. “The Prodigal Son returns... but I must ask... why? Word on the street has it that you have gotten out of debt, stopped your bad habits, and are working to rebuild your fortunes.”

“I’m not here for myself,” William replied matter-of-factly. “I’m trying to find a Frederick Wycliffe.”

“That name does not feel familiar, but...” Giuseppe stood with a flourish, then beckoned, “Come to my office, young Duke. We’ll talk there.”

This ‘office’ was little more than a glorified cupboard with a table shoved into a corner, two chairs surrounding it, a tiny window, and a gas lamp. Upon seating himself, Giuseppe pulled a ledger and flicked it open. William chose sagely to stand and wait instead, lest he get his fresh clothes stained with whatever business went on here, and have his valet at his neck about it again.

The moneylender hummed a tune and leisurely trailed a finger down the sheets, checking the inserts, turning the pages with excruciating slowness. Finally, he leaned back and stroked the patch of hair on his chin. “He is not in these records, but this is only for the past year. I have other records from years past but those are at my other

office in Soho. Would you care to visit tomorrow, perhaps, Your Grace?"

"I suppose I have no choice," William muttered bluntly.

"I am curious, however," Giuseppe sat back and drummed his fingers on the arms of his rickety chair. "Why are you here with me instead of gracing the well-appointed bed of your new wife?"

William knew he shouldn't be surprised—word spread fast in the stews after all. Many believed that money was the currency of the stews; William knew better; if you dealt in information, you were king.

"Who said I hadn't?" William replied calmly.

"I seem to recall the days when you didn't give a whit about the ton or propriety and you would stay whole weekends with your courtesans, never leaving until dawn."

I still don't care a whit about the ton.

"I hold my wife to a different standard," William replied.

"They are delicate little things, aren't they," Giuseppe laughed. "Trained to sing and dance and paint but not the most important thing of having stamina or creativity in the bedroom."

"As touched as I am about your concern for my wife, I did not come here to talk about her," he replied sharply. "It is her missing brother."

"Ah, I see," the man murmured in thought. "In that case, I shall throw you a bone, Your Grace. You do not have to come to me, I will send you word if I find his name in my books. That being said, though I know I deal with some of the lowest, there is

another who serves the scum. His name is Harrison Black, and he works inside Covent Gardens. He may be a better outlet. Though you will have to break through a wall of cutthroats to get to him.”

“My wife fears her brother might be dead,” William stressed. “This is pressing, so please send me whatever you find. In the in-between times, I’ll try seek out this Harrison Black.”

“Be careful, he has a budding disdain toward the fops of the ton,” Giuseppe warned. “But maybe use your other hobby to your advantage, hm?”

William considered his options. He did not question the man on how he knew William boxed—this was the stews, the men were more intelligent than others took them for—but did question how he was going to get this Harrison Black on his side.

“Send me whatever you find.”

“You should check the whorehouses too,” Giuseppe said to his back. “But not the upscale ones you once patronized.”

That made sense: men who escaped to pleasure houses were less likely to be discreet. After all, most of them didn’t think they had to be reserved to be with some ‘cotton-headed’ wench.

“Any recommendations?”

“The Blue Siren in Whitechapel. I’d start there,” Giuseppe replied.

“Duly noted,” William inclined his head, then flickered his cowl up.

Thinking of her husband somewhere deep in the pits of London, searching for her

brother, had Bridget worrying intensely. Unable to sleep, she glanced anxiously at the Ormolu clock on the fireside mantle. The soft ticks sounded thunderous against the quiet night.

Where is he?

Is he okay?

Fidgeting in her bed, she sighed. “What is it about him that... affects me so?”

Suddenly, she heard the soft thump of boots down the corridor and checked the clock again—it was half past three in the night. Sitting up, she looked to the door and wondered, would it help to see him? Would he think it brazen and improper?

The other door opened, and she slid her legs out from the covers, then hesitated again. Five minutes passed before she worked up the courage to don her wrapper and leave the room. Two steps across the corridor and she found his door, dared herself to twist the knob, held her breath, and stepped in.

A dark form sat atop a small, single bed, one knee pulled up. Again, she paused.

“...You’ve made it this far,” William murmured. “Come closer.”

Relieved, she approached and sat at the foot of the bed, fingers coasting over the soft cotton. “This is not what I had expected. Why do you sleep in a cot?”

“To dissuade myself from returning to my old ways,” he muttered. “A large bed means two in it, or three.”

“Three?” She went red. “Meaning...”

“Yes,” he sighed. “Back in the day when I thought nothing of my life, such things were commonplace. I know better now. Life is fleeting, frail, with unexpected turns and twists. It’s not wise to live so... carelessly with your health.”

She peered upward through her lashes at him, all virile lines and masculine grace. He was so handsome that her heart ached.

“Penny for your thoughts, sweetling,” he said with a lazy smile.

Her fingers brushed the faded purpling bruise on his cheek. “You’re not like other lords, are you?”

William leaned into her touch. “No.” After a small pause, he continued, “...Do you want to know a secret?”

“Please.”

“The dukedom,” he nuzzled her palm. “I never cared for it. The thought of bearing such a great responsibility never appealed to me, not even from a young age. I am sure others would have loved the idea of price like rank, more money than Midas, and have women nipping at their heels, but not me.”

The feel of his bristles against her skin was oddly arousing, and the more he nuzzled, the more her blood heated. “And what did you want?”

“Something more... hands-on,” he replied in thought. “Quite literally. When I was nine, my father took us to his countryside Manchester home for a holiday, and there, I snuck away to a countryside fair. I saw two men in a prizefighting bout and crowds of people cheering them on.

“They were so... awe-inspiring, so powerful, so much in control of their destinies,”

he murmured, lost in his past. “I drew parallels that made no sense at that age. I thought they showed me that a man can be the master of his life, that no one should have power over you. No man, no title.

“Minutes later, one of them sent the other flying out of the ring, he won on a knockout, and the women flung themselves at him,” William’s eyes took on a nostalgic haze. “Right then, I knew that was what I truly wanted in this life. To be famed for the destiny I carved out, not one handed to me on a silver platter. And so, I trained in secret. Pembroke was not jesting when he told you I was once a skinny wisp, but then I minded my meals, ran for hours, worked out in boxing salons...”

His voice trailed off, eyes closing. “Then, it was like one day, I just... woke up. My life had taken a sudden turn, I was losing money left and right, and I had to take some drastic measures to correct them...”

It was not hard to put two and two together for Bridget. “You... prizefight?”

“Hm,” he replied. “And I’m pretty good at it too. There’s a tournament going on and I am about to win it. A hundred thousand pounds. It’s a pittance compared to my inheritance, but this is money I earned fair and square, not tainted by ancient blood or war. Is it foolish of me to consider that money of greater value than what I will get passed down?”

“No,” she shook her head. “I think it is fair for one to take greater pleasure in things that they have earned over what was handed to them. Do you want the dukedom?” she asked.

His lids lowered. “I... do not know.”

Feeling that it was a sore spot for him, Bridget asked, “You went out looking for my brother, did you not? What did you find?”

Rubbing his eyes, he admitted, “Not much yet. Missing men who are up to their ears in debt have many places to hide. The first step is finding who they borrowed money from, and I know a moneylender who caters to anyone, so I went to see him first.”

“And then?”

He looked up. “I don’t want to scar you.”

“Tell me?”

“If your brother was anything like how I was... he quite possibly sought female companionship, so I visited a brothel,” he continued. “I need to ask you a very important question though, when exactly did your brother disappear? I have to narrow down the time.”

“Between three months and two years,” she said, grimacing. “I should have told you before.”

He gave her a slanted smile. “I just started, love. It’s fine.”

Her heart jumped. Love, he said love.

“I will try tomorrow evening, but first—” He swung his legs over the bed, bent, and scooped Bridget up into his arms. “—let’s get you to bed.”

Holding onto his arm, she stayed still as he carried her to her bedchamber and rested her on the bed. At the side, she watched as he stripped his shirt off and removed his trousers to stay in his small clothes.

And when her gaze fell upon his body, her breath caught. The man was a sight to behold. He was lean, yet his torso, shoulders, arms, and legs were still strong and

finely muscled. A mat of dark hair covered his chest, arrowing to a thin line upon his ridged belly and down to the band of his small clothes.

The moment his knee pressed on the bed, her heartbeat ratcheted up a notch. He cocked his head to the side, “I am not attacking you, my sweet. Do not look so horrified.”

Huffing, she snagged a pillow and smacked him lightly. “Don’t mock me.”

Laying beside her, he pulled her into his side, “Let's mark off sleeping with a man off your debutante list.”

She laughed, then pillowed her head on his arm, “In the same token, you have never slept with a virgin, have you?”

“Never,” he muttered. “Virgins seem... tricky. All my life, I have preferred women who knew their way with bedsport, but I suppose they all had to start somewhere.”

Her brows lifted. “Is that your way of saying I should... begin with you?”

William laughed. “Not at all, but so far, I have realized you do have feminine passion, unplumbed passion at that, but in your heart of hearts, you must be asking of all the men you might have discovered it with, why did it have to be me, a seasoned rake.”

“You are proud, self-assured, even flippant at times, but you are a good man. You’ve made mistakes and are self-aware enough to take the steps to correct them.”

He peered at her. “Thank you,” he said softly. “Now—” He gently turned her on her side, wrapped an arm around her middle, and pulled her into his chest. “We sleep. I need to see my uncle tomorrow.”

Despite his indifferent tone, she sensed the underlying tension. Felt it in his body. His arm was a possessive steel band around her and the feeling uncurled a deep-seated need inside her—male comfort. His scent enveloped her and cocooned with his body, she slipped off to slumber.

It was the absence of his arm around her middle that woke Bridget and instantly, she sought out William. Had he left? Turning over, she saw he was there still, his eyes were closed, the blemish on his jaw faded yet pronounced against his tanned skin.

His brows were smoothed out from their usual harsh knit, his ordinarily taut jaw now lax in sleep. Beneath the blanket, his chest rose and fell in slow, deep surges. It seemed impossible that her strong, potent husband could be this vulnerable.

Her words to her godmother came flooding back. William Hartwell was nothing like the world took him to be, and she now knew why—it was a shield. Yes, she had no doubt he'd been wild in his younger days, but he was a good man now, smart, witty, kind, and oh-so-handsome.

It hit her like the first icy splash of morning ablutions. Could she be developing feelings for William?

“Ah!” The gasp punched itself from her as her back met the bed, William looming over her, pinning her hands over her head.

His eyes were sleep-laden, his hair ruffled and bed-tousled, his jaw dusted with dark stubble. Eyes coasting over her face, he whispered, “I could feel you watching me in my sleep.”

“I was admiring you,” she corrected.

His lips twitched, “How was your first night sleeping beside a man?”

Her cheeks tinged red. “It was...”

“No lies, sweetheart.”

“...Sublime,” she replied, tamping down on her embarrassment at admitting it. “Your hold on me was... oddly comforting.”

“You like my hands on you,” he murmured warmly.

With him above her, she felt her world narrow to him and him only. Arching, she leaned up and kissed him squarely on the mouth, slanting her lips across his in the way she knew he loved. She let out that breathy moan as her lips touched his.

There was no taking it back. Not that she wanted to. Goodness, no. His mouth felt exquisitely warm against hers, and the soft, bristled hairs of his stubble abraded her skin in a sensual way. A delightful heat welled within her as William deepened the kiss.

Again, he switched their places smoothly, spinning them with her straddled atop him—his hands framed her jaw, holding her still for his kiss. His mouth possessed hers with firm, arousing authority and she parted her lips for his tongue, moaning as he plundered her softness.

As he licked inside, saturating her senses with his masculine flavor, his hand, rough with calluses, slid up her outer thigh, up under her nightdress, and cupped her bottom. Her woman’s place was throbbing, aching, shockingly wet already.

Good Lord, he was potent. He lifted his mouth from hers, and the loss of contact momentarily broke her reverie.

Awareness jolted her just then—it was daytime already, and while the under-curtains

were drawn, the morning light filtered through the thin material, tinting the room with a golden glow.

William shifted them so they lay on their sides, as his hand smoothed over her silk nightdress. “As much as I would like to stay with you and tumble over this bed, I must see my uncle.”

“Should I come with you?” she whispered.

“I think it is best if you stay here,” he kissed her cheek and sat up to ruffle his hair. “Explore your new home, you may even visit or invite your friends if you’d prefer.”

She leaned on her elbow as he slid from the bed and headed to the door. William paused, hand on the knob, “Would you like to sleep together again?”

Falling to the pillows, Bridget gave him a soft smile, “I’d love nothing more.”

CHAPTER 23

“ I was expecting you this morning,” Ambrose said calmly as William stepped through his door. “So, I prepared.”

Upon seeing the other man in his uncle’s study, his later father’s solicitor, Lodge Needs, sitting in a wingback and sipping a cup of coffee, William murmured, “I see that.”

“Before we get into the proceedings, I am profoundly insulted that I did not merit an invitation to your wedding,” Ambrose dropped that morning’s edition of the Times on his desk, the headline, in bold black, Beast of Brookhaven Marries Seamstress.

William took the paper and skimmed over it, then casually dropped it again. “I apologize. But it was nothing spectacular. I doubt you would have even enjoyed it. Anyway—” he pulled a folded document from his inner jacket, “—my marriage license, if you need proof.”

“If I may, Your Grace,” Lodge took the paper from him and unfolded it.

While he read it over, William apologized to his uncle again. “The night before, I was drinking with company, a last hurrah to my bachelorhood, and I apologize for not paying attention to detail.”

Ambrose lifted a brow, “You got drunk before your wedding day?”

“No,” William shook his head. “I wouldn’t disrespect her that way. It was simply a

last salute to my single days.”

“Ahem,” Lodge cleared his throat. “May I have your attention, Your Grace, and my lord?”

As they joined the solicitor, the man withdrew a document from his valise and opened it. “Before we begin, may I give my felicitations, Your Grace. I wish you a long and delightful marriage.”

“Thank you,” William replied, choosing to stand instead of sit. He simply wanted to hear seven words; your inheritance is now available to you so he could move to the bank.

“...That being said, according to your late father, and this is his direct statement, my son, William Hartwell, upon his marriage to whichever lady he sees fitting, is to be issued his million dollar pound—”

His heartbeat increased.

“— upon being married and staying married to the lady and residing in the same domicile for a consecutive two months. Only when such time has passed, and upon approval of my brother Ambrose Hartwell, will the sum be issued.”

William flinched. “What ?”

Lodge folded the paper. “I am sorry, Your Grace, but these are your father’s words and until these terms are met, your inheritance will still be withheld by your uncle.”

Even from the grave, you have bested me, father.

Throat tight, William crossed the room to pull a glass of whisky from a shelf and

poured a finger. As stoic as he could, he muttered, "That is... disappointing." Throwing back the drink, he reveled in the burn. "Here's to you, father."

"You were hoping for something else," Ambrose stated bluntly.

"Without a doubt," William replied. "But I suppose I will have to do as stated."

Ambrose tilted his head. "You will have to do as stated? Perchance, did you marry that girl simply to acquire your inheritance or because of the scandals surrounding the two of you?"

The grip William had on his glass tightened to the point his knuckles went white. "No." His eyes narrowed, even though his conscience smarted with the lie. "I married Bridget because I love her, and I see...." He paused. I see a hurting heart that narrowly mirrors mine "...a tender soul within her, one that craves comfort instead of what the other ladies want, riches and status."

His uncle's brows met his hairline and he shared a look with Lodge. When he did face William, his voice was deep with astonishment and respect. "I would have never... expected that from you."

"I may have a hard head and a jaded past," William added calmly. "But I am not immune to emotions."

"Another thing I had not expected to hear from you," Ambrose replied, but he reached out and laid a hand on William's shoulder. "You've grown, my boy. I am happy to see it."

His fingers shifted to press on William's jaw. "What happened here?"

"Your Grace," Lane bowed. "Two ladies are here to see you, Ladies Josephine

Simons and Eleanor Pembroke.”

Head snapping up from the book on her lap, she exclaimed, “They’re here! Please, send them in and some refreshments too please.”

She stood up as the two entered, Ellie in a gorgeous bronze dress and Josie in a pale-yellow dress filled with bows and ribbons.

Delighted, she embraced both and sighed. “I am so sorry,” she shook her head. “I am the worst of friends, I should have visited.”

“Nonsense,” Josie shook her head in turn, “You are a newlywed, Bridget. We suspected you would be... occupied.”

While Ellie snickered, her friend's meaning was not lost on Bridget and her face brightened. Ellie leaned in, her eyes glittering, “How was the marriage night, dear? Inquiring minds want to know.”

“A lady does not kiss and tell,” Bridget said, hoping her red face would convince the two otherwise.

“You are married to the rakehell of London,” Josie tutted. “Surely, he wouldn’t have scorned the one night of socially acceptable coupling.”

“Maybe he is addicted to the thrill of jumping out of a widow’s window,” Ellie laughed. “But enough, Josie, we’re embarrassing the poor girl. Surely, there is something else to talk about.”

The three shared a look, only to burst into peals of laughter while Lane entered the room and sat the tray of tea and sweet morsels down. Bridget thanked him, then turned to Ellie, “So, what engagements are you planning on enjoying for the rest of

the season?”

Stepping into his home, William peeled his jacket away and headed to his study—and stepped in, only to pause. Surrounded by papers, Bridget had a quill clamped between her teeth, a smear of ink across her cheek, and with her hair up in a tousled knot, she pored over them.

“What on earth are you doing?” he asked, nearing.

She startled and he found he quite liked her wide doe-eyed look. Gently, he drew the quill from her teeth and rubbed the smear of ink away. The rounded curve of her cheeks reminded him of a blushing peach and felt smooth as silk.

“I am attempting to create nutritious menus for the pair of us,” she began.

“Menus,” he echoed.

“Yes,” she pulled away and focused on her papers. “I know you men believe you can survive on coffee, brandy, and the humor of other men, but I believe you, in your special circumstance, need something more.”

Pressing his backside to the table, he plucked a paper up. “Coddled eggs, grilled kidney or cold ham, cornmeal cakes, brioche bread. Tea, coffee, and hot chocolate, hm.”

“You are not in favor?”

“No, actually, I don’t remember eating this, well, not since I was a child,” he replied.

“Please add veal.”

“Why, thank you.” She smiled, then handed the other paper to him. “Input?”

“Pheasant pie, roast, asparagus, hare stew, brown bread, lobster, chicken cuts and game pies, wine, brandy and for supper, cold cuts, sweet and savory pies and tarts, fruits and marzipan,” he listed off, then wrinkled his nose. “Negus ? God no, I despise that thing.”

“I shall remove that, then.” She struck it through. “And this is all under thirty pounds. You have your healthy meals, and we have a selection to choose from all month.”

“Beauty and brains,” he murmured, “Why are you doing all this?”

She smiled. “As your wife, is it not my duty to care for you?”

“Duty, hm?” he murmured. “Is that why you’ve tended to me?”

Her heart thumping, she continued, “Well, no, I mean... I mean to say, I am your wife. Obviously, I should do my womanly duties and make sure the basic needs are covered. I remember my mother making menus for us so I—I thought it was right to do. Erm, how was your day?”

Gently, he drew her from her seat and widened his legs to pull her into the vee of them. Dropping her hips, he held her squarely. “It was a disappointment, but I can work around it.”

Her brows furrowed. “You didn’t get your inheritance?”

“No, well, not yet. My father decreed that we must be married for two months before I can attain it,” he replied. “But I am not as upset as I might have thought. Our relationship is something I want to discuss with you.”

She searched his eyes, “Yes?”

He bent his head, his mouth claiming hers. His kiss was gentle yet masterful and she clutched at his arms. When his tongue swept against the seam of her mouth, it felt natural to open to him. William slid his fingers around her nape, anchoring her as he courted her mouth with slow, drugging kisses.

He delved deeper, sliding his tongue against hers, and she moaned with desperate need. Against his own desire, he broke the kiss, resting his forehead briefly against hers.

“You’re so bloody sweet,” he brushed his lips across her cheek. “I could taste you all day.”

Bridget blinked. “I didn’t realize you wanted to add me to the menu.”

He stared at her... then threw his head back and bellowed out a laugh.

Hearing his unrestrained mirth, seeing the crinkles on the sides of his eyes, and feeling the rumbling vibrations from his chest, all made her heart warm. It was the first time she had broken through the stoic facade he always wore. His laughter was infectious, and she joined in, enjoying the lighthearted moment.

I’ve finally seen the heart of him.

Chuckling, he kissed her cheek, “That is the first time I can remember laughing that hard. Thank you, sweetheart.”

“What did you want to ask?” She smoothed her hand over his brocade waistcoat.

“Just a moment ago, you mentioned basic needs ,” he pulled her closer so she could feel his arousal. Bridget’s cheeks warmed but she kept her head up high. “I must ask, do you want to take our intimate arrangement another notch?”

Her brows lifted. “I do... but what do you mean?”

“I want your hands on me,” he replied, dipping to sweep her legs from under her and lifting her into his arms. Clutching his shoulders, she stared at him with lust-glazed eyes as he carried her into his bedchamber.

“You are light as thistledown,” he murmured while padding down the corridor. “You’re so soft and delicate. When I think of another man near you, I feel like a troglodyte, willing and ready to grasp a club and beat them off you.”

She giggled. “Do you have a club?”

“Yes, somewhere,” he murmured while kicking the door in and resting her on her bed.

She peered down at the huge bulge straining the front of his trousers. “I suppose you want my hands on you...” She moistened her lips, “...there?”

He gave her a slow, beautiful smile while peeling the cravat from his neck and undoing his cufflinks. “Yes.”

As he tore his shirt away, she avidly took in the springy dark hair that was sprinkled over his taut skin, the softer trail bisecting it that delineated the muscles of his torso.

Once again, her eyes dropped to his legs and back up to his shoulders, the muscles flexing as he undid his trousers and kicked away his boots.

Her breath held as William removed the rest of his clothes, his thick rod ruddy with arousal, her heart thudding as he grasped himself and ran his fist along the thick and veiny shaft. At the base, his male sac hung heavily between his corded thighs.

Fully naked now, he pressed a knee to the bed and she got to her knees, waiting for him to join her. He pressed his back to the headboard and spread a knee wide. “Come here.”

He took both her hands, fixed one at the base of his length, and carefully curled the other around his sac. She grasped his heavy stones and kneaded them gently as she twisted her hand around his base.

She fixed her grip on him and began to stroke; his head lolling back in bliss as she gripped him with a firmer fist, dragging her palm up and down his shaft, and the pleasure that strained his face made her want to take him to the pinnacle of bliss.

When her thumb surged up the thick vein on his underside, he spurted. Bridget swiped her thumb over his crown, wicking the droplets away, and William opened his eyes as she stuck her thumb into her mouth.

“Devil and damn,” he grunted, a shudder wracking through him, “You’re going to kill a man.”

“From only that? hm? What about this?” Bravely, she wrapped her lips around his crown and slowly took the length of his manhood into her mouth.

“Sweetheart, you don’t have to—” Another more fervent shudder racked him as she suckled on his length. “Christ!”

A groan tore from his chest as hot, wet fire clamped around his manhood and the cord of his neck stood stark as she lapped at the bulging crimson crown, her tongue dipping into the slit.

Delirious, he said, “Take me deeper, pet,” he bit out. “Open wider, use your tongue, hell, yes—”

She moaned in response and moved her hair out of the way so he could watch her pink lips go down on his member. His thighs tensed, belly flexing as he swelled in her hand.

With a guttural groan, he released her hair, pulled his length from her lips, cupped her face, and stroked his thumb over her swollen lips. Looking up at him slowly, her breath caught at the stark male hunger in his gaze.

With a ragged, impatient groan, he pulled her into his side—his expression was tight, the flesh drawn over his cheekbones, his eyes narrowed, his lips heavy with sensuality.

Fixing her hand around him again, she took his mouth in a blistering kiss, threaded her fingers through the thick strands of his hair, and melded her mouth to his, kissing him with wild passion and sensual greed. They kissed passionately, with one of her arms around his neck, the other still stroking his length.

He fixed his hand around hers, tightening the grip as he groaned into her mouth. His body jerked as his seed became a hot geyser over her palm.

With a gasp, he fell against the headboard, breathless. The pleasure marked his face and soft breath left his parted lips. Gently, he pulled their hands from his tender skin and nuzzled his nose into her temple.

“I feel boneless,” he admitted. “This is a first for me. Normally, I would feel this way after the act.”

Her lashes swept up. “Are we...ever going to...”

“The act? That is up to you.” He nipped at her ear while his fingers strayed over her bodice and his thumb swept over her nipple. “Do you want me to return the favor, my

sweet?”

Smoothing a hand down his chest, she smiled, “Maybe tonight.”

“Tonight, I am back on the search for your brother,” William settled down in the pillows. “But dawn, I promise.”

She leveled up an elbow. “Are you concerned about taking my innocence?”

William cleared his throat, “Well... yes. The arrangement is for us to part at the end of this partnership with you fully, well, equipped to marry again, and your maidenhead is your biggest bargaining chip,” he held her eyes, voice dropping. “...Or is that not what you want?”

CHAPTER 24

What do I want?

William had a point; after this was over, with her hefty dowry, she could have men lining around the lane to offer their hand. But... none of them were William, the man she was falling in love with... that is if she had not tumbled over the edge already.

His questioning gaze had her heart turning over in indecision. "I... do not want another."

William's eyes narrowed. "You do not want to marry after we part ways?"

She sighed and turned away, then gazed at the ceiling, lips pressed tight. "Maybe I am naïve, maybe it is because you are the only one I have been intimate with, or maybe it is because I think I see something in you that you have hidden from the world, and, William, I know you have no intent of being a family man or marrying for love but..." she paused.

"But right now, you are here with me, and while I don't know what tomorrow will bring, I know, in this moment, there's nowhere better for me to be right now than here in your arms. I—"

His fingers pressed on her lips, effectively silencing her, his eyes now guarded. "Keep those words, Bridget. Guard them until I prove if I am worthy of your affections."

What does he mean by that?

Lips pressed tight, she watched as he pulled on his trousers and left the room, while she bit her tongue. Ice washed over her heart, and she wilted back into the bed, unsure of what she should feel, but something was starkly clear now—William did not feel the same way she did.

Foolish, naïve heart.

Splashing his face with icy water, William hunched over the basin, his knuckles white. The storm of emotion inside him did not seem to have a halting point, and he could only stare at his reflection in the water, the image shifting by the moment. He was confused by the intensity of emotion she provoked in him.

Why does she have such an effect on me?

“Your Grace?”

“Yes, Lane?”

“A letter has arrived for you,” Oliver said calmly. “I must add, under your salutation is the words, underscored three times, urgent .”

Turning, he plucked the letter off the tray and unfolded it, eyes flying over it.

Your Grace,

I have searched my records from top to bottom for the last two years and I have found a record for a Frederick Wycliffe who borrowed fifty pounds from me and has paid me. He is the Viscount of Marchwood but his estate is empty, debts higher than the clocktower in London.

However, I have asked around for you and I found that this same Frederick is or was a frequent visitor and patron of The Cytheria, a rather posh bawdy house for a pauper, don't you think?

G. Alfonso.

"Lane," William muttered. "Prepare a bath for me. I will be going out tonight."

Pausing, William stared up at the unassuming structure where the tall columns of pure white marble rose up to a gilded, Corinthian capitals, where they met an elaborately painted ceiling. To the inexperienced eye, the building, set in a quiet corner of Soho, had all the makings of a peer's manor house—and they would be right.

Until they passed the foyer, and the lady there took your coin and sent you to a room. He dropped the cowl over his head and moved up the gravel drive to the flat, marble steps and rapped briskly on the wide double doors.

A footman pulled the door in, and he bowed. "Welcome."

"I need to speak with Madame Maera," William began. "The Beast of Brookhaven is requesting an audience."

"Please, enter, and I will relay the message promptly," the footman replied.

William entered the glistening circular marble foyer and gazed at the story above; the landing was shaped as round as the floor below it. He remembered many a time the madame would stand there in gauzy silk, gazing down at her guests like a Queen presiding over her court.

Glancing at the paintings on the walls, elegant portraits of past madams who were

dressed like ladies of the realm, elegant gowns stretching back to Henry the Eighth, William held back a nod of respect. Some of them had married lords, some were favored mistresses to lords, and some had borne children for lords.

“Your Grace,” the footman returned not a moment later. “Madame Maeara will see you now.”

With a nod, William took the steps to the level above, took a corridor down the east wing, and ended up at the last room on the right. He knocked, then stepped in, not caring if he had earned permission.

The lady was reposed on a chaise, her book on her lap, her gown one of masterful creation. The silk of that gown matched impeccably with her skin tone and gave the illusion that she was draped in sensuous silk and little else.

“Your Grace,” she began smoothly. “I have not seen you in a lifetime. I am honored you have returned. What service may I perform for you?”

“It is certainly not in your bed,” he cut off her hope in one swift stroke. “I require access to your records. I have it on good source that your girls have serviced a Frederick Wycliffe, and I need them to tell me what they know.”

“I sense some praise in those words, but I must ask why you believe my girls have such information?” the lady asked blithely.

He laughed. “Do not try to bluff your hand, my lady. You and I both know the real currency of the underworld is secrets. Men who have been wine and satiated are less than likely to keep their lips sealed. Your girls winnow secrets from men by the hour and use them to their advantage. So, I will ask only once more, allow me to search your records or send me the girl who he favored.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” She calmly slid her legs from the divan and stood, smoothed her skirt, and moved to the large desk across the room.

Watching her go, William felt no inclination to admire her; even while she was young enough to still hold her curves, he actually craved to return to his home and Bridget.

She’s admitted, or almost admitted to loving me... what do I do about that?

Love had not been a variable he had considered in the equation of his life, but now that he had it—or could have it— everything in his soul clamored to keep it.

He looked around the boudoir, the graceful gray-on-gray damask, the gilt-framed painting on the wall, and the large standing blue and white porcelain Chinese Vase in the corner.

Dark, drapery-covered windows that faced the street and handsome leather furniture were scattered around the room, tall bookshelves packed with tomes contributed to the ambiance of authority and affluence.

“I see a Frederick Wycliffe ,” the madame said. “And his chosen companion was a girl named Ginger. I shall go and get her for you.”

As William took a few minutes of his time perusing the shelf, the door finally opened, and the woman stepped inside; beside the madame, this Ginger stood. Aptly named, her hair was a pile of silken red, and while she wore a silk banyan, the diaphanous gown she wore beneath showed a neat and well-shaped red triangle covering her sex.

As above, so below.

“Ginger, is it?” He greeted. “Do you remember a Frederick Wycliffe, Viscount of

Marchwood?”

“I do, Your Grace,” Ginger dipped out a practiced curtsy.

“Perfect. I need you to tell me everything he told you, after the necessary deed was done, of course,” William waved. “Where he was going, where he was staying, if he planned to travel, anything important that you can remember.”

The young woman’s eyes shifted while she thought. “I recall him telling me he had a sister who he regrets disappointing, and that he was sorry he had gambled all his family money away. He told me how he had forced her to live with her godmother and that she had to work for a living.”

Those confessions agreed with what he had learned from Bridget, but he needed more. “What else?”

“He mentioned leaving to the coast, but the week after that, he returned to me and said he’d reconsidered that move, and decided he was going to stay in London. He said one man in his old army days had trained him in wrestling and brawling and that he was going to start prizefighting to regain his fortune.”

William’s head snapped back at those words. “Prizefighting.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Ginger replied.

“Did he mention this old army man’s name?” William asked, hopeful.

“Erm...” Ginger dropped her gaze and William knew she was holding back.

“Need I remind you, the man’s life is at stake,” William pressed. “Tell me this man’s name.”

“A Sir Reginald Huffington ,” Ginger finally replied. “He said the man was from Gentleman Jackson’s.”

A solid lead. “Thank you,” William nodded. “Anything else important enough to tell me?”

“He mentioned his heart was bothering him and that there was an apothecary in Whitechapel he visited to treat it,” Ginger said. “Regrettably, I do not know the name.”

“You’ve given me enough,” William flicked the hood over his head again. “Thank you, Ginger. Madame, have a good night.”

“I do regret not having you as a customer again, Your Grace, but I do wish you and your new wife all the best in the world,” Madame Maeara said at his back. “I do not suppose I will see you under my roof again?”

William paused, then looked over his shoulder, “Thank you, and yes, you are right, I will not be a patron of this establishment anymore.”

Ducking under the threshold, he headed down and out to his carriage, and when the carriage came around, he hopped inside, plucked his timepiece out, and checked it. “Too late for Gentleman’s Jack’s but not too late for the apothecary.”

After hours of turning and tossing, punching her pillow into a comfortable shape, twisting here and there, Bridget, unable to sleep, sat up and huffed.

“Oh, it is useless,” she sighed. “I am worrying about him too much.”

Slipping off the bed, she donned her housecoat and left the room, taking a lit candle with her, only to sneak into William’s room. The man’s room was the essence of

spartan.

There was nothing in here that told her who William was; there were no paintings of his family, no loved memorabilia, no curious baubles scattered around, nothing to tell her who he might have loved or who had loved him.

“Why has he erased every indication of his life before this one?” she asked herself. “I should know more about him than I do at this point. Even if he is my husband, he is still a mystery.”

She sat on William’s cot and pressed her hand to his pillow. Before she could think of it, she’d lain down, pressing her nose into his sheets, inhaling his scent—expensive spice mingled with clean male musk—and it spurred a lick of desire in her breastbone.

Holding his other pillow to her chest, Bridget whispered another prayer that William would be safe and that he would return unscathed. For once that night, cocooned around his scent and presence, she finally slipped off to sleep.

Colin glared fire and brimstone at William as the carriage sped off to Whitechapel.

“That was a winning hand of whist you pulled me from,” Colin grumbled. “A winning hand!”

“You were going to win, what, fifty pounds?” William shrugged. “A pittance.”

“I was going to win a townhouse in Grosvenor Square, you lummo,” Colin replied heatedly. “Couldn’t you have waited ten minutes for me to deal the blow? No, I had to follow you on this investigatory crusade to some apothecary in Whitechapel at damn near midnight.”

“It is ten twenty-seven,” William corrected him. “Have you been drinking so much you cannot tell time?”

“My point is, you have all the power and the money to hire people to do these things for you,” Colin’s mouth twisted. “Private Investigators, Runners, Bow Street Men, you have all the manpower you can have but yet, you choose to do all this messy work yourself. Need I remind you, we are not in Arthurian times, you do not need to put yourself in danger when ye needn’t to.”

“And where is the honor in that?” William asked, propping an elbow on the windowsill while keeping an eye on the neighborhood they were in. “You know the only thing I do by proxy is govern the dukedom.”

“You’re a madcap,” Colin huffed.

“Hopefully, we can get you back to your precious game after visiting this apothecary,” William replied.

“But you brought me here for what exactly?” Colin asked as the carriage turned down a dark lane.

“I hope we won’t have to get to that,” William remarked as the vehicle stopped at a doorway. The faded paint on the door glinted blue under the flickering gas light above it, casting menacing shadows over it.

Stepping out, he knocked on the door while Colin joined him, angling his body so he could peer into the shadows. He saw no one, William knew because he had looked there himself.

A sliver of a peephole shot back and dark eyes stared at William. “What do ya want?”

“Your... special laudanum,” William replied, hedging his bets. “I am told this is the only place I can get it.”

The eyes shifted. “Who’s that wif you, guv?”

“A friend,” William replied. “A trusted friend.”

Once again, the eyes shifted, “If you willnae tell the Runners, come in...” a series of locks and chains slid away and the door pulled in. A man in worn clothes and an apron wiped his hand on the cloth. “Name is Gibeny, now, what can I get you?”

CHAPTER 25

Inside, William took a moment to look around the makeshift shop instead of replying. Vials of powders and liquids rested on the shelves—he even spotted some with feathers, red dirt, black oil, and bat wings.

He'll probably have an eye of newt in the back too.

“You’re not after the laudanum, are you?”

“I need to ask you about a previous patron of yours,” William finally said. “This man was sickly with his heart, and he came to you for help. You’ll be compensated for your time.”

“Compensated how?”

“Say, five pounds?”

“Five pounds sounds mighty fine to me,” Gibney said. “Incentive first, eh?”

Reaching into his jacket, William counted out five sovereigns in front of the man and offered them. Gibney took them and gestured over his back at a room beyond. “I will set these down in my lockbox. Give me a minute or two.”

William nodded and Gibney slipped into the room beyond, while Colin looked around. “Is this an apothecary or does MacBeth’s witches live here?”

Snorting, William added, "I was thinking the same."

Returning, Gibney dusted his hands off. "Does this gent of yers have a name?"

"Frederick Wycliffe," William replied. "He had a bad heart."

The man's face twisted. "I remember him. Thin, scrappy lad with brown hair. I sold him Centauris Maior, or as others call it, Cornflower. The tea helps the heart. Also helps cleanse the blood."

"What else?"

"Hmm. I recall selling him some Feverfew too, to reduce his muscle spasms when he started his prizefighting bouts," Gibney shrugged. "That's all I know."

"Have you seen him recently?"

"A fortnight, no, three weeks ago, yes, but after that, nothing," Gibney said.

"Do you know any hideaways he has around here?"

"Not that I can think of, guv."

Colin nudged William. "Thank you, kind sir. Now, come on, Arlington. I can probably wheedle Brookstone into another hand."

"You've given me something to work on," William nodded while he flicked his hood up.

"And you have given me a fortune," Gibney grinned widely. "I'll see you gents out."

As they stepped out to the waiting carriage and boarded—a barricade of men blocked the alley mouth, and it didn't take a sharp eye to see the blade glistening in their hands.

Instantly, William's guard went up. From his periphery, he saw Colin's jaw tighten at the now tense situation.

The door at their back creaked open and Gibney stood there, smirking, twirling a blade. "See, the fortune you just gave me covered half of the debt Wycliffe left me with, and the boys and I figure ye and yer laddy there are good for the rest of it."

"Hand over that purse, nice an' slow," one man hissed, approaching menacingly.

William clenched his fists.

"More company," Colin murmured, nodding to two men who blocked the other half of the alley.

In a move they had perfected over the years of boxing—and brawling at Oxford—they pressed their backs together. William wrenched his head and saw the two other men block off their exit from the alley.

The gas lamps from the street made the men's shadows stretch long against the side of the church. "Six to two. It could be worse."

William rolled his neck. He had been in worse situations over the years. Many times. In fact, one of those times had led him to meet his wife.

"Would you gentlemen care to introduce yourselves?" William asked while assessing the first man he would take down.

“Didn’t ye hear what the man said? Hand over the purse,” one, wearing an eyepatch over a wicked scar, sneered, his blade flicking from one hand to the other. “We wouldn’t like to deliver yer guts to yer pretty wives.”

“No names? I’ll remind the gravediggers to put scarface and pegleg on your stones then.”

A man barring the entrance lunged forward, blade flashing, and William spun while Colin slipped his coat off and twisted it over the arm with the knife, placed his back to the man with the blade trapped, flipped him over, and slammed him to the ground in one smooth maneuver.

Facing the other man behind them, William swatted his hand away and sent the blade into the wall. He grabbed the attacker's wrist and twisted it until something went—snap .

A ripple went up the back of his head and he ducked in time for Colin to punch another man away from him. Mirroring the help, William slammed a hand to the ground, and quick as a snake, he swept the man’s legs out from under him before launching and delivering a blistering uppercut to another.

A third man grabbed a discarded knife and swung the blade in a wide arc that William easily dodged, but he opened himself for a fist to the face. Reeling back, he shook the blow off, and while vigor pounded through his body, he launched into another attack, falling another man with a blow to the temple that sent him to sleep.

A flash of silver—

“Argh!” he snarled as the knife sliced through his coat and scored his arm, and the acrid smell of iron and copper met his nose.

The pain in his arm spurred him to fight harder and he decided to stop tempering his punches and slammed the blade of his hand into an attacker's throat, crushing his windpipe and then added a blow to his exposed center while Colin had a fourth man on the wall.

Two men were on the ground while another two had run off. William faced his last opponent, blocked a hammer punch from him, grabbed the man's wrist, and twisted his arm behind his back. With a yank, the man's arm popped twice, broken in two places, and he fell to his knees screaming.

Pressing a hand to the wall, William sucked in a breath and rubbed a hand over his face. "I don't suppose you will catch Brookstone tonight."

With his back to the wall, Colin burst out laughing.

It's dawn and William is not home yet. Why...

Uneasy, Bridget rose for the morning, washed and dressed, then stepped into the breakfast room. Smoothing the skirts of a simple but elegant peach morning gown, she poured her tea while Lucy arranged her breakfast.

"Excuse me, Your Grace," Lane said from the door. "You have a visitor."

"Pardon me?" A woman's gasp came from behind him. "Lane! I am no visitor. I am family and I would like to meet my daughter-in-law, if you'd please. Now, step aside."

William's mother! Oh dear. I never expected this so soon...

The slender lady swept elegantly into the room not a moment later, wearing a dashing aubergine-and-cream striped carriage dress, while pulling her cream gloves off.

Bridget was on her feet in moments, heart pounding beneath her breastbone.

Beneath the brim of the feathered leghorn hat, her face was a study of planes and light, with high cheekbones, pale sapphire-colored eyes, and full lips.

“Your Grace!” Bridget bowed clumsily.

“Call me Estelle, dear,” the lady smiled. “When I had heard my nuisance child had chosen to finally marry, I feared for the worst—”

Bridget tensed.

“—that he would marry one of those vain London darlings that has nothing between her ears than grandiose ideas of wealth, privilege, and silk net. But you, you are not so, are you?” Estelle smiled warmer this time.

“Lane told me all about how you managed to wrangle the menu into something that won't have my son wasting away by the time he is forty. God knows that boy lives on coffee and air like his father used to.”

Relieved, Bridget gave a soft laugh, “William seemed to be all right before I came along.”

“Oh, darling, you don't know the half of it,” the lady moved over and poured her own tea before adding a drop of cream. “But then, I have not been here for some time now. He has respected my privacy and independence beyond what he needed to. Sadly, it has made me a little out of touch.”

“I do not think William has intentionally pushed you away, I believe he simply got caught up with demanding affairs,” Bridget said enigmatically. She was not sure if his mother knew about his prizefighting and did not want to disclose it without his

permission.

“And where is my son this morning?” the lady asked, before taking a graceful sip of her tea.

Bridget felt her tongue stick to the roof of her mouth as she had no answer. Scrambling for one, she took a long taste of her tea too. “He went out with one of his friends, Baron Thornbury, I believe, to... erm... Tattersalls.” The lie felt foul on her lips, but she would do as much as she could to give William some time.

“The races,” the lady tutted. “Another thing he and his father had in common.”

Crisis averted —hopefully—Bridget listened with half an ear to the lady and watched the door, praying William would step in any time soon. Instead, Lane re-entered the room, holding another tray of breakfast foods and Bridget dearly hoped he had been close enough to hear her lie.

After setting it on the table, she held his eyes, and he gave her the tiniest of nods. Relief flooded her like the Thames breaking its banks. “Thank you, Lane.”

Stepping into his home after an emergency drop-in to his physician to get stitched up, William only wanted three things, a bath, his bed, and Bridget in both, preferably. Getting cornered by Lane the moment he stepped through the door was not on that list.

“Your Grace,” he said. “Your mother is here.”

William cursed under his breath. “When did she arrive?”

“Earlier this morning, and Her Grace has implied that you were at Tattersalls with Lord Thornbury,” Lane quickly added. “She is a quick thinker, I must say.”

As exhausted as he was, William still felt it in himself to chuckle. “She is, indeed.”

“What are your orders?” Lane asked.

“Run me a bath and tell my mother and wife that I would not like to ruin their sensibilities with me smelling like horseflesh and their manure,” William replied while heading up to his room. “Tell them that I’ll be down soon.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

CHAPTER 26

“He was that stubborn?” Bridget asked, holding back a laugh.

“Oh yes, and I daresay he still is.” Estelle tucked her hair behind an ear. “He stayed on that tree-limb for an entire day and half the night to prove to others that he could live in the wilderness if he had to.”

“And I did,” William remarked pridefully while striding into the room. He braced a hand on the back of his mother’s chair, dipped his head, and kissed her cheek. “Good to see you, Mother.”

The dowager scoffed. “Yes, you did sustain it, only because I turned a blind eye to Lane sneaking you hot drinks, muscadine ice, and biscuits.”

“So good to see you, Mother,” William said dryly before dropping a chaste kiss on Bridget’s lips. “Colin’s horse made us a fortune, sweetheart. We can go to Hatchards this evening, if you’d like.”

Her lips flickered. “I would much rather visit the Temple of the Muses.”

Pouring a hot cup of coffee, he agreed. “Done.”

“I must say, I feel deeply slighted about not getting an invitation to your wedding,” Estelle began.

“Don’t feel so bad. Uncle Ambrose was not invited either,” William shrugged. “I felt

it wise to have a short and private affair for I did not want to subject my wife to more scrutiny than we have had already.”

“Unfortunately, even as far as I live, I managed to read enough in the papers, so you do not have to explain what you mean,” Estelle waved. “So many unfortunate, or should I say, odd encounters, did draw eyebrows, but I suppose it worked for the best. You are married after all.”

“Quite happily so,” William replied, sitting his cup down and without thinking, Bridget slid a coaster under it. “So, how long are you in town?”

Laughing, Estelle stood, “And that is my indication to leave. Don’t worry, son, you shan’t find me meddling in your affairs, but please know I am proud of you and how well you’ve pulled yourself up from...” She looked at Bridget “...certain situations.”

“She knows all my rough points, Mother,” William murmured, plucking his cup. “All of them.”

The lady’s head snapped back, brows high. “That’s... wonderful. I am a big proponent of going into a marriage with no secrets being withheld from the other.”

William wrapped an arm around Bridget. “I hope you do the same for when you finally choose to marry Mr. Terrelonge. And as hypocritical as I am, we would like an invitation.”

The lady blushed. “You know about him?”

“I do,” William laughed while getting to his feet and Bridget followed. “I do wish you well though.”

The two embraced and the lady, to Bridget’s surprise, enveloped her too. “I am so

glad I met you, darling. I hope to see you again soon.”

“Me too,” Bridget replied, then whispered, “I need more stories.”

Laughing, his delighted mother left the room and William sank to his seat, the grimace he had been holding back breaking through to mark his face.

Bridget noticed. “Are you all right?”

Instead of replying, he gingerly took his jacket off, undid his waistcoat one button at a time, then set it to the side, acutely aware of her growing concern.

He peeled the shirtsleeve away and heard her gasp at the thick bandage around his arm. Gingerly, she touched the spot where a dot of blood marked it. “What happened last night? W-were you accosted?”

“In a way, yes,” he murmured as he dropped back into his chair. “Knowing your brother had an ailment, I went looking for the apothecary where he treated it, and while gaining a good lead, the owner thought I had more to give than I had offered.”

Her fingers traced over his arm, pain and grief marring her visage. He could see she was torn. “I—” Bridget bit her lip, “—I wonder if I shouldn’t have asked you to find Frederick if it meant you’d be putting yourself in danger.”

“But you love your brother,” his head inclined in confusion. “If I were in your position, I would have asked the same.”

A single tear slipped down her cheek, and William’s heart wrenched. Her shoulders wilted as if she could no longer support herself and using his good arm, he wrapped her close onto his lap. “Don’t say it.”

“But—”

“Just because you love us both does not mean you should sacrifice one for the other,” he murmured in her ear. “A deal is a deal, Bridget, and I promised you I would do this for you. Don’t worry, I can handle myself out there.”

William held her tighter, willed her strength. “It’ll be alright,” he said in a low voice. “We’ll have him back soon.”

She pressed her face to his shoulder. “I don’t want to see you hurt.”

“It happens,” he tried to comfort her.

Without another word, he drew her face to his. It was so quick and unexpected that Bridget forgot to react. His mouth took hers, and his other hand touched her cheek in a caress, pulling back to shift the angle to deepen the kiss.

She groaned in protest when his lips abandoned hers to instead trail along her chin and then her neck.

With a shuddery breath, he kissed her again, devoured her with his mouth and, at the same time, memorized her with his hands. His attention to detail showed in each kiss and lick, and each touch of hers reciprocated sent sparks of desire shooting through him.

He wanted her. He wanted to make love to her.

Parting a touch, he nipped her earlobe, slid his good arm under her bottom, and lifted her off his lap. Instinctively, she held onto his shoulders as he carried her down the hall and up another story to her bedroom.

“William?”

He stopped cold and forced his logical thought through the haze of lust. “I—” He had no words.

“...Were you going to take me to bed?” she whispered.

“I was,” he swallowed, “But if you don’t—”

Her lips met his ear, “No, no, please, I’ve wanted this for a long time. Take me to bed, William.”

She did not think about their bargain. In fact, she did not think about anything except that being held and kissed by this man felt utterly right.

His taste was familiar and his embrace, full of relief and protection. He was a bastion of security and comfort. She welcomed his kiss and his touch without any reservations whatsoever.

She uttered not a word as he carried her over to the bed and then let her body slip so she could stand beside it. Sliding a finger in the knot of his cravat, he pulled it away and let the cloth drift to the ground as he found a chair and reclined.

With his thighs splayed showing sleekly bulging calves, and eyes heavy-lidded, he radiated male vitality.

“Take off your clothes,” he ordered. “But do not rush.”

His soft command made her feel giddy and lightheaded; and her hands were moving to unlace her gown and let the shoulders slip from her arms. She kept her eyes on him as the muslin fabric glided over her bust and down to her waist. With a final push, it

pooled at her feet.

The airy white fabric she was now only sheathed in glimmered with silver and was nearly as transparent as a moonbeam. The square bodice bared her plump, white breasts almost to the nipple. In fact, she was sure he could see her nipples, the faint outline of puckered buds visible under the gossamer breath of silk. Her breasts were aching to be touched, the tips almost hurting.

“Touch your nipples for me.” She was breathless, nevertheless, she obeyed.

Scandalized, she flicked her thumb, stroking the nipple, which grew sharp and sensitive almost at once, but when the pleasure spiked, she was soon pinching and teasing her hard buds. A sweet ache trembled low in her belly and the more she tantalized herself, her woman’s place between her legs grew mortifyingly wet.

“Enough,” his voice was rough. “Remove the rest.”

She loved this demanding, intense side of him— and loved even more that she had the power to bring it out. Following his instruction, she undid the silken material, letting it pool at her feet. She toed off her slippers and drew the pins from her hair, to let it fall in a silken curtain around her shoulder, but she was otherwise laid bare.

Naked and blushing, she held his gaze. He curled a finger at her. “Come closer.”

She took the two steps forward into the lee of his thighs. Her toes curled in the soft fibers of the bedside rug. “Get on your knees, sweetheart.”

When her fingers started working on the placket of his trousers, he found his voice. “You are so intuitive.”

Grasping him lightly, she stroked up the underside, feeling him swell even further in

her hand and a droplet seeped from his head.

Bending forward, she licked proof of his desire from the stretched dome, swirling fire over his senses, before planting kisses along the thick shaft. Light, teasing kisses that made him burn for more.

“Minx.” He slid his hands into her as her head bobbed up and down, fallen strands of hair brushing against his thighs as she tasted him, pulling off before taking him deeply inside again.

His thumb traced over her brow. “Easy, sweet.”

Gently, he pulled her off him, then stood and disrobed, bracing an arm on the bedpost to pull his boots off. After removing his shoes too and being fully bare, he slowly climbed up onto the bed with her.

When he had crawled over on top of her, she could do nothing other than revel in his closeness and the moment his lips found hers again, she kissed him back enthusiastically. After he withdrew his mouth from hers, it was to nip and lick and kiss his way over her chin and down her neck to her collarbone.

He pressed his mouth to her pulse point, the vital throb leaping beneath his tongue. His mouth strayed to her breasts next, the pouting peaks begging for his attention, and the moment his hot mouth developed a tip, she gasped in pleasure.

“ William !”

“Enjoy it, sweetheart,” he whispered devilishly, his fingers teasing the taut bud of the other before suckling on that one as well.

He lingered there, licking and teasing her buds, and Bridget could not find it in

herself to be ashamed—or concerned—about the wetness coating her core.

She speared her finger into his hair and shivered at the fine pinpricks of his light beard and the cool air that drifted onto her heated skin from the window. She felt beautiful and womanly with him, and the look in his eyes, when she did meet them, was primitive as it was playful.

Bridget felt utterly wanton. The sensations of this man, the heat of him over her, wanting her, loving her, rubbing and tantalizing her naked skin, persuaded her to let her legs fall open so that she could cradle his hips and thighs.

Oh God, I want him everywhere.

Dipping his fingers into the thicket of her curls, he spread her slick wetness upward, pleasuring her with her own desire—a moment before his tongue invaded her folds and slicked over her pearl repeatedly and his fingers pumped her with firm, upward thrusts.

Embarrassment be damned. This was too good to be tarnished by shame. She found herself writhing and thrusting in perfect accord with his ministrations.

She reached for something, so close, so close. Whimpering and panting, she could not help but give in to his ministrations. “William, please, I—I need—”

What did she need?

“I know what you crave, sweetheart,” he pressed his mouth to her belly. “Find those Letters for me.”

The sheaths would stop her from increasing with his child—she knew it; but felt—maybe foolishly—that she wanted to feel all of him. “William... I’d prefer if

you didn't."

He rose to his elbows and looked at her searchingly. "Are you sure?"

"Very," she replied, a twinge of nervousness trembling in her words.

Canting her hips, he sat back on his haunches and pulled her thighs over his, stroking her skin comfortingly.

"Keep your eyes on me," he whispered before leaning in and pressing his member softly to her entrance.

Gently, he breached her virginal muscles, her throat tightening as he slowly slipped in deeper. Bridget forced herself to be calm as he made her body swell and stretch, but she kept his gaze. Sweat misted his brow and his muscles bulged with the effort to hold back.

"I want to be yours," she whispered.

Feeling her resistance, he fixed his jaw, and with a snap of his hips, claimed her with a firm thrust, wanting to make her pain as fleeting as possible.

The intimate pinch made her wince, but soon enough, the pain faded and he bent his head and kissed her, moving his hips in shallow thrusts.

"Your snug heat is incredible," he murmured raggedly, finding her hand and intertwining his fingers in between hers, "You are mine," he affirmed huskily, the truth escaping his lips.

"I want to only be yours." She trembled, the sheen in her eyes undoing his control.

Her breathy cries urged him on and each deep thrust had the tide of pleasure surging higher. Dipping his head, he captured her plump nipple between his lips, sucking fiercely as his pace increased and he pounded into her deeper.

Bridget could not get enough of the friction, the rough hair on his chest, the scrape of his calluses on her skin, and she ground herself against him.

By now, she was panting his name, her eyes dazed with ecstasy; endearments, hot words of lust and love came out of William's mouth, perhaps without logical consent and flutters started deep inside her belly, her channel spasming, the contractions milking his length.

“ Will —” She was coming around him, the pleasure almost too much to resist. She flew free in an explosive, mind-blanking climax.

With a ragged roar, he drove himself home, holding nothing back and he slammed into her again and again. The last vestiges of his control frayed with a snap, and he exploded with unending pleasure.

CHAPTER 27

Something tickled her nose, but Bridget shifted her face from the irritant—only to meet another. She twisted again—but the same thing happened, and irked, she resisted the initial tugs of wakefulness, but she couldn't ignore the irritant anymore.

Her eyes fluttered open and realized the irritation—William's chest hair. She was sprawled like a starfish over his chest and feeling his heat under her cheek made her body warm all over. Last afternoon returned to her in a flash, and joy flamed so brightly within her that she did not dare to move.

I am truly his wife now.

She closed her eyes to the flickering firelight and thought back to the soft, sweet words in her ear as he moved within her. Her skin flushed at the memory of his weight on her, the musk of his skin, and the thick pressure of him inside her.

She basked in the glory of waking in her husband's arms, atop his very muscular, very naked body.

"I could feel you staring at me." William's voice rumbled under her ear.

Humored, she raised her head to look at him. His hair was tousled around his face with sleep like a boy's. The lines on his face were eased, and a smile was in his eyes. He had never looked more handsome.

"Can you blame me? You are relatively handsome," she replied.

“Relatively?” his brows shot up. “I am insulted.”

His husky grunt rolled over her at the same time that he did. Pinned beneath him, she could not help but snicker. “Troglodyte.”

“Your troglodyte,” he murmured, pinning her arms over her head before slanting his mouth over hers.

He gave her a gentle, almost courtly kiss. She tasted herself on his lips, and despite her satiated state, titillating anticipation rippled through her. When he released her hands, she ran her fingers over his shoulders and down his arms.

“Another round then?” she asked, feeling his arousal against her inner thigh.

Pulling away, he buried his head in her shoulder, and laughed, “As much as I would like that, I need to get to Gentleman’s Jacks this morning.”

“To train?”

“Yes,” he replied. “A light round, because later tonight, my dear, is the final match of the Circuit. And I must win.”

“May I attend tonight?” she asked.

He considered it. “I am sure you can, but I will have to make sure you’re protected. Lightholder and Pembroke will be there with you. I will not have any man try to approach you.”

“Jealous?”

“Extremely,” he swung his legs out from under the sheets and stood.

“May I invite my brother’s friend Baron Howell as well?”

He twisted his head, expression dark and pondering, “About him, I never got to say before but I do not like the way he looks at you. You may think of him as a friend, but I do not believe he feels the same.”

Bridget made to tell him about the numerous times Adam had proposed marriage—jestingly, she was sure—but bit her tongue on that. If anything, it could give William more fuel to the fire of his assumptions.

“He’s not like that,” she said, sitting up and laying on his back. “He’s a second brother to me.”

William rolled his neck. “I am only telling you how men think, lass. We’re like buzzards, circling and circling until the prey gives up the fight. But if you are certain he is no threat, you can invite him. I trust you. Care to join me for a bath?”

While he had his pack with him, William’s focus was on finding the man Ginger had told him about, Reginald Huffington . It was the final day of the Circuit—every prizefighter in their right mind would be out in numbers.

Stepping into the exercise room, he found he was right; every square had two men sparring in them and he wound through the other men who were waiting for their turns.

He found the gentleman in question. An ex-army man, Huffington was in his forties, tall, dark-haired with cold, dark, onyx eyes. It spoke of a man who had seen too much darkness in his life to count the light.

“Huffington,” he greeted him. “May I have a minute of your time?”

“Your Grace,” he inclined his head to a quiet corner. “What can I do for you?”

“I have it on good authority that you used to mentor a man named Frederick Wycliffe, the current Viscount of Marchwood. Do you know where he is?”

Huffington gawked at him as if William had asked him to fetch cheese from the bottom of the ocean or pluck it from the moon. Uneasy, William waited for his answer.

“You don’t know, do you?”

“Know what?” William asked.

With a muscle in his jaw clenching, Huffington ground out, “I told that daft boy not to push himself too hard, I warned him, but he did nae listen. Already hell-bent on winning that fortune for himself and his sister, he stepped into the ring with the masked marauder, with you —twice.”

Dread began to settle in William's gut, and it built until it clogged his throat with a lump the size of a West Indies Island. “With me? Twice ?”

Huffington’s response came as a silent nod.

The entirety of his world seemed to dawn on him all at once. “Wait. Do you mean... do you mean Ricky was—”

“ Frederick ,” Huffington affirmed lowly. “An alias of his he acquired in the army. And you, good sir, put him down for good a month ago.”

Horror and disbelief made caustic rounds in his breastbone and almost took his knees out from under him. Slapping a hand to the wall, he swallowed over the bile racing up

his throat while his vision splintered in two.

The memory of Ricky falling over, frothing at the mouth made his blood chill and acid burn right through his stomach.

He had killed Bridget's brother. Unknowingly and unintentionally of course but that did not negate the fact that his blow to the chest had sent the man to his grave.

How could he tell Bridget? Should he tell her at all?

"Don't take it too hard, Your Grace," Huffington muttered, clapping William's shoulder. "As determined as he was and as foolhardy as he was, someone else woulda' landed the blow. It was only a matter of time."

Huffington's cold comfort did not make much of a difference; in his mind's eye, William could only see over and over the distress and hatred radiating from Bridget's eyes when he told her. A heated spear jammed itself in his heart at the thought. What curse was this?

He could not tell the lady he loved he had murdered her brother.

She would hate him to the day he died and in the life after.

Was it not just yestereve she wished she hadn't asked of you to look for her brother?
Was it not that moment she was about to choose you over him?

It did not matter a whit. Frederick was her brother. Didn't family ties trump a marriage?

"I buried him in a pauper's grave in Highgate Cemetery."

“I—I—” William raked fingers through his hair and grabbed the roots in confused frustration and grief. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Get a drink,” Huffington advised. “Some of the good stuff. It’ll help.”

No, it won’t.

Teeth grit, William went to change; he needed to work off sudden aggravation. She is going to hate me to the day I die, and I do not think my love for her will be any balm. I will just have to prepare myself to lose her. After tonight.

CHAPTER 28

“The ballroom?” Bridget asked in shock at the footman of a sprawling estate in Mayfair mansion. “Can a prizefighting bout be held here?”

“For the major patron of the Circuit, yes ma’am,” the footman bowed. “Now, please.”

“It means the riffraff is excluded,” Baron Thornbury muttered as they descended to the ballroom. “The masses have had their turn, now it is the gentlemen’s.”

“If it weren’t for His Grace’s generosity, I daresay I would be counted in such riffraff,” Adam said humorously, brushing a hand down his jacket.

The ballroom was extensive and had seating all around the ring, made with mahogany posts and red velvet ropes, while the bet-takers were in proper suits behind desks and with ledgers. Waiters, in gray and red livery, passed by with glasses of champagne, punch, whisky, and other spirits for the guests.

“The master says the reigning champion Rollo Sampson will take the match, and it will be a fight that will go down in the history books,” Viscount Sutton said. “Someone might be carried off here in a gurney.”

“What?” Bridget gasped in a wavering voice. “You mean—”

“God forbid,” Lightholder muttered. “The crazy bastard is up against a Goliath.”

“My coin is still on Arlington,” Sutton shrugged, nodding to the bet-takers, “Anyone

with me?”

Bridget pulled a coin purse from her reticule. “One hundred pounds on William,” and when the brows went up, she blushed. “Erm, Mr. Lane has met me halfway. It’s not all mine.”

“You know the match must be significant when the valet has wagered two years wages on one night,” Thornbury laughed. “But we shall see how it goes. My money is still on our dear duke though—”

Just then, the opponent came in; he was a beast of a man, over six and a half feet tall and with a single thigh the size of William’s torso, all of that weight in muscle and ham-sized fists.

“—or not.” Thornbury’s eyes widened. “Dear god, he truly is Goliath.”

Anxiously, Bridget looked to the other door where William was bound to emerge. When he did appear in his black ensemble and black mask covering his head, save his eyes, he did not look anything like what she had imagined.

The loud chatter and bragging hullabaloo grew quiet compared to the havoc within Bridget’s heart. This was all William wanted; all he desired in life, to come out as the champion for something he had truly earned.

The moderator called the crowd to order and Bridget sat, barely hearing the bet-taker yell, “No more bets, no more bets.”

“Welcome lords and ladies,” the moderator began with an unearthly boom. “This is the ultimate match of The Circuit! Both contenders have fought hard to get to this point, between them eliminating six other competitors, and those competitors, twenty-four. For your pleasure, we have Rollo Sampson, the reigning champion, and

the new contender, the Masked Marauder.”

Bridget’s fingers clenched around her skirts—she did not know that William assumed a pseudonym when he battled. William craned his neck to look at his opponent, his fists curling by his side.

A sharp gong reverberated through the hall, followed by, “Now begins... round one!

William did not feel steady.

Even while standing on steady ground, he felt unstable—thoughts utterly erratic. He had to force himself to concentrate, to have a plan and execute it impeccably if he had a prayer of surviving this match, much less winning it.

Stay in control. Most of all, don't get knocked down in the first damned round.

Most of William’s bouts in this Circuit had lasted fewer than ten rounds. Due to the plans he made in advance with studying his opponent and using a variety of defense tactics, he'd managed to escape any major injuries... so far.

His gut told him this night would be different.

Sampson’s trump move is two jabs to the gut, a feint to the left and punch to the right temple. It has taken out more men than you can count.

Hands up around his face, William bounced smoothly on his feet, working on ingrained memory rather than a plan; a plan he had narrowed down to one word; survive .

Sampson, for a large brute, was quick on his feet and shot out a testing fist that William luckily dodged.

Every moment, you must decide whether to go left or right, to dodge or to weave, to duck or to lunge. Flawlessly.

The whistle of air by his cheek jolted William out of his head and he barely dodged the second thundering punch that would have shattered his shoulder, ducking out and grimacing when the man snorted with mocking laughter.

“Are you already counting the pounds, masked man?” he taunted in a low bellow. “You will not get by me to get it.”

It was high time for William to get into the game, and with the ferocity of a jaguar, he agilely sidestepped the man who was coming in like a raging bull, before landing two heavy jabs to Sampson’s side, though they didn’t seem to make a mark. Rather, William felt like he had punched a brick wall.

“What was that?” Sampson laughed. “A fly? A gnat? Aren’t you supposed to be the best?”

I’m a murderer.

A heavy fist flew into the side of his face, and William floundered back against the rope, staggering to keep his balance. Before he could get his bearings, another punch landed on his stomach, causing him to hawk up bile.

“Prohibited,” the umpire called. “Round to Sampson but no point, Marauder is on the ropes.”

Pushing himself up with a grimace, William pressed the tips of his fingers to his temple, hoping he was not bleeding while trying to piece his next attack together. Sampson was sure to knock him out by round two if he did not put up a challenge. His eyes flicked over Sampson’s shoulder and...

His stomach lurched. Bridget . She was standing now, her blue gown a shimmering refuge of color in the dark, her eyes wide, her lips pressed tightly in fear for him.

With newfound grit and lightning speed, he went in low, his fist connecting with Samson's midsection. It was like trying to crack marble with a hairpin, and pain jolted through his arm. He ignored it, following through with alternating jabs, finding the soft spots, and exploiting the breaks in his defenses—only for a wicking punch to send him down, his head smacking the parlor floor.

Everything went black.

CHAPTER 29

“Damn it,” Viscount Sutton hissed as William went down.

Bridget could hardly hear the murmurs in the crowds as her heart was pounding in her ears. William was down and there was no sign of him getting back up... but as she counted, so meticulously, so slowly, his shoulders began to flex, and he got to his knees.

Relief washed through her as a man handed him a bottle of water and a slice of lime. She bit her lip and fretted; that large brute could severely damage him, and she did not care if he won the money or the title, all she wanted was for him to live.

“He’s distracted,” Baron Thornbury remarked.

“I think so too,” Viscount Sutton affirmed, his shrewd eyes raking over William. “His head is not in the game, but what is taking his concentration away?”

She watched powerlessly as he wiped the sweat away from his brows and leaned an ear to the man talking to him before he got back to his feet and walked over to Sampson.

The next two rounds went by in a blur, with very little action and mostly graceful maneuvers from William to evade any further shots to his head, all while Bridget held her breath in apprehension. Before long, the gong for the fourth round rang out, and by some miracle, they were tied at two each.

“The lummo is slowing down,” Adam murmured. “I suppose he is more brawn than anything else. He might have planned on taking the match in under five rounds.”

Yes. William is quicker. That much is certain—

But a sudden blow to his stomach had William winded, worse than any he had delivered to Sampson.

Bridget could not take it anymore and, propriety be damned, gathered her skirts and ran to an umpire.

“Ma’am—”

“I need to speak with him,” she told the man barring her way. “Please, I need a moment.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I’m his wife,” she said, strangled. “Please, if he dies in that ring—”

The man’s jaw was tight, but he looked over his shoulder and spotted William clinging to the ropes again, chest heaving. He turned back to Bridget and said, “You have ten seconds.”

Ducking under his arm, she rushed to William and grasped his hand; he blinked dazedly. “Bridget?”

“You don’t have to win. Just come back to me,” she whispered. “Come back alive. I believe in you, and I love you no matter what.”

Knowing her time was up, she pulled away, but he held on to her hand as if needing

an extra moment; his throat worked with a thick swallow. A heartbeat later, she drew away again and regained her seat, heart pounding and ignoring the looks shot her way before training her gaze on William once more.

Twiddling her ring, Bridget held her breath as William stood, rolled, turned to her, and sluggishly plucked the mask from his face.

A collective gasp rang through the room as the Masked Marauder was now found out to be the Duke of Arlington.

Another thing for the papers. Gentlemen of the peerage do not prizefight.

He had his fists up and the match started again, fists flying and the sixth round went to William, while she realized Sampson's bulk only had him moving in direct lines, he did not bend and weave like William; something fully utilized to his advantage.

As William danced around the lummoX, Sampson's punches slowed, and his footwork lost momentum. William looked like a renewed fire alive from its smolder, delivering quick, pounding blows to the torso, side, and abdomen that were finally beginning to have a conspicuous effect on Sampson.

"We might be getting somewhere," Baron Thornbury murmured in awe, sliding an eye to Bridget. "Whatever you said to him worked."

William leaped away from a blow that came after a feint and a swift hook sent the man to his knees.

"Round to Marauder," the umpire said. "Five to three. Final round."

"I will grind you to the ground, maggot," Sampson spat.

With a snarl, Rollo launched at him with a hammering fist and William dodged the blinding blow, and with blistering speed, uppercut Sampson's midsection to throw him off balance, flung a cross to his ribs, and with a mustering roar, sunk a left hook into Sampson's temple, sending him reeling to the ground.

Thunderous applause came from the audience and Bridget clutched at her heart in relief.

"He won," she swallowed. "He won."

"Yes, he did," Adam mumbled, taken back. "Because of what you said to him. What did you say to light the fire under him?"

"Only that I loved him no matter what," Bridget said.

Something ran over Adam's face, but she ignored it and turned as William gently slid out from under the ropes and headed to the room beyond, the man who had assisted him the whole time helping him inside.

Glances were flickering over her person as everyone knew she was William's wife; while they ranged from inquisitive to judgmental, she ignored them all. The one thing she cared about was to know William was all right and all she craved was returning home with him.

"Your Grace," Colin said, patting her on the back to get her attention before handing her a pouch. "For your bet, you have earned a thousand pounds."

Her mouth dropped and her eyes flicked to him. "W-what?"

"I, myself, placed six thousand pounds on him," Colin grinned while reaching for his champagne. "My winnings plus an initial stake added up to fifty-five thousand

pounds. Handsome, isn't it?"

Still shocked, she gazed at the pouch. It was more money than she had ever touched in her life. The room was busy as bets were paid off and more champagne flowed in the room, but she kept her eyes on the door, waiting with bated breath for William to emerge. And when he did, dressed, large cloth pressed into the cut over his eyebrow, he only had eyes for her.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" the umpire announced, grabbing William's arm and holding it up. "The winner of the final match and of the fifteenth season of The Circuit is none other than the Masked Marauder!"

They presented him with a handsome silver cup and an equally handsome purse of a hundred thousand pounds, and while members of the ton wanted to speak to him, William barely gave them a second look as he crossed the room and gathered her in his arms.

Relieved, the world disappeared, and all she saw was him.

"I won," he muttered hoarsely, with love in his eyes.

"I knew you would," she sighed, her face tucked under his neck. "Are you ready to go home now?"

"I want nothing more."

The groan that left his mouth as he slipped into the warm bath made her chest tremble.

"Are you grievously injured?" she asked in uneasiness.

“No,” he dropped his head to the towel behind him. “Bumps and bruises. I may need a day or two and jars of salve to recover... but I think I will be alright.”

“You made Lane a very happy man this evening,” she replied with a smile. “And I have enough money to cater to my godmother for at least 3 years.”

“If it was not for you and those words at the end,” he swallowed, “I fear I would have lost it all.”

“Baron Thornbury supposed that you were distracted,” she mentioned in passing. Perching on the stool next to the tub, she plucked a bottle of soap from a ledge and poured a handful in her hand, then lathered it into his hair.

He moaned as she massaged his scalp. “I—it's nothing, my sweet, forget it. Keep on, please.”

She worked at his scalp, using the pads of her fingers to stimulate his skin, then, after rinsing his hair, moved to unknot the tight muscles along his neck and shoulders. Using the heels of her hands, she got the tight knots out and slid her fingers up the back of his neck again—only to find William was half-asleep.

“William,” she stirred him. “Please tell me you have the strength to get out of this tub because I do not have the strength to lift you out.”

He laughed, “I’ll be up.”

Gently, he stood and stepped out of the tub, dried off in a towel before donning a silk banyan, then fell into her bed. She believed he was off to sleep before his head even hit the pillow.

She brushed a damp curl off his forehead, then kissed his cheek, and when her touch

failed to rouse him, she left him to sleep and went to tidy up the bathroom. By midnight, she disrobed and joined him, happy that he had won, but happier that he was there by her side.

William was still slumbering peacefully when Bridget left for breakfast and Lucy was pouring her tea when Lane entered the room, bearing the tray for the sideboards with a newspaper tucked under his arm.

“Good morning, Your Grace. Are you having a good morning?” He asked, rather jovially. “And is His Grace doing well?”

“He is, just exhausted and sore,” Bridget replied, her eyes dropping to the paper under his arm. “If that paper has a headline with the words Duke Arlington is a Gentleman Prizefighter, or anything along those lines, please burn it.”

Lane casually tossed the paper into the fireplace and dusted his hands off while a footman came to the door. “Your Grace, there is a Baron Howell who seeks your attendance. Should I let him up?”

She nodded, “Please.”

While Lane fixed the sideboard, Adam came into the room and bowed. “Your Grace,” he said, lips twisting. “I feel so strange addressing you as that. All this time I have held you as my younger sister.”

“In every sense of the word, I am,” Bridget hugged him. “I’m surprised you are still in town.”

“Something you said last night got me thinking,” he chimed back. “...And there is something I need to show you, which I fear cannot wait any longer. It is not far, so would you please consider taking a few dozen minutes out of your day to accompany

me?”

Unsure, Bridget looked over her shoulder, as if asking Lane his permission, but the manservant was impassive, so Bridget decided to give him the benefit of the doubt.

“Lucy, will you join me, please? I’ll go with you, Adam, just give me a few minutes.”

She returned to her room and gazed at William, laying on his side, as he slumbered on. Deciding not to disturb him, she drew on a coat, a leghorn hat, slipped a few coins into her reticule, and then headed out. Lucy was waiting at the door, her dark coat the same shade as her maids dress, and together, they mounted the carriage Adam had waiting.

“Where are we going, Adam?”

“If you don’t mind, I believe it would be more... proper to show you,” he replied, his eyes flickering to her maid. “Please, indulge me.”

The buildings of the city passed by as the countryside took over. The more they traveled, the more worry and concern grew in her heart. What was Adam going to show her, and more importantly—where?

The cemetery was the last place she expected.

“Please, follow me,” he inhaled sharply before stepping out. He took her and Lucy’s arms and they headed off down the main lane, heading into the denser part of the cemetery, where the pauper graves were pushed tight together.

He stopped at one, a simple grave, the dirt mound not even pressed tight yet, and motioned to the simple wooden cross stuck in it.

With a furrowed brow, she slowly followed his line of gesture to the engraved name

on the carved stone— Frederick Wycliffe —and collapsed.

Adam grasped her inches before she hit the ground, but her piercing scream shattered the morning quiet. Disbelief and agony wracked through her and she grabbed at Adam, her nails biting into his skin.

“No—no—” she choked, “ No ! Pl-please God no!” Tears flooded her eyes and were rivers down her face as she looked where her brother lay. Chest burning and vision blurry from tears, she collapsed in on herself.

Her chest was hollow with grief and sorrow, her limbs numb and fragile. Her mind flooded in and out of conscience.

“I am so sorry, Bridget, I am so sorry you had to find out this way but if I had told you, I know you wouldn’t have believed me.”

Chest heaving, she pressed her face into his neck and held on to his shoulder, the sobs now dry but still as aggrieved as the moment she’d laid eyes on the grave.

“H-how...” her throat was rough. “How did he die?”

“Bridget, I don’t want to—”

“Tell me!”

Adam sighed. “To regain the fortune he lost and to pay off his debts, he took up prizefighting. About a month ago, he got into the ring with the Masked Marauder... and collapsed,” Adam murmured hollowly. “I was there, Bridget, I saw it. William delivered a blow to his chest, and he died, right there, in the ring.”

This time, on top of the disbelief at Frederick’s passing, she could not dare believe

that William had a hand in her brother's death. "You're lying!"

His expression was painful. "No. I wish I was, but I am not."

Still, she shook her head viciously, "I don't believe you! He—he wouldn't do that, not to me, not— not when I asked him to save Frederick. He wouldn't—he would not kill him!"

"I don't think he did it on purpose," Adam replied softly. "I wondered if he had told you, but soon, I realized he had not, so I decided to do it for him. I am so sorry, Bridget."

Still firmly unbelieving, she weakly got to her feet. "This—this cannot be true. I need to ask him about this to his face. I'll know if he lies to me. I must return home."

While guiding her back to the carriage, he asked, "What will you do when he tells you the truth?"

"I—" she faltered, heart twisting at knowing she loved William, but could not square up with the thought of him betraying her so cruelly. "...I don't know."

CHAPTER 30

Waking in the benign afternoon, for the first time in months, William felt more rested than he had ever felt. There was no stress of rising before dawn, pushing his body to its limit, and then doing it all over again. The only thing he was missing was Bridget sprawled over him, the way he had come to love.

Where is she?

Sitting up, he rubbed his face. “How do I tell her about Frederick?” he murmured to himself softly.

Moving from the bed, he made a quick visit to the washroom, then headed out to find Bridget. It was midday, could she be in the library reading one of the classics, or in her drawing room, working on this week’s menu? Maybe she was in the breakfast room with her friends?

“Lane?” He asked coarsely while stepping into the cozy room. “Do you happen to know where—”

Bridget came in like a whirlwind, her skirts billowing. “Is it true!”

Stymied, he asked, “Is what true?”

“My brother,” she jabbed a finger at him. “Did you kill him?!”

Ice washed right through him. His mouth opened and closed twice but no words came

out; his eyes flicked to the man behind her, the very same one he had a feeling had desired Bridget all this time.

“Is it true!” She slapped a hand on his chest, then did it again. “Is it true? Tell me! Why won’t you tell me?!”

Tears were beading in her red eyes, and William knew he could not deny or lie his way out of this. He reached out to grasp her shoulder, “I can explain—”

Her face washed white. “You—you did! You did kill him!”

“I did not mean to,” he stressed. “I didn’t even know it was him. You have to believe me. When he stepped into the ring, he said his name was Ricky, it wasn’t until I found out from an old army man of his regiment that I learned it was indeed him! I never meant to kill him, Bridget, I swear on my life.”

“You didn’t say a word to me, and you knew about this for weeks!” Her voice was breaking.

“Not weeks, God no! I only learned of the truth the night before the final bout. You were right when you said I was distracted, I could not concentrate because I could only see the moment he’d collapsed in front of me. Over and over in my mind’s eye.” His hold tightened on her. “If you only knew how sorry I am.”

She pulled away and her inclement emotions transformed her visage. “Stay away from me,” she whispered coldly. “Don’t come near me again. Now, let me go.”

His hands tightened instead; his features harsh with desperation. “Please listen to me, sweetheart. I omitted the truth about Frederick, but I love you and I cannot, I will never lie to you.”

“Let me go.”

“No.”

“You sent my brother to his grave!” she screamed. “Let me go!”

“You heard the lady. If you have any decency, let her go,” Baron Howell said calmly. “And it would do you well to annul the marriage and return the asset you won over on that last bout to her and then some. Or do you want me to release to the papers that you murdered her brother?”

“What?” Bridget’s head snapped to the Baron, then to William. “What asset?”

“On the night of his final fight, your brother placed his house, your old ancestral home, as a wager, and by default, I won,” William said miserably.

“Another deception,” she whispered.

“I did not mean any of this,” he hastily added. “Please, understand, I never...” The words failed him. “Please don’t go.”

Shaking her head, Bridget backed away until she met Adam’s chest. “Adam, please, get me away from here.”

“As you wish.”

Anger and despair tangled inside her as she boarded Adam’s carriage.

She’d fallen in love with a cad and gotten ripped to pieces for it. To think that she had trusted William with the one thing she cared for more than anything—her brother.

Instead of saving his life, he ended it.

She was done with love, done with being lied to and made a fool of; never again.

“You are better off without him,” Adam muttered. “I always had it that man was a seditious bastard and that he was bad for you. You’ll do good to leave his life.”

“I believed he would save Frederick,” she said emptily, as the carriage trundled out of London and headed for Kent. “I’d gambled on the one thing I shouldn’t have, Adam... and I lost.”

“Meaning, Frederick.”

She gave him a fleeting smile. No, Adam, I mean my heart.

The red tiles lining the rooftop of Adam’s townhouse had a decidedly Italian feel to them but the marble steps and columns, Grecian.

“I know it looks all over the eras and cultures, but inside is nothing like the exterior, I promise,” he defended while unlocking the door. “It’s been a long journey; you must be ravenous.”

“I don’t think I can stomach a morsel,” she replied quietly. “I need to sleep.”

“I cannot allow a lady to leave to her bed hungry,” Adam replied while calling for a servant girl. “Indulge me again. My cook makes a sumptuous pheasant. There’s nothing like a well-roasted pheasant with new potatoes and seasoned vegetables. And perhaps a good Yorkshire pudding to go with it.”

“Adam,” she sighed. “Please.”

“How about tea and a small mince pie?” he asked instead. “I cannot sleep knowing you are hungry.”

She looked down, “I think I ran out too quickly. I haven’t brought anything to sleep.”

“No need to fret. I still have some of my sister’s old things,” he continued. “You’ll have everything you need.”

“Thank you,” Bridget murmured while taking off her coat. “I suppose I can settle for some tea.”

“Good God, man,” Andrew said. “You’re supposed to be at home, basking in the fruits of your winnings and celebrating with your wife. Why in the name of all that is good and holy do I catch you getting foxed at Whites?”

Ignoring him, William threw back his whiskey.

She was gone.

The memories of her walking out were all he saw. They buried him in a darkness worse than if the earth had opened and swallowed him alive. Remorse had his chest in a vice grip.

She was gone. Gone because he’d deceived her, killed her brother without knowing it, then hid it from her.

She is never coming back.

“Arlington?” Colin joined him, “What the deuce is going on?”

Setting the glass down, he finally muttered bitterly, “She left.”

From his periphery, he saw the two share a look, “ She as in... the Duchess?”

“Why?”

Eyes clenched, he leaned on the table and the tale came out, from the moment he had met Briget in the alley to the deal he’d made with her to find her brother and restore her fortunes. It all spilled out in calm, concise words. He did not hold a thing back and when everything was said, the silence around him was deafening.

“Now, I think I need a drink,” Colin called for a glass from the barkeep.

“Shakespeare has nothing on this torrid tale,” Andrew muttered.

Taking a stool, Colin asked, “Did you try to explain it to her?”

“I did, but she would not listen to a word I said,” William slurred. “I cannot convince her otherwise.”

“But—if the man had a heart condition, anything could have made him collapse,” Andrew replied. “Isn’t that simple logic?”

“Would you listen to logic when you heard someone killed your loved one?” William scoffed.

“You’re a fighter,” Colin pressed. “Go and fight for the woman you love and don’t even try to tell me you don’t love her because it is written all over your face that you do.”

“She went off with Baron Howell, somewhere to Kent,” he murmured, “What should I do? Go there and scale the ivy like a love-skin Romeo?”

“It couldn’t hurt,” Andrew replied cynically with a shrug.

His words were met with a fist against the heavy wooden table. “I forgot to tell the reason I did not chase after her,” William exhaled somberly. “Howell stated clear as day he would publish that I was the one who killed Frederick, and you already know how London thinks of me.”

“Extortion? Christ,” Colin muttered.

“No matter how you look at it, I will be blamed,” William sighed, shifting his glass to the side, “Dukes can get away with almost anything but murder.”

“Is there a way to turn this back on him?” Andrew asked, very little hope lacing his tone.

“I don’t see how,” William shrugged, “As far as I know, he never committed a crime, nor would it do any good to my standing with Bridget.”

If he’d only taken the risk and told her the truth earlier, she would have maybe understood and forgiven him. Instead, he’d been a coward and dragged it out.

Shifting in his seat, Andrew pressed, “Are you going to let the love of your life fade away like that? I thought you were more of a stubborn bastard than a spineless one.”

“I cannot love her from gaol,” William grunted, the shadows of the room playing over the back of his hand. “Maybe I have allowed the fantasy to take over my common sense.”

“Despite what you might think, you do deserve love,” Colin scratched the side of his head. “You fought a giant for her, William, and we both know it. The moment she touched you, you got the strength to finish the fight. Maybe the tables are turned now;

she is the weak one and needs your strength instead. Think of that, Hartwell.”

With a clap to William’s back, both men moved off and left him to his thoughts.

What if they are right? What if it is a switch around, and I need to go to her this time?

His gut clenched.

This Baron , it was clear he desired for more than a ‘sisterly’ relationship with Bridget, and the thought of the man touching Bridget the way he’d loved her made him want to rip the man limb to limb.

His words played over in William’s mind. It would do you well to annul the marriage...

He had to get to Bridget before the man sewed permanent poison into her heart against him. He had to find her.

CHAPTER 31

Three days sequestered in Adam's house; Bridget was starting to feel cloistered. Adam was constantly showering her with gifts that made her uneasy and she had the sneaking suspicion that he might be taking her separation from William as a sign to court her.

As much as her heart felt heavy and numb at knowing his betrayal, for the past two nights, she had woken up breathless with the memory of how sweetly he'd kissed and worshiped every nook and curve of her body.

Yet it was more than that; William had opened up to her in ways he had never shown anyone. She saw more than the Beast of Brookhaven Castle. He showed more of his playful side, his caring side, his self-sacrificing side. She saw his doubts at times, his insecurities at times, but most of all, his determination.

"My lady," a young lad, about fifteen said, "May I get you anything?"

"Samuel, is it?" she smiled. "No thank you, but I appreciate it."

In the days she'd been here, the lad had been appointed as her help—or more so, appointed himself, and while he'd indeed been helpful, there were times she'd felt him looking at her in... sorrow? Why?

"Very good, my lady," he smiled weakly, then bowed out.

Thoughts trained back on William, she could not understand how he'd been so

tender, so loving... and all the while lied to her face.

But had he though?

Curled up with a steaming cup of tea at a window, she looked out as the rain pelted the panes. Now, days after the revelation and being left to her solitude, she could finally organize her thoughts in an impartial manner. William had not known he'd fought her brother that night, true, and it had shown as he had faithfully gone out to search for him night after night.

But when he knew... why didn't he tell me?

Was he afraid? Was he still shaken by it? Did he fear that I would hate him?

The rain began to ease, and as she pondered the situation, faint sunlight began to break through the gray clouds, and the light glistened over the droplets on the tree leaves and the grass.

"Bridget?" Adam entered and strode over to her, glass of brandy in hand. He did not look steady on his feet. "Oh, here you are. How was your day?"

"Middling," she murmured. "And yours?"

"Not so much," he replied. "Have you heard anything from that scallywag of a husband of yours?"

"No," she sighed.

"It is for the best," he declared, joining her on the window seat. "I hope he never contacts you again."

His statement sounded... too forward for her comfort. At the end of the day, William was still her husband, and while he had been caught in this unfortunate circumstance, being separated from him... pained her heart.

“Adam, please, no.” She shook her head vehemently. “William is not evil.”

“Be that as it may, he is not worthy of you, and Frederick was foolish too,” Adam mumbled, taking another swig. “Do you know how many times I asked him for your hand, yet he constantly refused?”

Bridget’s head snapped back, “What ?”

“I asked him if I could marry you, but he said no,” Adam clarified as if she hadn’t heard it the first time. “So, I settled for what I could get and that was friendship. Now, I have my chance to prove him wrong and be the one for you in your time of need.”

Bridget immediately recoiled. What was this?

“I will be going out tonight.” He rested the glass on the windowsill and leaned in to kiss her. Instinctively, Bridget leaned away.

“Adam, you’ve been drinking,” she uttered. “You are not in your right mind.”

“You don’t want to kiss me?” he asked with a frown.

“I... am still married.” She pulled out the first rationalization, one that she knew Adam would understand, while trying not to tell him she did not see him that way or want him the way he wanted. Lest it make him more hostile in his approach and put her in danger.

“You shan’t be a married woman for long. I will wait for that day, and it is coming soon,” he smiled lecherously, then took the glass up and made for the door. “I am sure Frederick would have preferred this union than with that damnable duke anyway.”

I cannot marry him. He is—I cannot marry him. Why—why could he think I would do so?

“Your Grace,” a voice tore her from her shaken thoughts. Sam lingered unsteadily in the doorway, and when she looked at him—he looked tortured.

Her brows dipped. “Samuel? What is it?”

He swallowed. “I—I need to tell you something, Your Grace, and I—I am scared.”

Instantly, she was up on her feet and by his side, resting her hands on his shoulders. “What is it, Samuel? You don’t need to be afraid around me.”

“His Lordship... he did some h-horrible things and I... I fear I am a very bad person for not telling you sooner...”

“Horrible things?” Bridget’s frown deepened. “To you?”

“No, not to me, but I have to—I have to show you,” Sam shivered. “Please come with me... quickly.”

Terrified about what he could mean, Bridget acquiesced and followed him up to a room that had all the hallmarks of a man’s study—broad desks, leather furniture, and bookshelves crammed with leather tomes. Sam crouched under the desk and pressed a latch that made a secret drawer drop from the underside.

Laying there, scarcely hidden, was a thick leather book, and Samuel nodded to it. “I don’t know your brother, Your Grace, but I have heard his lordship speak about him and—” Sam sucked in a breath. “—See, my father was a preacher, and he told me never to look the other way when you see something wrong. I—I couldn’t live with myself if I kept this secret.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look—look inside,” Sam murmured with another nod at the book.

Gingerly, Bridget took up the book, turned the pages, and began to read—a recipe for death. No, a literal recipe for death. Why was Adam calculating Foxglove infusions, from inflicting minor irritations to enough to cause heart failure?

What is this?

Turning the page, she saw a drawing of a body, 169 pounds, drawn over the figure. The approximations of blood mass inside divided by the measurements for Foxglove was calculated and beside it was—Stage One.

Two and three had the poison increasing, and then, stage four, hemlock was introduced. The outline showed again with a red line slashed across the chest.

Beneath the outline, in small letters, it read... “ Four years; Frederick Wycliffe should be dead .”

Bridget instantly dropped the book and stepped back.

For the second time in so many days, her blood turned to ice. Foxglove was an herb that damaged the heart, and nightshade was an indiscriminate killer, even worse for an already weakened body.

Could it be... could it be that Frederick's heart condition had not stemmed from the wars? That it had been purposefully contrived inside him with malicious intent?

"Samuel," she muttered hastily with very little breath in her lungs while scooping up the book from the floor. "Go—go and resume your duties. And thank you for your bravery in showing me the truth. Not a word of this will pass my lips. Now go on. Quickly. Go!"

The lad immediately hurried away, as Bridget tucked the book into the crook of her arm and dashed to her borrowed room. Throwing a cloak over her dress and tucking a purse into her inner pockets, she hastened through the corridors and down to the front door below.

It was late, but she could call for a carriage—

The door abruptly opened and Adam stepped in, his face sporting the irritated expression of a man who had forgotten something. He cocked his head. "Going somewhere?"

Bridget went red. "To my... f-friend Josephine," she said as collectedly as possible in her present state of mind. "She lives nearby."

"Oh dear," Adam sighed. "Please do not lie to me, Bridget. Your bosom friend Josephine lives in Westminster. It would take you a night's drive to get there. Were you about to leave for London, by any chance?"

"I—" She swallowed upon being caught in her lie. "—My aunt. I meant to say, I wanted to go see my aunt."

"You're lying again," he said calmly, advancing on her akin to a predator stalking its prey.

Scuttling back, her flimsy hold on the thick book slipped and it clattered to the floor with a loud thwack .

Before she could reach down and retrieve it, Adam pounced forward the last few steps, snatched the book from just beneath her fingers, and flicked it open. Upon realizing its contents, he let his head fall back, then sighed theatrically. “Oh, how I wish you had not found this.”

His tone was gentle but menacing, and Bridget edged back, unsure of what to do or how to get away from the man. “I seem to have made a measured flaw in overlooking your curious nature, but this. ” He waved the book high in the air. “—no one needed to see this.”

Straightening her shoulders, she stammered, “D-did you poison my brother after he returned from the war?”

“And why would I admit to that?” He scoffed unnaturally.

“B-because it is all there.” She gestured to the book, heart pumping in fear. “And to think I trusted you... Did you do all this to get to me?”

His face washed with a blank expression. Then, a creepy, unnerving smile began to split his head. “I also may have hinted to Frederick to take up prizefighting...” Adam replied venomously while advancing. “Excitement makes your heart work harder, and in doing so, makes it weaker. But who’s to say?”

“Oh god...” she choked out. “He was right. I should never have trusted you. You are a monster.”

A thunderous bang on the door had them pivoting to it. “Bridget—” William shouted. “Bridget, please, I need to speak with you.”

“Don’t you dare make a sound,” Adam hissed.

Shooting a look to the door, Bridget sucked in the biggest breath she could manage, filling her lungs deeply—and screamed.

EPILOGUE

The piercing scream had William reeling back and slamming his thick boot into the door's hinges, dismantling it in one attempt before ramming his shoulder into the higher one.

When the door caved in, William sprinted into the foyer and found the Baron clasping Bridget with an arm across her throat and a fireplace poker up as a weapon.

"Do not come any further!" Adam snarled. "You have no power here."

"He poisoned Frederick!" Bridget shouted from the top of her lungs. "He was the one who killed him, William, not you! I am so—"

"Be quiet!" Adam roared.

Keeping his calm at the revelation, he focused on Adam and tried to find a way into the guard Adam presented. Where was the weakness? Where was the opening to attack?

"Let her go," he tried. "You can have me instead?"

"And why would I want you?" Adam hissed. "I was trying to get rid of you!"

"And you can," William lied. "Just... let her go and I will give you whatever you want. Money, land, a higher station, anything, simply let her go first."

“Pah! It is you who needs to let her go,” Adam growled. “Do your part and annul the marriage. Let her be free, Arlington.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” William gritted his teeth, while regretting that he had come to Kent all alone. If he’d had Colin or Andrew with him, they would have easily overpowered the Baron and taken him down.

Now, it was only him.

The baron raised the poker to Bridget’s neck. “Or else, leave and never come back,” he muttered darkly.

William tried to find her eyes, seeing if he could convey a wordless message to her but Bridget did not seem to be in a receiving mood. Her face went flinty, and something flashed in her eyes right before her hands flew up behind the poker, covering her neck before she stomped on Adam’s boot with all her might.

He dropped his makeshift weapon, and she darted away while snatching the poker from the ground—as William launched himself recklessly into Adam and the pair of them trundled to the floor.

Adam’s fist slammed into William’s jaw and even with the spots dancing behind his eyes, William had the wherewithal to ram his fist into the baron’s midsection, the force punching air from Adam’s throat.

Quickly following was a hook smashed into Adam’s left temple, but the man seemed to be giving up too easily—until they rolled, and he yanked a dagger from his boot to swipe at William’s throat.

Moving on pure instinct, William blocked the blow with his elbow up, not even feeling the burn of the blade cutting through his skin as he made to wrestle it from the

man's hand, only to slam it into the hard floor, once, twice, and three times until something went— crack .

Howling in pain, Adam was a puppet in William's hands as he yanked Adam from the floor, rammed him into the wall, and jammed his forearm into his windpipe. The Baron grunted, his knife clattering to the floor from a broken wrist.

"I g-give," Adam choked out. "Let me... g-go..."

Disgusted, William yanked him from the wall and he crumpled to his knees—right before Bridget slapped him across the face, her chest heaving.

Pulling her to his side, William stopped her, gazing at the dazed man at their feet. "It's done, my dear. It's done."

She trembled in rage and fear while he searched for something to bind the man with, and tugged a tie from a curtain and quickly bound him while Bridget plucked a leather book from the floor. "Th-this is all we need to prove he killed my brother. He documented it thoroughly."

William could not bring himself to care about the book.

Instead, he cupped her face with both hands. "Please forgive me. I should have confessed the truth the moment I knew it but I was afraid, damn well terrified that you would hate me for life and it made me a coward. I—I never expected to fall in love with you, but it was only then I learned how deeply I was taken by you... that I would turn into anything to keep you."

His heart punched against his ribs with the confession. "I'd come tonight to ask you the same thing, laden with guilt in my heart, but now, now I have a speck of relief. It does not excuse my cowardice, but I promise you that I will use the rest of my life to

make up for it.”

She pressed her cheek into his chest. “I love you too. But there is nothing for me to forgive, nor was there before. You were being sincere, you did nothing out of malice. Please forgive me for only thinking you murdered Frederick. It hurt so deeply because I loved you so much. To know that someone I love could hurt me so... it-it soured my heart.”

He wrapped an arm around her back and pressed her head under his neck. “Let’s go home, my sweet.”

“What about him?”

“Him? We’ll drop him off at the Bow Street Runners on the way,” William murmured, then leaned his head and kissed her sweetly. “Let’s start our lives afresh.”

“I want nothing more.”

Just then, William's eyes fixed on a shadow in the doorway, and his muscles tensed instinctively, ready for another threat. It had been a night fraught with danger, and his guard was up, his senses sharp.

"Who's there?" His voice was blunt, ringing with a defensive edge.

"It's only Samuel," Bridget quickly interjected. She reached out, her touch gentle on his arm, calming him. "He led me to the book to reveal Adam’s true intentions. Sam, would you please fetch Mr. Hughes, the carriage driver?" Her voice was steady, disarming William's tension not with force but with the gentle certainty of her presence.

Samuel, having been given his task, nodded quietly and disappeared with swift steps

to carry out Bridget's request.

William's gaze softened as he looked down at Bridget, feeling the residual adrenaline begin to ebb away under her influence. The leather book she held was a heavy reminder of the night's revelations, yet her touch, her proximity, brought an anchoring calm.

The sound of footsteps approached, heavier this time, as Mr. Hughes entered the room. The carriage driver stopped short, his eyes widening in surprise and a frown of confusion crossing his features at the sight of his master, Adam, bound and subdued on the floor.

"What on earth has happened here?" Hughes blurted out, his gaze darting from Adam to William and Bridget.

William stepped toward the man with an air of authority. "As the fourth Duke of Arlington, I command you to take your master directly to Bow Street Runners," he stated firmly, his voice carrying the weight of his title. "There is no room for delay and we shall be following shortly behind."

Hughes, momentarily taken aback by the presence of William, hesitated, his loyalty to his employer causing him conflict. "But, Your Grace—"

When William realized he was not likely to get any leeway with the man, he sighed, then added, "The matter pertains to the murder of an aristocrat. It would be for your own benefit to comply, Hughes. This is non-negotiable."

The driver's eyes widened at the severity of the situation, and he nodded immediately. "Sincerest apologies, Your Grace!" he exclaimed, then moved to assist Adam to his feet, casting cautious glances back, as if still processing the surreal turn of events.

With Adam and Hughes preoccupied, William turned to Bridget, his hand reaching for hers. "Let's go home," he suggested softly.

Together, the pair of them stepped outside, the night air crisp and invigorating after the oppressive atmosphere indoors. They walked over to where William's horse was tethered nearby, patiently waiting under the soft silver light of the moon

With a steady hand, William helped Bridget towards the horse. She mounted with grace, initially sitting behind the saddle as he prepared to mount. Once he was securely in the saddle, William gently gathered Bridget in his arms and, with a smooth motion, swung her around to sit in front of him. She settled against his chest, her back to his front, facing the direction they were headed. It was an intimate arrangement, her presence a comforting warmth against the chill of the night.

"You were incredibly brave tonight," William murmured into her hair as he took the reins and nudged the horse into a gentle walk.

"And how fitting it is that it's you who has come to my aid this night," Bridget replied with a small smile. She leaned back into him, the fit of their bodies together natural and reassuring.

As they moved away from the estate, the steady clop of hooves against the path joined the symphony of the night, creating a tranquil ambiance. The shadows of the trees lined their path, casting long, ghostly figures that danced lightly in the moonlight. The world around them felt expansive and full of possibilities, the quiet of the night enveloping them in a peaceful cocoon. William's hold around Bridget tightened slightly.

"I love you, Bridget. I should have trusted that love more," he confessed with a touch of guilt. "If I had, perhaps none of this would have happened."

"I love you too, William. More than the world, but don't ever apologize for such a thing as that," Bridget responded, turning slightly within his embrace to look at him. Her eyes met his, shining with a mixture of love and the reflective glow of the moon.

Their gaze held, time seeming to slow as they found solace in each other's eyes. William leaned down, his lips meeting hers in a kiss that held all the promises of a new beginning and the closure of past pains.

The kiss was gentle yet profound, sealing their union truly this time, and reinforcing their bond as they set off together, the road ahead promising a journey not just back to their home, but towards a renewed future together.

The End?

CHAPTER 1

Thornhill Castle

“Now you can open your eyes.”

Upon opening her eyes, Cecilia felt as though she had stepped back through time.

The hall through which she walked, arm in arm with Arthur, was of brooding dark stone. A vaulted ceiling was supported by massive timbers. Windows set to either side of the hall were tall and arched—they looked as though they belonged in a cathedral! The floor was of naked stone, though highly polished, and despite the finish, it bore the scars and scratches of its centuries of use.

“This is... remarkable. I cannot imagine living in such a place...” Cecilia gasped.

Her long auburn hair cascaded down her shoulders in bouncing curls. She shared the same brown eyes and small, straight nose as her brother, and both possessed dimples in their cheeks when smiling—so deep, it wasn’t difficult to tell they were siblings.

Arthur nodded. “Neither can I. In all the times I have visited Lionel here, I cannot picture Thornhill Castle as anything other than cold, brooding, and possibly haunted.”

He grinned and Cecilia returned the smile. “How exciting. I would love to share a house with a phantom.”

“But not the bloodless seventh Duke who walks the passageways of the east wing,”

Arthur noted, grimacing in the manner of a gargoyle. “They say his throat was cut and when he was found, he was as white as snow. Now, he remains there, prepared to push unwary visitors down the tower stairs.”

Cecilia shuddered, though she knew her brother was exaggerating.

“I don’t see how an insubstantial wraith could push anyone down anything,” she said.

“By the force of sheer fright,” Arthur pointed out.

Cecilia playfully slapped his shoulder.

“Stop trying to frighten me, Artie. I am sure that this house is not nearly as frightening as its age makes it appear. It is... atmospheric, however.”

“Very,” Arthur agreed.

The babble of voices reached them from the far end of the hallway. A carved wooden screen divided the room at that point. It was painted to depict a grandiose scene from Teutonic mythology. A door was set into the screen, and as it opened, the sound of the other gathered guests grew in volume. A man stepped through the door and Cecilia immediately felt her heartbeat hasten.

“Ah, there you are, Penrose! Come and join us. Have you shown your sister around this moldering pile of stone I call home?” he uttered.

He was tall and broad-shouldered with short-cropped black hair. The darkness of his hair made his skin seem pale and emphasized his emerald, green eyes. His handsome features were completed by a Roman nose and full lips above a strong jaw. The man exuded strength and power. When those green eyes met her own, Cecilia found her breath quickening. She did not want to look away and found herself reminded of dark

fairytale concerning seductive vampires. There was a physicality to him that made her acutely aware of her own body. By comparison to the muscle that seemed to make his clothing tight, her own curving hips and bosom felt soft. Under those broad hands, she would be helpless, to be manipulated as he saw fit. She wetted her lips and forced a breathless smile as he approached them.

“I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure of being introduced. I am the Duke of Thornhill, Lionel Grisham.”

He did not smile. Nothing disturbed the marble stillness of his pale face. It was the visage from the mind of a Renaissance master artisan. There was the capacity for cruelty there and the potential for an implacable enemy. But, she fancied, there was also a vulnerability in the softness of his full lips.

“Thornhill,” Arthur suddenly hastened to say, “may I introduce my younger sister, Cecilia.”

Cecilia remembered to curtsy and put out her gloved hand. She felt Lionel’s lips brush her fingertips and experienced a moment of wild fantasy in which she imagined that kiss without the material of the gloves in between,

“My pleasure, Cecilia. Please call me Lionel, as your brother is wont to do,” Lionel added, releasing her hand.

She regretted the end of that touch but at the same time was glad. She knew that Lionel was engaged to be married, and would have been disappointed had he shown any sign of being one of those men who did not respect the sanctity of marriage. Or respect the woman to whom they were betrothed. She considered her parents to have been the perfect examples of marriage, devoted to each other and their children. Her father’s brother, Rupert, was the opposite. A rogue who chose his wife for her money and his mistresses for their youth and beauty. Cecilia had little experience with men,

having only just reached her debut this year. No suitors had yet come forward. Or at least none that had passed Arthur's ferocious protectiveness. He took seriously his responsibilities for his younger sister in the absence of their father and mother.

"That is most gracious of you, Lionel . I should be glad to," Cecilia replied with a happy smile.

Arthur grinned but Lionel remained stony-faced.

"He never cracks a smile if he can help it," Arthur stage-whispered to Cecilia.

Lionel's eyebrows raised a fraction and he inclined his head.

"You only think so, Penrose, because you've never said anything humorous in my hearing."

"Touche," Arthur replied.

"I was just saying to Arthur how remarkable this house is, Lionel," Cecilia said, her voice soft and inviting, "would it be imposing to ask for a tour and perhaps something of its history?"

Arthur rolled his eyes. "My sister has an inordinate interest in such dreary subjects as history and literature, I'm afraid. Give me sport and a mug of ale over a book any day.

Lionel's mouth twitched at the corner and his eyes narrowed. "I remember from our days at Westlands. Your love of sport saw you whipped far more often than I."

"Worth every stroke," Arthur grinned, "books are for librarians."

Cecilia giggled softly. “I have never heard those stories! I suppose that is why you insisted I learn fencing, brother. To be entirely truthful, Lionel, my brother’s insistence on these lessons meant I had heard quite a bit about you even before our acquaintance.”

Lionel’s eyebrows shot up in surprise, a spark of intrigue lighting in his eyes. “You? Fencing?”

“Oh, indeed,” Cecilia replied, her gaze holding his a moment longer than necessary. “Arthur mentioned more than once that his skills were sharpened under your tutelage, if I’m correct?”

Lionel chuckled, stepping slightly closer to her, the space between them becoming tantalizingly small. “I had no idea. Perhaps one day we might spar together. I would love to see if your brother’s teachings did my lessons justice.”

Arthur groaned good-naturedly, breaking the moment. “Enough of that. When are we to start the hunt, Lionel? My patience wanes.”

“Soon enough, old boy. We await one more guest, a friend of Arabella’s. And as for the tour, Miss Sinclair, I will ask my man, Blackwood, to show you around the castle and give you an account of its history. He has served my family since birth and knows more about Thornhill than any man living.”

Cecilia found herself smiling brightly, touched at the consideration Lionel was taking. She knew that while the men who had been invited to Thornhill were hunting, the women would be gathered in a drawing room and would talk over tea. She had little aptitude for the kind of gossip that was the primary discourse in those gatherings, remembering hours of tedium as a young girl, sitting beside her mother and listening to the conversations going back and forth. Afterward, her mother would translate the seemingly innocuous comments, stripping away the surface meaning to

expose petty squabbles and sniping. The prospect of exploring such a dramatic residence as Thornhill Castle was much more appealing to her.

“I should be delighted, Lionel. Thank you very much.”

Lionel actually smiled, and it transformed his face. The austere expression was gone and a joyous life seemed to appear like a blossoming sunrise. His green eyes, previously the hardest emerald, became the light shade of grass, soft and comfortable. Cecilia, always quick to smile by nature, found herself mirroring his expression while lost in the verdant depths of his eyes. A moment stretched into eternity and then Arthur cleared his throat. Cecilia jumped and Lionel blinked, turning away hurriedly.

“Yes, well, I shall lay that on for you. Come through and meet the company, both of you. No one you haven’t met before, Penrose. Several people for your brother to introduce you to, Cecilia... I mean, Miss Sinclair. Yes, come through, come through.”

He was talking in a breathless rush and hurrying away. Cecilia found herself blushing with such fury, she could feel the heat of her cheeks. Arthur looked from one to the other with a raised eyebrow and a quizzical expression. He offered his arm to Cecilia, who gave him a wide-eyed stare above lips compressed to a white line. It told him she would tolerate no teasing. Duke Lionel Grisham of Thornhill was a man engaged to be married. There would be no flirtation and the moment that had just passed between them was a mere trifle. Hardly worth commenting on. So she wouldn’t. And neither would her maddeningly mischievous brother. Or there would be consequences.

“Shall I give you a moment to dispel those scarlet cheeks, dear sister?” he smirked.

“You will not,” Cecilia said with as much dignity as she could muster.

Lionel was a man happily promised to another. Doubtless Arabella Wycliff was a famed beauty and a woman of accomplishment and rank. Cecilia Sinclair, orphan and ward of her brother, the Earl of Penrose, would be no competition. Even that thought increased the heat in her cheeks. The very thought that there could be any question of competition with herself as the victor in particular. Nonsense. But she could not forget the frisson she had felt when looking into Lionel's eyes. The quake that had begun somewhere deep within her at the proximity of such masculinity. His height and the breadth of both chest and shoulders made her breathless to think of.

She smoothed the cream skirt of her new dress, bought for her by Arthur from London for her birthday the month before. Its bodice was a pale green that complimented her brown eyes and bronze hair. Wearing it made Cecilia feel beautiful. It was the finest gown she had ever worn and it gave her a thrill to know that Lionel had seen her in it, that he had seen her at her best. Once again, Cecilia berated herself for a foolish fantasy that could never come to be. Best to forget Arthur's handsome and enigmatic friend.

Lionel stood at the door in the screen that led to the part of the Great Hall in which his other guests were mingling and talking. As Cecilia and Arthur reached him, there came a raised voice from the far end of the hall. Cecilia happened to be looking at Lionel as the voice rang out and saw his expression change. Green eyes narrowed and his chin lifted. There was tension in the muscles of his neck and jaw and a hand at his side clenched into a fist. Arthur turned and Cecilia saw the tightness in his features. Arthur was a happy, smiling man but now there was almost an expression of open hostility on his face. She looked for the cause of this sudden tension.

Approaching across the hall was a man with black hair, curling close to his scalp and short. His skin was pale and his body slender. As he approached, she saw that he had pale blue eyes and something of a resemblance to Lionel. But while the Duke was powerful and strong, this man was lean and whip-like. On his arm was a beautiful woman. She had golden hair and was tall, moving with grace and deliberation. Her

lips possessed a pout that made them seem full and luscious but her blue eyes were cold. Cecilia was left with the impression that her beauty was the product of a great deal of work rather than something bestowed by nature.

“Your Grace!” the slender man said, looking at Lionel, “I do so apologize for my tardiness. But look who I bumped into as I arrived!”

“Lord Thorpe. Welcome,” Lionel replied stiffly.

The blonde woman left Thorpe’s side and crossed to Lionel, kissing his cheek and taking his arm.

“Cecilia, may I introduce my fiancée, Arabella Wycliff. Arabella, this is Cecilia Sinclair, sister to Lord Penrose, whom you already know.”

Icy blue eyes swept over Cecilia and rosebud lips smiled. Cecilia was left feeling that she had been weighed and measured by those eyes.

“Miss Sinclair. How nice to meet you,” she spoke.

“My Lady,” Cecilia replied politely.

“And may I introduce Lord Gordon Locke, Viscount of Thorpe,” Lionel continued.

The dark-haired man took Cecilia’s hand without invitation and pressed his lips to it. His blue eyes met hers and he smiled. She returned the smile politely, not liking the presumption he had shown.

“I had not expected to meet such a beautiful stranger. I thought I knew all of His Grace’s society,” Thorpe grinned, “where have you been hiding yourself?”

Arthur cleared his throat and removed Cecilia's hand from Thorpe's grip, placing it upon his arm.

"Shall we go through, Sister?"

Cecilia caught the brief flash of a mocking smile on the face of Lord Thorpe at Arthur's intervention. Then those blue eyes were on hers again. His stare was direct but did not have the effect upon her that Lionel's had. Cheeks cold and not remotely blushing, Cecilia smiled politely, looking from Lord Thorpe to Arabella.

"It was a pleasure to meet you both."

As Arthur led her away, Lord Thorpe called out, "I am so looking forward to this hunt, Penrose. Perhaps I will show His Grace and yourself the marksmanship I learned in service of King and country."

Cecilia looked questioningly at Arthur as they stepped through the screen. Lionel closed the door behind them and she heard him speak to Lord Thorpe, though she could not hear what was said. The room beyond was softened by the addition of plush furniture, rugs, and wall hangings to disguise the bare stone of the hall. A fire roared in an impressive stone fireplace and men and women stood about or sat, talking, eating, and drinking.

"What was that all about?" Cecilia asked in a quiet voice.

"Thorpe is a scoundrel with a terrible reputation when it comes to women. It is rumored that he came by his wealth through looting the bodies of the dead in Spain. And a viscountcy followed soon after. A reprehensible man. I had hoped he would not be in attendance and do not like the fact that Arabella arrived in company with him."

“Whyever not?” Cecilia asked.

Arthur glanced at her and he tapped the side of his nose.

“Best not speak of it. Let us enjoy ourselves and hope that the blackguard does not cause trouble.”

CHAPTER 2

5 YEARS LATER

Lionel entered the mist-shrouded woods. His footsteps were slow and careful, making no noise among the moist undergrowth, rich with decaying leaves. Mist rendered the trees to dark silhouettes, skeletal figures in the gloom. The sun was not yet to its noon peak and was not yet strong enough to dispel the covering of fog that clung to the shadows of the woods. To his right, Arthur stalked, rifle held ready, eyes keen. To the left, invisible among the shadows were the others of the hunting party. The white stag that had been seen on the Thornhill estate these last few weeks and whose presence had precipitated the calling of the hunt, was somewhere ahead. The ground fell away beneath his feet, a slope that would carry him into an ever-deepening dell. Lionel raised a hand, a signal to Arthur to halt. Closing his eyes, he tried to pinpoint the minute sound that had caught his attention. It came again, the soft sound of movement from ahead and below. Opening his eyes, he looked to Arthur who was watching him. Lionel pointed and Arthur nodded, he had heard it too.

They descended a slope made slippery by soil churned to mud. Tree roots made a precarious staircase for the two hunters. Above them and to the left, a human shape moved among the mist, another hunter but one who had not heard the sound that Lionel and Arthur pursued. He ignored them, if they were not as skilled as he, then their hunt would be in vain. These hunts were as much a competition against his guests as they were against nature. Lionel liked to win at the hunts he organized. He would not begrudge his guests if one of them emerged the victor but would not give up victory out of deference. The only one present whom he would defer to was

Arthur, his old comrade from the battlefields of school. A shape appeared from the mist ahead, large, and dark. Too tall to be man or beast. It was a standing stone, and soon, others appeared. They were arranged in a circle at the foot of the dell, moss-covered and dark with damp. A brooding relic of a bygone age. Something moved quickly between the stones. Something taller than a man but moving on four legs. It dashed from left to right and both hunters brought their rifles to their shoulders. But the stag was gone before they could fix it in their sights, hidden by the all-consuming mist.

Nature was contriving to frustrate the human hunters today, conjuring an unseasonable mist to hide their quarry. Lionel relished the challenge. He glanced at Arthur and, from the gleam in his old friend's eyes, he saw that his own feelings were mirrored. Then Arthur's eyes widened as they became fixed on something beyond Lionel, over his left shoulder. Thinking that the deer had circled around them, Lionel swung around, raising his rifle to his shoulder. But it was no deer. A man had stepped from behind a standing stone, already with rifle raised. Lionel was close enough to see the face of Lord Thorpe, see the victorious smile as his finger tightened on the trigger. Arthur roared as he shoved Lionel from the back, knocking him to the side. Lionel hit the ground as the rifle held by Thorpe fired. The sound was an explosion in his ears, accompanied by a flash of light and the acrid stench of gunpowder. There was a gurgling groan from behind him and the sound of a body hitting the ground. Looking back, he saw Arthur on his back, unmoving. Lionel screamed, reaching for the rifle he had dropped when Arthur had pushed him aside, saving his life and becoming the victim of the shot that would have killed Lionel—that had been intended for Lionel.

Thorpe had stepped clear of the stone and was drawing a pistol from his belt. Lionel's hand closed around the rifle, fingers finding the trigger as he jerked it to point towards his attacker. The rifle discharged at the same instant as the pistol Thorpe held. He jerked at the last moment and the shot intended to kill seared along Lionel's back. Pain enveloped him, followed by the deepest, icy cold blackness.

Lionel lashed out against the foe of his dream but found only empty air. He jerked upright in his bed, panting as though he had run a mile. With one hand, he reached to the scar that ran for three inches to the base of his spine. For a moment he felt the fire of the lead shot that had made the scar. Fired by a man who had killed Lionel's best friend that night.

A man who was still free.

His left leg ached. The pain was a dull throb that never completely faded and which, from time to time, had to be dulled by poppy juice supplied by an apothecary in London. Still, the pain was better than the terrifying numbness that had engulfed both legs years ago when he had awoken in the dell, at the foot of the standing stones. A white stag had been chewing the bark of an elm when Lionel had jerked into wakefulness. It had looked at him once and then leaped away into the woods. And Lionel had been unable to walk, or even stand. Now, he silently thanked God that he had been spared the life of a cripple, reliant on others for his most basic needs.

False dawn was lighting the windows of his bedchamber and, despite the early hour, Lionel knew that sleep was done for him. The dream did not come every night but when it did, there was no rest for him. He swung his legs out of bed and reached for the complicated structure of flexible willow and leather that stood beside his bed. With practiced ease, he strapped it to his left leg. It attached to his thigh and shin, reaching as far as his ankle. Under his breeches and boots, it was invisible but provided support to that leg that had never fully recovered its strength or full mobility. Lionel's dancing days were done. He had not attempted to dance since his recovery and would not risk the humiliation of falling. His hair fell about his face, long and wild and he rubbed at the beard that now covered his jaw. Beyond the window, he could see the shadow-shrouded countryside around Thornhill castle. The dark woods which concealed the dell of the standing stones. The dell in which Thorpe had laid his trap, attempting to kill Lionel for reasons he had never admitted.

But, justice had not been served. Arthur was dead, unable to bear witness to events. And Thorpe's presence at the far end of the hunting line, some five hundred yards from Lionel's position, had been attested to by the Sir Reginald Cox, Baronet of Laleham. Lionel found himself grinding his teeth, jaw clenched in anger at the injustice that had been done against him. They had escaped justice thus far but he would find a way to take revenge. Except, that had been five years ago and he was no closer to that end. A tap came at the door of his bedchamber and Lionel smiled to himself grimly. Blackwood was almost psychically attuned to his master's needs.

"Come in, Blackwood," Lionel said.

The door opened and the butler came in. He was as broad as his master, though shorter. He walked with bowed legs and the slight, listing stride of a man more accustomed to the rolling deck of a ship. The only hair on his head was two thick, black eyebrows above a broken nose and a permanently squinting expression. Immaculately clad in Thornhill livery, he nevertheless resembled a highway brigand.

"Does Your Grace require assistance in dressing this morning?" he asked in a thick west country accent.

"No, Blackwood. I will accomplish that task myself."

"As I thought, Your Grace. I have therefore brought implements for the shaving of beards and cutting of hair," he noted.

Lionel rubbed at the beard, several weeks' worth of growth. "I have not requested grooming."

"As tonight is the night of the ball, the first Your Grace has hosted in a long time, I decided it was needed," Blackwood added, putting a basin and towels down on Lionel's bedside table.

Lionel chuckled, knowing that only a direct order would deter the man from what he saw as his duty. Five years of helping Lionel learn to walk again had reduced the social gulf between them. Lionel stood stiffly and limped to a chair before the window.

“If it must be done, then do it here. I would have a view while you work.”

Blackwood muttered to himself under his breath as he moved his gear to rest on the windowsill. Lionel suppressed a mischievous smile, knowing the move would provoke his manservant, who was by nature morose and fond of complaining.

“Whom have we had responses from to our invitations?” he asked.

Blackwood began reciting a list from memory of those who had accepted the invitations as he began to apply lathered soap to Lionel’s beard. One name, in particular, made Lionel put a hand to his arm to stop him.

“Did you say Sinclair? Cecilia Sinclair?”

“I did at that, Your Grace,” Blackwood replied, removing his arm from Lionel’s grip and recommencing the job of lathering.

“Whom is she to be accompanied by? A husband?”

“No, Your Grace. An uncle and an aunt. The Earl of Hamilton and his wife,” Blackwood corrected, unfolding a straight razor and tilting Lionel’s face to better catch the light.

“I have not seen her for... well, not since that day,” Lionel muttered.

He did not need to say which day he referred to. All who worked at Thornhill knew

that references to that day meant only one thing. The last time any kind of social occasion had been hosted at Thornhill Castle. Until now.

“She is presumably betrothed by now if she is not married.”

“Living with her aunt and uncle says to me it is neither,” Blackwood commented, “unless she married a pauper, that is to say.”

“Well reasoned. It is of no matter regardless. A woman like that could not have remained available for long. God, but she was beautiful. My eyes were full of Arabella at the time but she still struck me.”

Blackwood’s only comment on Lionel’s former betrothed was a snort that almost became a spit until he remembered himself. Instead, Blackwood muttered imprecations about Arabella Wycliff that Lionel was glad he only half heard. Another betrayal. Another injustice unpunished. Lionel put Arabella from his mind. Instead, he thought back to the first time he had met Cecilia Sinclair. He gazed out of the window, no longer aware of Blackwood or the room about him. Even the pain in his leg was lost in the backwoods of his consciousness. He remembered Cecilia’s cascading bronze hair. Her pale, delicate skin and the shimmering dress that seemed to have been made to accentuate her coloring perfectly. That first meeting had momentarily put Arabella from his mind. It had made him extremely uncomfortable when he realized.

The racing heart. The dry mouth and shivering stomach. Those were what the poets said a man and a woman experienced when they felt the kiss of true love. But he had never felt that for the beautiful, perfect Arabella. She had been like a work of art, appreciated but with detachment. Cecilia had been different and Lionel had been wracked with guilt when he understood the nature of his reaction. Those brown eyes. Had they been hazel? With lighter flecks that were almost gold? Was that his imagination, conjuring perfection that no woman could ever live up to?

“A handsome woman, I thought,” Blackwood added, turning Lionel’s head to shave the other side.

Lionel felt his heart thump in his chest. It was ludicrous to experience such excitement for a woman he had met only once, and that, several years ago. But it was true. Cecilia had been beautiful in a way that struck at his core. He remembered well her slender but curving figure. The very epitome of femininity. While he had known that Arthur’s aunt and uncle, the Sinclairs of Hamilton Hall, were invited to the ball, it had simply not occurred to him that they would bring their niece. Or that following the death of her brother, Cecilia would not be resident at Penrose any longer. Suddenly, he found himself looking forward to the event.

CHAPTER 3

THORNHILL

Cecilia watched the approach of Thornhill castle with trepidation. She sat in the carriage belonging to her uncle, the Earl of Hamilton, opposite him and next to her aunt Margaret. She wore diamonds in her mousy brown hair and pearls about her thin, over-long neck. Her dress matched the color of the pearls and the glinting diamonds. Uncle Rupert was resplendent in a waistcoat of red and an overcoat of purple with a ruby in the pin of his scarlet cravat. The carriage was new and from a coachbuilder with royal patronage. By contrast, Cecilia wore no jewels openly. A simple chain around her neck held a heavy signet ring intended for a man. It had belonged to her father and then to her brother. Her aunt and uncle did not know that Arthur's solicitor had quietly passed it to her when the Penrose estate had passed in its entirety to the Sinclairs of Hamilton. As well as Cecilia. She wore the same dress that had been new the last time she had attended a social event at Thornhill.

Now, however, its luster had faded as a result of repeated laundering. Repairs had been made, not visible but of which Cecilia was very conscious. By contrast with her aunt and uncle, she felt as though she were clothed in rags. The walls approached, ancient and stained by the years. The gates in those walls were of massive, fissured wood bound in black iron. Beyond was an open courtyard and two huge, oaken doors leading to the great hall that she remembered so well. She remembered the last time she had watched the castle approach. Arthur had been her companion then, seeming to enjoy her marveling at the grandeur of his friend's home. Cecilia felt her dear brother's loss as a physical wrench. It was as fresh now as it had been when his body had been brought back into the castle, along with the paralyzed form of Lionel

Grisham.

“Whatever is the matter, girl!” Margaret snapped, “You are being treated to a ball held at the home of a Duke. You could at least look as if you are grateful.”

“She is not, Margaret. My brother’s family never were,” Rupert muttered lazily, sounding bored, “they were not like us.”

Cecilia felt a flash of anger at the thinly veiled insult to her mother and father. But she knew well enough to keep her lips tightly sealed. Instead of replying to her uncle as she ought, she smiled tightly.

“I was thinking of Arthur,” she finally said.

“Yes. Irresponsible of him to go and get himself killed like that, leaving a burden for us to carry,” Margaret sighed.

“Well, it would seem odd if you were not here given the friendship between your brother and the Duke,” Rupert added, “just you remember your place. Speak when you are spoken to and do not make any social gaffes that might embarrass us.”

“I won’t, uncle,” Cecilia reassured, putting on a show of timidity that didn’t pass her aunt’s cynical eye.

Rupert, though, had already turned away, looking with interest at a couple alighting from a carriage ahead of them.

“I do believe that is the Chertsey Littletons. Do you see what she is wearing, Margaret? And he?” Rupert scoffed, looking the couple up and down.

Margaret smirked, nodding her agreement. Cecilia resolved not to look, not wanting to join in with her aunt and uncle’s shallow sniping. Dwelling on Arthur inevitably

made her think of the man whose house this was. The Duke. Lionel Grisham. She wondered what her aunt and uncle would say if they knew he had once given her leave to use his first name. She licked her lips and smoothed her skirts. The man had been a revelation. She had not known that such giants existed. And with such handsome features. He was not a brute, but rather, a god. That idea brought on a blush and Aunt Margaret raised an eyebrow when she saw.

“Do you judge us, child?” she whispered, dangerously.

“Merely stuffy,” Cecilia said quietly, fanning herself with her hand.

“Well, this place will air you out. Never have I set foot in such a drafty pile. Ridiculous that a man should wish to live in such a place. It might have been well for the Middle Ages but we are considerably more civilized now. Quite why the Duke would not adapt the place to the style of the Renaissance, I cannot think.”

“It shows a deplorable lack of taste,” Margaret nodded.

The carriage was coming to a halt and Rupert rapped on the roof with his cane.

“Further forward man!” he roared, “I will not alight behind the Littletons. Take us to the door!”

“We must get rid of the foolish man,” Margaret tutted, “he has no concept of etiquette.”

“He is extremely knowledgeable about horses and an expert driver of a number of conveyances. You could not ask for a finer coachman,” Cecilia put in, unable to hold her tongue.

George, the driver, had a family of four to support and a sweet and gentle nature. Cecilia felt lucky to consider the man and his wife as friends and had spent many

happy hours with his family in their little cottage on the Hamilton estate. But the look that her aunt directed at her would have frozen water to ice.

“And what, precisely, would you know about it?” she asked lowly.

Cecilia swallowed her first response and tried to look meek. She lived on the charity of her aunt and uncle, trying to avoid their ire because she depended on them. She had been left with nothing in Arthur’s will, a fact that had shocked her at the time. If Rupert and Margaret decided so, she would be without a home.

“Nothing, Aunt Margaret,” she said, folding her hands in her lap.

“Exactly. We shall fire the man after all and you will know that you are the reason. Dwell on that, young lady.”

Rupert harrumphed his approval as the carriage moved to a position opposite the entrance to the castle. A footman opened the door and Margaret alighted, followed by Rupert. Cecilia followed, smiling her thanks at the young servant. She looked up at George Preston, the driver, who winked at her when her aunt and uncle weren’t looking. He didn’t know that his livelihood was about to be snatched away. Cecilia resolved to help him, somehow. She followed her aunt and uncle through the grand entrance of the castle and into the daunting hall. It was as majestic and awe-inspiring as she remembered. This time the guests were not confined to the partitioned section beyond the painted screen. There looked to be far too many of them. They milled about the hall and a wave of noise flowed from them. Cecilia felt even more under-dressed as she looked around. Rupert and Margaret were greeting another couple, equally as resplendent as themselves. Cecilia quietly moved away, knowing that they would not wish to introduce her or even be associated with her. She allowed the crowd to hide her from them.

That brought a measure of relief but she still felt self-conscious about her dress. There was no one here that she knew. Indeed, most of her friends were not the kind of

people who would be invited to soirees such as this. At Hamilton Hall, she lived among the servants and counted them among her most trusted friends. The tenants of the Hamilton estate were also good friends to her and most of them were either farmers or weavers. She tried to avoid attention but felt that eyes were upon her unceasingly.

Finally, she reached the edge of the milling throng of guests. A cool, shadowed alcove appeared and she stepped back into it. It was then that she saw him.

Lionel Grisham...

He was moving through the crowd which parted before him like the waves of the Red Sea. Head and shoulders above most other men at the gathering, he had the same coal-black hair that she remembered. It wasn't as short as it had been but flowed back to the nape of his neck. It gave him an exotic look, like an Eastern prince or an Indian rajah.

Emerald green eyes stabbed into the throng around him as he greeted his guests. He did not look like a host who was enjoying his ball, but rather that he would prefer to be anywhere else but here. She felt a pang of empathy at that moment. She too would rather be almost anywhere else. Unable to look away from him, she watched him move through the crowd, bending his head to speak to people, greeting them. She became hypnotized by him. His movements were careful and controlled with an underlying sense of power but with grace. As though he had learned through painful practice an awareness of his body that went beyond most people. It was as though he had total control over his musculature. It increased the sense of physical power that had been so attractive to her on their first meeting. As she watched, a man approached him from behind, greeting him and forcing him to turn suddenly.

Cecilia saw a sudden stiffness in the movement and a quickly controlled flinch of pain on his carefully controlled features. Then he was smiling politely, greeting the man, and inclining his head towards him in courteous acknowledgment. Cecilia

wondered if she were the only one to have seen the pain that had clearly gripped Lionel at that moment. She wondered at its source. Was he ailing? Or suffering the ill effects of an injury? Did it have something to do with that fateful afternoon when the spring mist had brought about such a terrible accident? Brought about the death of her brother at the hands of the man she now watched. For the longest time, she had tried to forget it, to tell herself that a hunt was a dangerous place and accidents of this sort did happen. It was in God's hands. But she could not rid herself of the belief that her brother had been killed and this man walked free. Accident or not, if there had been no hunt, then Arthur would still be alive and she would not have spent the last five years living as a servant in the house of her aunt and uncle.

She wanted to be angry with him. Wanted to hate him. But something about him drew her. He was magnetic in his charisma. Looking at him made her heart quicken and her breath release in short gasps. She knew that she was blushing and willed herself to stop. But the sight of him brought only illicit thoughts of what he must look like beneath his clothes. It was a scandalous thought, but it would not be dislodged. His body would be ridged and hard as steel. Muscles like smooth-sided boulders bulging beneath skin, itself covered in a fine layer of dark hair. The body of a barbarian prince, a descendant of the warrior nomads who had terrorized the Romans and scourged the continent of Europe.

Savage and prideful. Fierce and passionate.

Cecilia almost gasped aloud when Lionel's head turned and their eyes met. For a moment, there was no one else in the room. The echoing babble of conversation faded to silence. The crowd melted into the stone, leaving only Cecilia and Lionel. The space between them became charged. Cecilia felt she could reach out and touch the air, that it must be tangible with the energy that thrummed between them.

Her blush deepened and her eyes widened as he took a step towards her. But another guest stepped in front of him, escorting a matronly lady with silver hair piled atop her head. The contact was broken as Lionel directed his attention to them and began

again the charade of greeting and mingling. Cecilia was left with a hot but empty sensation in her stomach. A feeling of loss and of need. She wanted those eyes on her again. Wanted his hands on her. His lips.

“My dear lady, are you quite well?” inquired a voice.

Cecilia looked to see a young man with brown hair combed forward in the popular Roman style. He held a wine glass and a smile of concern and... something else. His gray eyes were direct, never leaving her face.

“I am... feeling somewhat... hot... I mean, it is crowded in here. I feel the need for a breath of fresh air,” Cecilia stammered her reply.

“Then allow me to escort you to a quieter room. There must be a veritable maze of them in this place,” the man replied.

“I am sure I can find my way. I thank you for your concern,” Cecilia replied hurriedly, not wanting to be escorted, simply wanting to be alone.

“Very well. I am Sir Gerald Knightley, by the way, of Brockwill. And you are?”

“Cecilia Sinclair of Penrose,” Cecilia replied, giving the name of her parent’s seat rather than the place where she lived with her aunt and uncle. Hamilton Hall had never truly felt like home.

“Penrose ? Indeed. A tragic tale. We really must talk during the course of the evening, about Penrose.”

Cecilia frowned, wondering what this could mean. But the need to escape that room had become overwhelming. She wanted a cooling drink and a breath of fresh air. She wanted to escape the magnetism of Lionel Grisham, to escape the confusion he wrought upon her. The man she reviled for the killing of her brother. The man who

made her heart hammer in her chest and her body tingle. She stammered what she hoped was an acceptable goodbye and walked rapidly away, looking for a door that would take her from the great hall and the Duke of Thornhill.