



The Duke of Diamonds (The Highwaymen #1)

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Category: Historical

Description: A highwayman duke is a contradiction in terms. There's no reason for a wealthy and titled man to turn to violent armed robbery. And yet, the Lady Balley, Patience Needbrooke, is positive she recognizes the tall, dark man who pulls her from her carriage that night.

"I. Am. Kidnapping. You," he tells her, speaking quite slowly and enunciating as if she's an idiot.

Patience isn't sure which is worse—being kidnapped by some mad duke or being returned to the man who the duke will appeal to for ransom. Her husband regularly beats her. It's a bad world, or so it seems to her, and she must bear it up and make what she can of it.

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CHAPTER ONE

PATIENCE NEEDBROOKE, RECENTLY the Viscountess of Balley, had become accustomed to being struck shockingly quickly in her brief marriage. The first time the viscount had taken his fists to her, she'd been stunned. The second time, she was less so, and by the third time, she was actually rather expecting it.

It wasn't that she was unaware that certain men behaved in such a manner, of course. If she had decided to complain about it to someone, perhaps her elder brother Mark, the one who'd negotiated this marriage in the first place, she knew she'd be shown the passages in the bible which indicated that she was not to complain.

She must submit to her husband in the Lord, for this was right, and her husband was the head of her, just as Christ was the head of the church, and she was a woman anyway, and her desire was to her husband and he would rule over her.

There was no recourse.

But if her father was still alive, well, he wouldn't have liked it. Of course, if her father was alive, she likely wouldn't have been forced into this wretched marriage at all. If her father was alive, he would not have done as her brother had done. Mark had taken all of the family money, gambled half of it away, lost the other half in an ill-advised investment in tobacco, and then found himself nearly penniless and titled. He still had the three estates that were entailed to him, but had no money to support his sister.

Yes, she'd needed to be married off, and Balley had wanted her.

It was done now; no reason to think too hard on what might have been.

Besides, though she kept gingerly touching her chin where his meaty palm had smacked into it earlier today, and though she was thinking she might be bruised (on her face! A bruise on the face, how horrid!) there was reason to be of good cheer.

For one thing, she was leaving her husband for a span of some weeks to spend the rest of the dreadfully hot summer in the country, while her husband stayed to finish out what was left of Parliament's session in London. The session this year was dragging on and on, likely what was putting her husband in such a bad temper, anyway, and he'd finally decided that it made no sense for her to stay in the heat and stench of the city. She could go on ahead of him to the north, and she would be given a blessed respite from his fist and his open palm.

For another thing, she had not bled this month, which might mean she was with child, and if she was with child, he might stop going at her every night the way he had been and also, perhaps, if she was very clever, she could talk him out of hitting her because it might hurt the child.

So, Patience reminded herself that she had many things to be thankful for that evening as her carriage left London.

She was traveling far later in the day than made any sense, but this was her husband's fault, too, really. She had meant to leave just after luncheon, had been packed and ready to go, in fact, and he had delayed the business for some hours and then insisted she must stay for dinner, which had necessitated having a dress unpacked from her trunk and having her maid dress her and see to her hair.

Then, she had said that she would simply leave in the morning. It was pointless now. It was late. The sun would be going down—though it was summer, so not until eight o'clock or so. But still, traveling now, at this time of the evening, it was madness.

And that was when Balley, having had too much to drink over the course of the entire day, began to yell at her and call her names. She was sadly quite used to this at this point. She did whatever she could to try to stop him from taking it out upon her, cowering in a corner, agreeing with him slavishly, apologizing, even though she had done nothing wrong.

But then, her little dog, a tiny terrier she had named Dash, had decided to take it upon himself to fearlessly defend his beloved mistress, yapping loudly at Balley, who had first thrown Dash into a wall and then driven a fist into her stomach.

She had cried, “But I have not bled. Don’t hit me there. I could be with child!”

And he had been angry that she had told him not to hit her, so he’d slapped her across the face. Then he’d said, “Get out of my sight. You must take to the road as planned today. I won’t stand for your silliness and indecision, not in my house. You may have been given your way until now, you spoiled chit, but my wife must behave differently.”

She’d heard versions of this speech many times from him.

At any rate, she was leaving London now. They would travel through the night, and she would sleep in the carriage. In the morning, there was a cozy and bright little tavern where they would stop for fresh horses and perhaps for a fresh driver, too, since the one she would have brought would be dead on his feet.

Then they’d be on their way again.

It was all much, much better than it had been, only hours ago. There was no reason to think upon anything except the goodness that lay ahead of her, this was what she told herself.

Truthfully, she would have liked to cry.

She had spent a great number of nights in her brief marriage sobbing. After Balley would leave her bed, after he took his husbandly rights with her, which she had known was supposed to hurt, really, but had thought got less painful with time, except with Balley, it was always frankly brutal and awful. After that, she would often cry. She would turn over and sob into her pillow for three-quarters of an hour or until her tears dried up and she fell asleep.

But usually, after he hit her, she couldn't cry, because there were servants about, and it simply wasn't done to cry in front of servants. And just then, she was traveling with her maid, a sweet girl named Isabella, in the carriage, and she could not cry in front of Isabella.

Well, to be truthful, Patience knew some people did cry in front of their servants. Perhaps, when she was younger, in her father's household, she might have done so. But now, in Balley's household, each of the servants was a spy, terrified of his or her master. He was well within his rights to hit all of them, after all. They all belonged to him. His servants. His wife. His household. He could do as he liked with them.

So, they had quite the incentive to report to him on her comings and goings. They were rewarded if they did so and punished if they did not. If he found out she was crying all the time, it would not go well for her. Isabella had even said to her once, her eyes quite wide, "Oh, he has asked me to tell him if you are anything but cheerful, and I dare not lie to him. Be cheerful, if you can but manage it, ma'am. Perhaps we may find something cheerful to think of, if we but try."

Isabella was happy to be leaving London, too, Patience thought.

And Dash, poor Dash, he was asleep on Isabella's lap. He had not been too damaged by her husband's fury, but Patience was loath to think of what might happen in the

future. She must teach Dash not to bark at her husband, not to protect her.

Of course, that thought made her wish to break out in tears as well.

Abruptly, the carriage stopped.

She furrowed her brow, doing nothing, thinking that they would get moving again in a moment. She looked out the window, but there was nothing to see. It was dusk, and they had just left London, and outside, she could only see the weary-looking waving grasses of a field, stretching all the way out to the setting sun, which looked weary also as it sank below the far, rolling hills.

She waited.

Isabella stood up, smiling brightly, handing over Dash.

Patience took the tiny dog, scratching him just behind his ears, the way he liked it.

Isabella opened the door and poked her head out.

Patience listened as Isabella spoke to the driver.

“It’s some obstruction in the road. A fallen tree, it looks like. Best is to go round, I think. We can easily go through the crossroads to the northwest,” said the driver.

Patience bit down on her lower lip. The crossroads were really the natural way out of London, but no one went that way these days, not unless they were rather desperate, for there were reports of a particularly brutal gang of highwaymen who called themselves the Lords of the Crossroads, and who lay in wait there for unsuspecting carriages and tended to rob them quite blind.

She clutched Dash to her chest and poked her head out as well, right next to Isabella's. "Is it wise?" she called to the driver. "No one goes through the crossroads anymore."

The driver took her in. "Yes, my lady, well, we can always go back to the house in town, back to Lord Balley. He won't be pleased to see us again, however, I can guarantee that."

She grimaced.

"I think," said the driver, "if there is any business at the crossroads, we can get through it by offering up some coin or jewels. Is there anything you have handy?"

Patience furrowed her brow. "Pardon me, are you suggesting that we simply pay the highwaymen, as if we are paying a toll?"

"No, not exactly," said the driver. He sighed heavily. "If your ladyship wishes us to turn back, we shall do it. Is that your wish?"

She licked her lips. She touched her jaw gingerly.

"Aye," said the driver. "It'll be another toll taken from us all if we go back. More than the one already blooming on your jaw there, my lady. More for all of us."

She was silent.

"Begging your pardon," said the driver. "I don't mean to speak out of turn, of course. It's only, in some ways, we are all in the same position with his lordship, are we not?"

"Perhaps," she murmured.

“I have been in his lordship’s service for three years now, and I can guarantee it, we’d all rather we give up a few baubles and some of the provisions on board than go back to whatever punishment he has in store for us,” said the driver. “Everyone in this carriage was looking forward to a bit of time away from that man’s fists and whips, you most of all, my lady, I think.”

Isabella’s eyes were quite wide and round. “If you are with child, like you said, if you are, and if you have hopes of keeping that child from being dislodged from your belly—”

“Thank you, Isabella,” said Patience. Yes, she could see that if she ordered the carriage to turn round and go back to her husband, he would be furious. They’d all face the consequences, and it would be not only her own pain that she would be responsible for, but the pain of these servants. They depended upon her to protect them.

On the other hand, she couldn’t think her husband would be pleased to find they’d been robbed on the road either. But if she gave up her own personal things, her jewels and her necklaces, well, maybe he’d never even notice.

“It may be that there will be no one at the crossroads anyway,” she said in a faint voice.

“Quite right, my lady,” said the driver. “We may get through it with no difficulty. I’m for taking the risk, for what it’s worth, but I’m here to do your bidding. Say the word, and I shall carry it out, whatever it may be.”

Patience wasn’t used to having anyone do her bidding. Perhaps, little things, here and there, throughout her life, yes. She might have asked for a certain pudding to be made for her birthday or something like that, when she was a girl. She had looked forward to her Season as a time when she might have her heart’s desire—all manner of new

dresses and her pick of eligible men. But then, Mark had lost all the money, so there was no Season, not truly. Before even the first balls were underway, Mark and Balley had been hashing out what Balley might give Mark to take her off his hands.

This was not the typical way of a marriage agreement. In a sense, a woman's dowry was given from her family to her husband as a sort of reparation for taking over the financial responsibility of keeping her. However, it was customary for dowries to be held back for the use of a wife in the event of her husband's death, all of that. So, dowries were a bit complicated in practice.

At any rate, it wasn't done for a man to pay the bride's family for the privilege of marrying her. Not usually.

It had been most irregular. Balley had wanted her badly. He'd signed over stocks in some company to Mark for her hand in marriage, had brought Mark in on some particularly lucrative investments.

At the time, she'd dared to hope that this meant that her situation might improve, if she was involved with a man who was so very deeply in love with her that he would pay dearly for her. But it had seemingly only raised Balley's ire. By the time she was his, bought and paid for, he had felt as if he had already suffered so much for the privilege of possessing her that he'd been resentful from the get-go. He'd punished her for his own desire, she thought.

More than once, he'd said things to her about it, strange things, that she had tempted him on purpose, that she had bewitched him, that she had made a fool of him.

He hated her.

He certainly never had put her in a position where it was her bidding that was done.

If she had ever thought she wished for the responsibility of it, she took it back now. She didn't want to make this decision. She didn't want it all to rest on her shoulders.

But it would look weak if she dithered or if she deferred to the driver. Truly, she would be well within her rights to scold him for being as free as he had, giving his own opinion.

She drew in a breath, clutched Dash even more tightly, and did her best to look regal. "Yes, then," she said. "The crossroads."

"Very good, my lady," said the driver.

Patience and Isabella retreated into the carriage. They shut the door. They were jostled about as the carriage turned around and set off in the direction of the crossroads.

The next bit of the journey settled into Patience with a dread that built and built.

It was not so very far to the crossroads, not really, but it seemed to take a thousand years. She tried to busy herself. She thought of taking off her necklace or the bracelet around her wrist. But this seemed to her to make it too likely that the worst happened. Mustn't she hope for the best, in the end?

She spoke to Dash, trying to make her voice comforting, but it rang shrill to her own ears.

Isabella, too, was nervous, gathering up handfuls of her own skirt and then letting them go.

It was interminable.

Patience kept looking out the window, but it got darker and darker, and she could not see anything. Her heart began to thud wildly and she felt ill, like she might cast up her accounts, and she wondered if she must ask the driver to stop so that she might be sick outside the carriage, for she could not bear the idea of saddling Isabella with cleaning it up.

Patience squeezed Dash so tightly he whined.

She loosened her grip.

They drove.

She began to think they must have passed it by now. She had not been able to tell through the windows, but surely, surely, they had already gotten through the crossroads, and surely, the danger was passed, and surely—

And then a shot rang out, loud and clear in the darkness, and the horses whinnied and the carriage reared to a stop.

Patience shut her eyes and shuddered.

Damnation, she thought.

And then she scolded herself, for that was not a ladylike word, not a ladylike word at all.

The words were muffled, but loud enough that she could hear them inside the carriage. “Stand and deliver!”

The response of the driver was too low for her to make out, but she heard that he was speaking.

“Whose carriage is this?” said the voice of the highwayman. She thought, incongruously, that his accent didn’t sound quite right. He sounded lowborn, of course, but there was something wrong with the way he spoke, something that jangled against some part of her brain in a way that she couldn’t reconcile. She puzzled over that for so long she missed whatever else was being said.

Suddenly, the door was being yanked open and a man stood there. He had on a domino mask and below that, his chin was covered in a dark shadow of hair, as if he hadn’t shaved recently. He wore a long black cloak and black clothes beneath.

She thought to herself that he looked like he belonged at a masquerade ball, that there was something foolish about his costume, something that didn’t quite add up either. She blinked at him, blinked hard.

“Why, look at that,” said the man. “It is the Viscountess of Balley herself, in the flesh. This is my lucky day, innit?”

The accent again. It wasn’t—it was put on. He didn’t naturally speak that way, and she was sure of it.

“Out, milady,” said the highwayman, his lips twisting into a satisfied smile under his domino mask. “You’re coming with me.”

She drew back, too stunned to react in any other way.

“Now, hold on, I can’t allow that,” said the driver, who had hopped down from the top of the carriage. “My lady, reach above you, please. There’s a gun there, and I know my master keeps it loaded—”

The driver stopped speaking because there was a blade at his throat.

“None of that,” said the highwayman, but he was looking at Patience. “Have you ever seen a man’s throat cut, milady?”

She was trembling, and she was clutching Dash too tightly again, and the little dog was wriggling, whining.

“Well?” said the highwayman. “Have you?”

“N-no,” she whispered, though she had once seen a chicken killed by the cook at one of her family’s country estates. The cook had lost her grip on it, and the chicken had gotten away, and it had half of its head still attached, and it was moving—

“Would you like to?” His put-on Cockney accent was too broad again. He laughed, grinning at her while his eyes glinted in that domino mask of his.

The driver whispered, “You cannot take the viscountess. My master will kill me if I allow that. So, if you think to threaten me with my life now, know it comes to the same thing either way. I cannot permit that.”

“Right, well, I’ll cut you elsewhere if you like, enough to make it look like you tried,” said the highwayman, still grinning at Patience. “Let’s go, milady, out of the carriage.”

She licked her lips. “But why? Don’t you want my...” She touched her necklace. “I can hand that to you without getting out.”

“No, no, milady,” said the highwayman, chuckling. “Let me explain this to you. I’ll speak slowly, because you seem a bit confused and upset, which is natural, really, given the situation. I. Am. Kidnapping. You.”

She let out a gasp.

“Out,” he said.

“No!” she said, retreating into the carriage.

The highwayman groaned. He moved fast, lightning fast, and he threw his blade to another hand and hooked his arm around the driver’s neck. He squeezed, and the driver crumpled to the ground. The highwayman put the knife in his teeth and bent down, taking a length of rope from somewhere within his cloak. He began to tie up the driver, and as he did this, he talked around the knife between his teeth, which had the effect of making him lose his put-on accent entirely. “You see, viscountess, everyone knows how much good old Balley went through to get you in the first place, so it only stands to reason he’ll pay dearly to get you back. Get out of the carriage.” Finished with his work, he set a foot on the driver’s back. He took the knife out of his mouth. “Don’t worry about him. He’ll wake up in a moment or two. It’s a point on the neck. Put pressure on it, light’s out.” Now, his accent was back. “Come on, then.” He beckoned to her, but with the hand holding the knife.

She shied away.

He looked at the knife, shrugged, and put it into a scabbard hanging on his belt. “Leave the dog.” He beckoned again.

“He won’t pay for me,” she said in a tiny little voice.

“Oh, certainly he will,” said the highwayman. “It was all over town, the way he went after you. He’s obsessed, and this is the luckiest break my boys and I have had in some time.”

Boys . She looked out into the darkness. Were the other Lords of the Crossroads out there, waiting to step in?

“Yes, they’re waiting for a whistle,” said the highwayman. “If they arrive, though, everyone bleeds. You don’t wish that, do you?” He beckoned again.

Even if she had wanted to obey this man, she couldn’t. She couldn’t move.

Isabella let out a very tiny little noise of fear.

It galvanized her. Patience reached forward and made to shut the carriage door.

Except the highwayman stopped her.

And then he was half inside the carriage, and he reached out with one hand and scooped up Dash. He held the dog by the scruff of its neck and dangled it in front of her.

“Don’t hurt him!” she shrieked, lurching forward, arms out for the dog.

The highwayman backed up.

Below him, on the ground, the driver was awake and struggling. He was tied at the hands and feet and he couldn’t stand.

She tumbled out of the carriage and snatched up Dash, pulling the little dog into her arms. Dash barked at the highwayman. He snarled.

The highwayman laughed. “There we are.” He seized her by the arm and began to pull on her. “Leave the dog.”

“Let go of me,” she said in a low, low voice.

“Leave the dog,” he repeated.

And in that moment, she recognized him. Well, sort of. She didn't know his name, but she had seen him before, when she was a guest at a house in the country—she couldn't remember which house or where or when, or anything like that, but she had seen this man before, and he was no highwayman, he was...

A lord.

They were called Lords of the Crossroads. She sputtered at the sheer cheek of it. How dare they?

He tugged on her and she was too stunned by the revelation to struggle. She came along with him.

He tried to take Dash now, but Dash snapped at his fingers, and the highwayman pulled his fingers back. "Fine, keep the dog," he muttered. He pulled on her, pulled her off into the darkness.

She looked over her shoulder at the carriage.

"Isabella, untie me!" shouted the driver.

But Isabella was frozen inside, unable to move, her eyes wide and frightened, still making tiny, scared noises, and she didn't do a thing.

Patience stared at the carriage, stared as she allowed herself to be led away, as her traitorous feet moved, until the darkness swallowed them all up, and the highwayman yanked her around a tree trunk and then another tree trunk and she found herself in some wooded area.

Should have fought, she thought. Why didn't I fight?

CHAPTER TWO

HIS GRACE BENEDICT Taylor, the Duke of Nothshire, lost his grip on the girl as he pulled her into the woods. It was his own fault. She'd been so docile, coming along easily, for too long, and he'd been thinking ahead, thinking of where he was going to take her, how he was going to navigate a kidnapping, which—admittedly—he'd never done before.

She wrenched her arm out of his grasp, let out a cry of dismay or rage, and took off running.

He couldn't help but laugh when she did it, though, because she took off running in the opposite direction of the carriage. He shouldn't have laughed, he supposed. She was a spoiled noblewoman who'd never been through one single moment of unpleasantness in her entire life. Women, especially the daughters of titled men in England, were coddled like children for their whole lives, passed off from fathers to husbands who never did more with them beyond treating them like living dolls who could bring beauty and grace to their lives.

The point of a woman like that was that she was a bit of pretty frippery, and most of them never had to learn anything like keeping direction in their heads.

Even so, he needed to stop laughing and go after her.

She was screaming at the top of her lungs, yelling that she was coming back for the carriage. "Isabella, have the driver untied when I get there, and we shall away!" she shrieked, and the dog in her arms howled its agreement.

All right, all right, he could laugh and go after her, couldn't he?

She was wearing skirts and holding a dog, and she was in the darkness, hindered by tree branches and brambles in the woods. It didn't take long until she fell down, and the dog fell out of her arms.

He was still chuckling as he advanced on them both, even as she attempted to get to her feet.

The dog ran for Nothshire, growling as if it really thought it were some kind of match for him. He liked dogs. Well, he liked real dogs, not these sorts of abominations, which were bred to sit on ladies' laps, and run around like rats. Still, he squelched the idea of wringing the poor thing's neck. He had taken mens' lives in his time—not often, and only when they truly deserved it—but killing a dog seemed like something only a demon would do.

He swept it up off the ground instead, again by the nape of its neck, holding it aloft as it whined and yawned and struggled in the air.

She was sobbing. "Don't hurt Dash," she said. "I know you. I have met you."

Yes, he'd been a bit stupid, overall, showing himself the way he did. They held up carriages out here, but they usually did most of the dealings with the drivers. If there were footmen that tried to get into the fray, they usually didn't even get too close to them, really. It had been one thing when they'd conceived of the idea, ten years ago, when they were all seventeen and idiot half-grown men, willing to take ridiculous risks. It was another now, a decade on, with the very real danger of being recognized looming in every single one of these interactions.

Dash it all.

That was a problem.

“Get up,” he said. “If you don’t wish me to hurt your dog, get on your feet.”

“There, I knew that accent of yours wasn’t even real,” she said, scrambling up to a standing position.

Dash it all .

For a man who’d been doing this for a decade, he really was shite at it, wasn’t he?

“Let me go back to the carriage,” she said stoutly. She gestured off in the direction she’d been running. “I shan’t tell anyone about this if you simply let me go.”

“My lady,” he said gravely, “we left your carriage that way.” He gestured with his head. He pulled the dog in against his chest. It yapped at him, angry.

She turned to look into the darkness. “You’re simply trying to confuse me.”

He shrugged. “I can’t let you go back, you know. Especially if you recognize me.”

The realization of that went through her, and she grimaced. “Oh, I’m very stupid, aren’t I?”

“You’re understandably upset,” he said. “Listen, it won’t be too awful. I shall take you somewhere nearby. We can walk there. It is but half a mile through the woods. I think I’ll have to tie you to the bed, but it’ll be warm and dry and there will be food. Once your husband pays the ransom, I shall let you go.” Of course, could he let her go, if she knew who he was?

Yes, certainly, of course he could. Better disguises. A new name. A different spot. It

could all go on. Rutchester and Arthford were already seeking out new vulnerable points on the roads, after all. No one came through the crossroads anymore. They'd worn their advantage thin at this point, truly. He was alone here tonight for there was almost never a carriage worth knocking over through here, anyway.

He supposed he might work on his accent, too. Maybe, from now on, they should all sound French. That worked well, didn't it? He smiled at the thought of it.

"I am telling you, he will not pay," she said. She wavered. "Anyway, I don't really recognize you. I just know I met you. I can't rightly remember your name, though, I have to admit."

Was she telling the truth? He scrutinized her. "You'd say that you don't recognize me now, of course," he said.

"I don't." She stomped her foot. "Give me back my dog."

"I don't think so," he said. "Follow me if you want your dog back." He set off into the woods.

"I'm not going to follow you!"

He shrugged. "This way is the way back to your carriage." Of course, it was not.

She clenched her hands into fists and turned in a circle, and he could see the realization dawning upon her that she was entirely lost.

"They've probably taken off now, at any rate," he said. "Back to your husband."

"Oh, I don't think that's where they went," she said. "He really would murder them."

He shrugged again. “Regardless, my lady, even if you somehow managed to get free of me, you’d likely wander around in the dark, all alone, and anyone you did come upon would likely hurt you—”

“You’re going to hurt me.”

“I promise I shan’t,” he said.

“You threatened my dog,” she said. “Besides, I can’t see your word is worth anything.” She took a deep breath, screwing up her face in determination. “I am going to fight you.”

“Oh, that seems pointless,” he sighed. “Look, I don’t want to hit you—”

“Yes, you see, your word is worthless.”

“If you hit me, I shall hit back,” he said. “Then I’m only defending myself.”

“Oh, as if it’s a contest,” she spat out.

“You are making my point for me,” he said.

She let out a cry of sheer frustration.

“Come along,” he said. “Cooperate, and this will all be over very soon. Think of the story it will make at tea. Everyone will be hanging on your every word, doubtless, facing off against one of the Lords of the Crossroads. You can say you fought, how’s that?”

“I want you to know I hate you,” she told him.

“I want you to know I’m deeply wounded by it,” he said airily. “Shall we continue hashing this out or are you going to hit me now?”

Her nostrils flared. Her lower lip trembled, and he thought she was moments away from bursting into tears, which would make it all that much harder, really, but he was beginning to think he could probably just haul her up over his shoulder—she didn’t look like she weighed very much, in the end—and, as for the dog, it’d probably trot along behind its mistress. Maybe it’d bark and make a lot of noise, but, well, yes, that was probably the best course of action.

He could set the dog down and put the knife to her throat. No, her back, likely, to make her walk. The back of her neck.

But she threw up both of her hands and said, “Fine. I suppose I’ll go with you.”

“Excellent,” he said, brightening. He went to her, took her by the arm and started to pull her along.

“You don’t have to do that,” she said, trying to shake free.

“A number of things that I’m doing right now, I don’t strictly have to do,” he said.

“Yes, like robbing people when you’re wealthy enough to come to people’s country houses as a guest,” she said pointedly.

“Oh, well, that I suppose I do have to do,” he said. “Should we have a little conversation, then? Lovely weather we’ve been having lately, don’t you agree? I do so love the July warmth.”

She scoffed.

But then she fell silent, which made things easier. She also stopped trying to get free of him.

The walk through the woods was fairly quick. There was a path out here that was well worn, for he and the others used Bess's as a sort of meeting place of sorts. They could trust Bess, who owned the place, and it was a convenient distance from the crossroads. They'd been coming there for years upon years.

He took her in the back door, and there was no one in the kitchen, which was a mercy. They went up the back steps, which were only used by Bess and the girls here.

At the top of the place, there were only five rooms, and these were always filled last, so he expected them to be empty. Still, he checked before bringing her in, throwing his shoulder into the door, as he worked the latch and calling out, "Anyone in there?"

"What?" came a distant call from the room down the hall. "I paid for an hour, and it's been not even ten minutes."

"Apologies!" he called back, hauling her into the room. It was dark in there, empty, and he deposited both the girl and the dog on the bed. He lit a lamp and she looked around at the sheets and the paintings of the wall, all of which were rather bawdy—naked people entwined in all manner of lascivious poses.

"What is this place?" she breathed.

"A brothel," he said. "Don't worry, no one saw you come in, and no one will ever know you were here. I certainly have no intention of advertising that bit of information to your husband."

She looked as if she were going to cry again.

“Oh, and don’t look at me like that ,” he said. “I’m certainly not going to touch you.” He huffed, affronted.

She sat down hard on the bed, gathering the dog up in her arms.

“Truly, what would be gained by that?” he said. “That would materially lower your value to your husband. I’m smarter than that, not to mention I don’t have any taste for bedding women like you.”

Pretty fripperies, as he said. Living dolls. It would be like taking a child to bed. He supposed, at some point, he was supposed to marry one of them, but he hardly thought about that. His life was not the life of a typical duke, and he had no real hope of ever getting out from underneath the thumb of Champeraigne. Besides, he was only seven and twenty, and he didn’t need to really think about marriage until he was six and thirty. Maybe eight and thirty. Whatever the case, he had time.

She petted her dog, making little noises of comfort to it.

“I promised you food, I believe,” he said. “Perhaps I’ll go and see to that.”

“You also said you were going to tie me to the bed,” she said in a resigned voice.

He had said that, and it was likely the most intelligent way forward. But, damn it all, there was something about this woman—no, it wasn’t her particularly, it was the idea of these women in general, he supposed—that made him not wish to harm her.

He still had some relationship with his mother, and she had been in a state of horrific helpless sadness after his father had died, and she had clung to him as if he was the only thing who could save her, even though he knew he was as much the source of her destruction as anything else. Still, women like this, women in the upper classes, the fragile fripperies, he disliked hurting them or causing them discomfort. Some

part of him shied from it, even though he could see that it was necessary.

Brilliant idea, kidnapping, Benedict, he said to himself. Yes, wonderful that you've committed us to this course of action. I rather imagine it's going to go swimmingly.

He grimaced. "I shall simply lock you in, and that should suffice, I think. If you get free, you'll have to come down one set of stairs or the other, and you'll be horrified, undoubtedly, by whatever acts you see in the brothel, so you'd best just stay put. Wouldn't want to damage your innocent purity, I don't imagine."

She lifted her gaze to his, and her eyes were blank in some way that startled him.

That was when he noticed the bruise. He had seen it before, but taken it for some shadow in the scant light. Now, here, illuminated by the lamp in the room, it was unmistakable.

His first thought was that he'd somehow done it, and shame welled up like a tidal wave. And then he realized that bruise was too far along to have been his doing.

Her husband, then.

He was sure of it, and it was mostly because of that blank look in her eyes. He'd seen that blankness before, truthfully. He felt entirely uncomfortable now, entirely uncertain. He put a finger in her face. "Do not move from this room, my lady, or I shall make sure you regret it," he growled.

Then, he left her alone.

CHAPTER THREE

DUNROSE WAS IN his cups and rattling about in the kitchen when Nothshire got downstairs. Nothshire hadn't locked her in. He'd realized, after closing the door, that the latch was on the inside, and he had no means to secure her. He could have stayed and attempted to do something about that problem, but he was too shaken to know what to do about that.

Dunrose looked up when Nothshire appeared, but slowly, squinting at him as if he could not make him out. Then, chuckling to himself, he went back to whatever he was doing, which involved a loaf of bread. He was struggling to unwrap it from the cloth that contained it. "Evening, Nothshire," he said.

Nothshire shoved him out of the way and unwrapped the bread quickly.

"Oh, thank you," said Dunrose, still chuckling. He rested a hand on the wooden countertop and sniffed. "You know what the problem with bread is?"

"No," said Nothshire, "but I do have a problem, Dunrose, and I don't know what I'm going to do about it."

"Why make it like this?" Dunrose gestured. "It's unwieldy in its size, you see? How am I meant to get that into my mouth?" He mimed picking up the entire loaf and stretching his mouth very, very wide.

"Most people slice it," said Nothshire.

“Ah,” said Dunrose. “Right.” He nodded as if Nothshire had said something very sage.

“Anyway,” said Nothshire, “I went to the crossroads tonight.”

“I remember you saying you were going to do that,” said Dunrose. “Someone said—it was you.” He pointed at Nothshire. “ You said that it was foolish to try to seek our quarry there, for no one goes that route out of London anymore. You said we should let it lie for some time and let people start going back through and then go back. I remember this conversation rather clearly, and I really should have brought it up earlier.” He turned away, resting against the countertop, squinting as he looked around the kitchen. “Why doesn’t Bess have any servants doing servant things? Have we asked her this?”

“Well, I’ve done something,” said Nothshire.

“Mmm,” said Dunrose.

“Oh, why am I telling you this?” muttered Nothshire. “Is anyone else here tonight? Rutchester? Is he here?”

“I have no idea,” said Dunrose. “Do you see a knife anywhere?”

“What do you want a knife for?”

“To slice the bread. Keep up. We are even now having a serious conversation about the deep intricacies involved in the process of trying to consume bread. What are you talking about?”

Nothshire rolled his eyes. He turned round and picked up the knife that was sitting right next to the bread and began to slice it.

Dunrose turned. “Ah! Clever you. Look at that. I don’t know why everyone says you’re worthless, Nothshire. You’re brilliant sometimes. You know, I wonder why they don’t simply slice all the bread and leave it sliced, hmm?”

“It gets hard and stale quicker that way,” said Nothshire.

“Maybe they could make it with, erm, a preservative or—”

“Here. Take your damnable bread,” Nothshire shoved a slice at him.

“ Butter, ” said Dunrose. “What I wouldn’t give for some butter.”

Nothshire set the bread back down, reached round for the earthenware container full of butter and shook it in Dunrose’s face. Then, setting it down, he left the kitchen.

“Where are you off to?” said Dunrose.

“Looking for Rutchester,” said Nothshire, as he left the kitchen.

“He’s not here,” came Dunrose’s voice.

“You could have told me this before, when I asked,” said Nothshire, who was moving down the corridor towards the front parts of the building. Bess’s place had a front room, for regulars, where the girls would often be lounging around. Sometimes, they all spent hours there, though—with the notable exception of Dunrose—none of them were particularly enamored of the strumpets here.

For his part, Nothshire never touched them. He had his reasons, his own ideas of honor. It was odd, wasn’t it? The noblewomen, they were too soft for him, and it was too horrifying a thing to think of sullyng them. But the other women, these women, they were hard in a way that made him feel as if they were already sullied, and it

turned his stomach in some other way.

He didn't know what sort of woman he could touch, truly. He'd perhaps yet to find one, and his few forays in that activity had turned him off the idea of it almost entirely. The others made jests at his expense, called him a monk, that sort of thing. But he didn't care. They could think whatever they wanted. He had to live with himself, and he wasn't going to cross certain lines.

However, before he made it into that room, he ducked his head into another room, a smaller room that was set up with a few mismatched chairs that flanked a fireplace. There was a table in there, too, knee-height, and it was often cluttered with flagons and bottles and the like. This was their room.

Arthford was in there. He was reading a book, puffing on a pipe. He looked up at Nothshire. "How'd it go? You're back early, and it's not like you to give up so quickly. Did you manage to come away with a trunk of jewels and coin? Lucky bastard. I never understand how it is that you decide to do the absolute least intelligent thing and it always works out for you."

"That's not what I do," said Nothshire, coming into the room. "I kidnapped someone."

"Kidnapping!" Arthford set down his book, all ears. "Well, then, this is quite the step up in our relative villainies. What's next? Shall we commandeer one of those slave boats in the Indies? Turn to piracy, perhaps? I think Dunrose would like it if we all went into the opium trade."

"The more money it appears we have, the more Champeraigne demands, as we all know," said Nothshire. "So, no, no investments. Are we really having this conversation again?"

“Oh, don’t talk to me like I’m Dunrose,” said Arthford. “Where is he, anyway? Did he pass out going to the privy outside? I told him there’s a chamberpot in the corner, and he wandered off anyway.”

“He’s eating bread,” said Nothshire. “Must not have been into the laudanum, I suppose. That tends to mute his appetite.”

“Well, don’t keep me in suspense. Who did you kidnap?”

Nothshire sat down in a chair across from Arthford and looked into the fireplace. It was empty and black and cold, far too warm in July for a fire. “Well, a carriage stopped. A nice- looking one, at that. I’d seen a few go through, more than usual—”

“Well, yes, you did say, with the road blocked in the other route we might be lucky tonight,” said Arthford. “You’re deliberately drawing this out, are you not?”

“ You have even now interrupted me .”

Arthford puffed on his pipe, snickering. “Oh, a thousand pardons. Carry on, Your Grace.”

“I stopped it, issued the standard warning, and the driver told me that he was happy enough to cooperate but that it was only his mistress and her maid aboard, and he’d appreciate it if I were not to overly upset them, for they were nervous about traveling through the crossroads. I inquired who his mistress was, and he told me it was the Viscountess of Balley.”

“Oho! That chit of a thing that Balley seemed bound and determined to have, by any means necessary. He practically raised her brother singlehandedly out of debt, didn’t he? Well done, Nothshire. Well done indeed.”

“You think so?” Nothshire swallowed.

“Is it not a good thing? I think we send someone directly to Balley, even now, with some kind of cryptic note. Why, he’ll meet us at sunrise with nearly anything we ask, I should think. Should we give him more time to gather a fabulous sum?” Arthford grinned, wagging his eyebrows.

“Well, she recognized me,” said Nothshire.

“Oh.” Arthford made a face. “Well, we’ve known that might happen. Honestly, it’s rather surprising it hasn’t happened yet. Hmm. What to do about that?”

“It’s not really a problem. She’ll tell her husband who I am, and he’ll come after me, and I’ll deny it, and he’ll challenge me to a duel, and I shan’t appear, and then, well, what recourse does he have then? Hunt me down and shoot me in my bed? No, we’ll say it’s all bollocks and we’ll regroup and do something different. We should be French, don’t you think? How’s that as a different sort of plan? We can have another name, something... I don’t know... Napoleonic? And we’ll pretend we’re some arm of the French army, reaching into England—”

“That’s fantastic,” said Arthford. “It’s a wonder we didn’t think of such a thing before.” He dumped out his pipe. “All right, then, so it’s all settled? Who shall we get to deliver the ransom note?”

“She’s got a bruise on her face.”

“Does she.” Arthford shrugged.

“I don’t want to send her back to him.”

Arthford sighed heavily. “Oh, God in heaven, Nothshire.”

Nothshire leaned forward, setting his elbows on his knees. “Come now, Simon, come now. We can’t do that to her.”

Arthford was silent for some time. Eventually, he said, softly, “It’s the way of the world, Benedict.”

“We do not believe that, or we would not, even now, be in the situation we find ourselves in,” said Nothshire, fierce.

“That is not true.”

“Oh, your own mother—”

“Yes, but that does not mean that the rest of us see everything the way you do. You have some foolish and naive view of the world, wherein we did that black act out of some higher sense of justice, and even with all the evidence to the contrary—”

“It had to be done.”

“It most certainly did not, and we all regret it now.”

Nothshire sat back in his chair, unwilling to have this conversation again either. “I would do it again.”

“No, you would not,” said Arthford. “Knowing everything it led to, you would not.”

Nothshire looked back into the fireplace again.

“She doesn’t have anywhere else to go,” said Arthford. “And you can’t know anything about the situation. I think you’re inferring some level of misery that you can’t infer. You can’t be sure it’s the same level of unbearable agony that you went

through, or even that my mother went through. You don't know."

Nothshire had to concede this was true. "I suppose not. It could have been an accident, or it could have been an isolated incident. The number of times Rutchester has struck out in some drunken rage, for instance, one wouldn't..." He trailed off. "I wouldn't send a woman back to Rutchester either, though."

Arthford laughed. "No, I suppose not. Rutchester is..."

Nothshire shrugged. "Leaving Rutchester aside, you're correct. She is married to that man, and I have to send her back to him. She has no other recourse. It's not as if I could free her from that situation in some way."

"No," said Arthford. "You cannot."

Nothshire rubbed his chin. "What if I said I'd bedded her?"

"Why would you do that? He'd most certainly come and shoot you in your bed then."

"Well, perhaps he'd leave her be. Perhaps he'd think she was so ruined by my touch that he'd bundle her off to some estate in the north and leave her there, and she could live out her life—"

"He'd take it out on her."

"Right," muttered Nothshire. "Most likely beat her to death."

"Is she pretty? Is this the one girl in all the world who tempts our dear Benedict to sin?" Arthford laughed at him.

"I don't know," said Nothshire. "I didn't really look at her in that way."

“How do you look at a woman in any other way?”

Nothshire sighed.

“The ransom note,” said Arthford. “What should it say?”

Nothshire rubbed his forehead. “Will you write it, then?”

“I think it should be me, since I’m the best at disguising my handwriting.”

“Right,” said Nothshire. “Well, I think we must decide what to demand, hadn’t we? It should be quite a lot.”

“Oh, quite a lot,” said Arthford.

WHEN PATIENCE TRIED the door and found it open, she scolded herself for having waited so long to have even attempted it. She had sat on that bed, holding onto Dash, frightened and timid, doing nothing at all, and all along, the door wasn’t even locked.

Well, no matter, she was free.

She gathered up Dash, who whined his disapproval, and she shushed him, telling him to be a good dog, as she moved into the hallway.

She looked back at the way they’d come up, and then down to the end of the hallway. There was another staircase at the end, a wider staircase. They’d come up a set of servants’ stairs, she thought, and she debated which would be the better way to go. If she went down that narrow set of steps again, would she be more or less likely to run into anyone?

Some part of her said to take the wider steps, but she thought that was only because she wished not to traverse the path she'd already traversed. No, it made more sense to go down the narrow steps. Besides, she knew the way out this way.

Decided, she started down the steps, her footfalls careful, because the steps were very difficult to navigate.

Dash barked and the sound was loud and she tensed, gritting her teeth.

The dog took that moment to leap out of her arms and go scurrying down the rest of the stairs.

Dash it all!

She rushed after him, whispering his name, thinking that she was going to have go chasing through the house for her dog, and thinking that also, she should leave him, because she was in a terrible situation and trying to save her dog of all things was the stupidest thing that a woman could do. It was exactly the kind of tender-hearted idiocy that was going to lead to her being ravished or recaptured or hurt.

And yet, she could not bear it, leaving Dash behind. She would not.

Luckily, when she got back into the kitchen, Dash was eating bread crumbs off the floor.

There was a man in the kitchen, a man she thought looked vaguely familiar. He was toying with a long, serrated bread knife and eyeing Dash.

She put her body between the man and her dog. "Don't you think about it!" she gasped.

The man looked up at her face. “Who are you?”

Dunrose. That man was the Duke of Dunrose. She had seen him at a ball, only two weeks ago, not that she’d been able to dance with anyone, for her husband had claimed every spot on her dance card, even though it was extremely impolite for married people to dance together at balls. Once might be permitted, but every dance was simply not done, and she’d been horrifyingly embarrassed. The Duke of Dunrose had been extremely drunk, knocking over tables in the tea room, singing some bawdy song at the top of his lungs. She had heard whispers, that the man was always thus, that he was a well-known drunkard. “Y-your Grace,” she said in surprise.

Dunrose smiled at her, still toying with the knife.

“You cannot hurt my dog,” she said to him.

“I wasn’t going to hurt your dog,” he said, disgusted by the thought of it. “I’m trying to cut bread.”

“Oh,” she said, noticing that there was bread sitting out, unwrapped. She drew in a breath and made a quick decision. “Your Grace, I’m in terrible danger, and I need you to put me under your protection and get me free of this place!”

He looked her over. “You’re not a strumpet, are you?”

“No!” She was horrified.

“No, that wouldn’t make sense,” said Dunrose with a shrug. “I know all the strumpets in this place after all, and you aren’t dressed like one and you don’t talk like one.” He held the knife out to her. “Well, here we are, then. I shall be quite happy to do whatever it is that you require if you will but first cut me another slice of bread and spread some butter on it, because I’m having a devil of a time with that bit. I actually

ate the last slice plain, and bread without butter is a crime against heaven, I believe.”

She reeled, blinking at him. “You wish me to...” She looked at the bread. “You know, I’m in danger right now, and I don’t truly have time for this.”

“Well, how long will it really take you?” said Dunrose. “If I weren’t so very drunk, it wouldn’t take me long. I don’t seem to remember it being so very complicated, anyway, but I am having such trouble.” He he proffered the knife again, handle first.

She took it. “This is ridiculous, Your Grace. I have been abducted by one of the Lords of the Crossroads and taken here against my will, and I am in no position to slice bread!” But she was doing it. She cut two slices for good measure and began slathering them with butter, using the bread knife, which... she then realized would likely render it too buttery to be used on the bread for cutting.

It was honestly hard to cut bread than she had thought. Both of her slices were far thicker at the top than they were at the bottom. How did people manage this?

Dunrose took one of the slices of bread and stuffed the whole thing in his mouth, muttering noises that might have been grateful, but she couldn’t understand him, because his mouth was full.

She backed away, hands on her hips, shaking her head. What was she even doing? There was the door. Perhaps she might just go on her own. “Did you come here on horseback or by carriage?”

Dunrose swallowed. “Horseback.” He hiccuped. “Ah, nothing like some bread after too much ale, I must say. I thank you... pardon, what did you say your name was?”

“I don’t suppose you have a side saddle,” she muttered.

“No, I don’t ride side saddle,” said Dunrose, laughing as if she’d said something positively ludicrous.

“We’re not that far from London,” she said. “I might be able to walk it.” She shook herself. Yes, that was exactly the right thing to do. She nodded. “Come on, Dash.”

The dog was still eating bread crumbs.

Dunrose chuckled at Dash. He bent down and offered his buttery fingers to the dog, who licked them happily.

“Oh, stop that,” said Patience. “Dash, come with me now.”

“Are you going somewhere?” said Dunrose.

“Yes,” she said, snapping at Dash, who reluctantly left behind the crumbs to trot over to her. She went to the door and opened it. The flush of the warm summer night hit her face. She stepped outside.

“Everyone keeps walking out on me!” came Dunrose’s voice from within. “Is it something I’ve said? Perhaps I have something stuck in my teeth.” He came to the door. “You’d tell me if I had something stuck in my teeth, would you not?”

“You don’t have anything stuck in your teeth,” she said. She started to walk away, and Dash came along with her.

“Where are you going?” said Dunrose.

“Back to London,” she said.

“Well, that’s that way,” said Dunrose.

She turned and looked to see which way he was pointing. Oh, dash it all, why was she so terrible at keeping direction in her head?

“You’re welcome,” said Dunrose, shutting the door.

She squared her shoulders. Should she even trust him? Well, she might as well try it. She started off into the night, Dash trailing along behind her.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE RANSOM NOTE was off by the time Nothshire thought to bring the viscountess some food. He busied himself putting together a simple repast of meat and cheese and bread in the kitchen and then delivered it to the room.

The empty room.

Dolt, he thought. How have you survived this long when you are so obviously a dolt?

But that wasn't his own thought, really, was it? There was someone else who used to call him names like that. He left the plate of food upstairs and came down to look around.

He found Bess, who was in the front room, and she had no notion that a viscountess had been in her house. She wasn't the least bit pleased, either. "We had a deal that you would never leave loot here, and that extends to women you kidnap," she said.

They brought things there, but they divvied it up and took it away immediately, that was the bargain they'd struck with her.

He searched the whole place, top to bottom, and finally found Dunrose passed out in the privy in the back of the place, his trousers around his ankles. He wouldn't have looked inside except the door was open.

"Oh, yes, girl with a dog," said Dunrose. "She recognized me."

“You let her go,” said Nothshire, sighing.

“Was I not supposed to do that, because you didn’t tell me that,” said Dunrose.

“Where did she go?”

“Well, back to London, I think, but she did try to walk off in the general direction of Oxford,” said Dunrose. “I told her to go that way.” He gestured, as he got up and hauled up his trousers. He worked at the falls of them. “So, anyway, who was she? Why was she here?”

Nothshire walked away from him.

“Stop doing that,” said Dunrose. “Everyone keeps walking off in the middle of conversations this evening.”

HOW FAR COULD a disgruntled noblewoman with a small, yappy dog get on foot?

Apparently, far.

There was, of course, the problem that he had no idea which direction she’d really walked. Maybe she’d started off going for London, but then she’d gotten turned around and had been wandering around in ever-widening circles for hours on end.

Because that was how long Nothshire had been looking for her. Hours.

At this point, Arthford, who was searching as well, had come back to tell him that the boy who delivered the ransom note had roused Balley from sleep, and that Balley was on his way to the specified rendezvous point with the ransom in tow.

“Let’s just tell him that she’s in some other location,” said Arthford. “And that, after

we take the money, we'll tell him where to find her. Then, he'll go there, and she won't be there, and... what will he do about that? He doesn't even know who we are. By that time, she'll have somehow wandered into someone who will get her back to her husband—”

“At which point, she knows our identities,” said Nothshire. “Or at least Dunrose's, because he said she knew him. And how hard will it be to put it all together at that point?”

Arthford sighed. “Well, it's no different than what you said before, though, is it?”

Nothshire thought about it. Maybe not. “It's harder to deny when she had a conversation with Dunrose, is all I'm saying.”

“We'll just pin it on Dunrose,” said Arthford. “We'll send him to the rendezvous, and he can—”

“Fuck it up,” thundered Nothshire.

Arthford considered. “Well, yes, in all likelihood, yes.”

It was quiet for a very, very long time.

Nothshire inspected the lapel of his jacket. He had shed his cloak and domino mask some time ago, and he was now simply wearing the fully black suit he usually wore to hold up carriages. “I could just kill him.”

“Dunrose?”

“Balley,” said Nothshire.

Arthford's eyes widened. "Well... that's unlike you. You have your code and all of that."

"He probably meets the criteria," said Nothshire. "Attend to me, if we kill him, we take all the ransom, he never comes after us, and she's free, which I wanted for her, anyway. So, I think it's the best option, don't you?"

"You won't go through with it," said Arthford. "I have been next to you when you wouldn't go through with it, in the past, and I'm not stabbing anyone else for you."

"Right, that didn't work out, anyway, did it? He didn't die."

"Luckily, no one knew who we were that time," said Arthford.

"Rutchester would do it," said Nothshire.

"Possibly," said Arthford. "Any idea where he is?"

"None," said Nothshire. He sighed again. "Where's Dunrose?"

"RUTCHESTER?" SAID DUNROSE . "I told you he wasn't here."

"Yes," said Nothshire. They were back inside Bess's now, and they were back in their little room with the empty fireplace. "But do you know where he is?"

"I think he's at home," said Dunrose.

"Right," said Nothshire, thinking that through.

"I'll get him," said Arthford. "Unless you want to. I'll just ride back and get him. He'll come along easily, I think."

“Yes, but tell him that it should be a gun, don’t you think? If he’s going to want to... with a sword...”

“If we want Rutchester to do it, I think we have to let him do it,” said Arthford. “However he wishes. You can’t dictate what Rutchester does.”

Nothshire sighed again. “Yes, yes, yes. All right. You go and get him. I’ll go to the rendezvous point with Balley, and I’ll... stall.”

“Excellent plan,” said Arthford. “I’m off, then.” He gathered up his jacket and started across the room.

“Well, what shall I do?” said Dunrose.

“Nothing,” said Nothshire. “You will sit here and sleep it off.”

“I already did that in the privy,” said Dunrose. “Can’t I come with you, Benedict. Please? I don’t want to stay here alone.”

Nothshire looked to Arthford, but he was already gone. He grimaced. He turned back to Dunrose. “What are the odds that you’ll just agree with me and not pester me mercilessly until you get your way?”

“Slim to none,” said Dunrose cheerfully.

“Let’s go,” said Nothshire.

They set off. It wasn’t a long ride back to London, likely twenty minutes at this hour, because one should encounter little traffic on the streets. So, twenty minutes for Arthford to get there, and then he’d need to wake Rutchester and Rutchester would need to get ready... perhaps another ten minutes. Then twenty minutes back. So,

nearly an hour, then.

And the rendezvous was set for... three quarters of an hour from now. It would work.
He swallowed, trying to convince himself it would work.

CHAPTER FIVE

BALLEY GOT OUT of his carriage, sneering across the clearing in the woods at Nothshire. Nothshire was wearing his mask—no reason in proclaiming his identity in case this all went badly, after all. He kept a far distance from the other man.

The sky was growing lighter, but the sun had not deigned to make an appearance yet. Dawn, however, was not far off.

“Who do you think you are?” said Balley. “How dare you kidnap my wife? And where is she, anyway?”

“All in good time,” said Nothshire in his put-on Cockney accent. Belatedly, he remembered they were supposed to be French now. Well, time for that next time, he supposed.

“Yes,” echoed Dunrose, also masked, his Cockney accent frankly better than Nothshire’s. “All in good time!”

Nothshire glared at him. Don’t fuck this up, he thought at the other man. He turned back to Balley. “We shall release the location of your wife after we are assured that you have brought what we asked for.”

“No,” said Balley. “That’s not what was stated in the letter, and that’s not what I agreed to.”

“If you want her back—”

“I have only your word you even have her,” said Balley. “She left in a carriage and neither the carriage nor my driver nor her maid have reappeared, so for all I know, she’s halfway north by now, and you’ve concocted this scheme just to take money from me. Produce my wife, or I go back home.”

Nothshire considered this. Stall, that was the goal here. He turned to Dunrose. “All right, then, go and get her.”

Dunrose gave him a confused look.

Nothshire gestured meaningfully with his head. He stepped closer, meaning to speak in a low enough voice that Balley wouldn’t hear.

“None of that!” said Balley. “You two say everything out loud where I can hear it. I’m coming closer, in fact.”

Nothshire sighed heavily.

Dunrose shrugged. He mouthed an apology.

Nothshire shook his head. It wasn’t Dunrose’s fault. It would have worked nicely, of course, if Dunrose could have understood to pretend to go and fetch the viscountess and then they could have waited, because surely, at any moment, Rutchester and Arthford would arrive. But that wasn’t going to work, so he must come up with another strategy.

“Why wouldn’t your driver come back after he lost your wife?” called Nothshire.

“I have no notion,” said Balley, stalking towards them across the clearing as the sky lightened behind him.

“You know he said to me that you would murder him if you found out that I’d kidnapped her,” said Nothshire. “Is that the way of it, then?”

Balley stopped walking. He folded his arms over his chest. “One can’t rightly murder a servant, can one? Servants are put on earth for the purpose of serving their betters. If they fail in that service, it’s the right of their masters to correct them.”

“Yes, certainly,” said Nothshire. “So that they can behave in the proper way in the future.”

“Just so,” said Balley.

“Which is impossible to do if one is dead,” said Nothshire. “Have you killed other servants?”

Balley glared at him.

“Your wife had a bruise on her face,” said Nothshire.

“It’s a husband’s right to correct his wife,” said Balley.

“Yes, and what did she do wrong?” said Nothshire, raising his eyebrows.

Balley gave him a withering look. “What is this about? You kidnapped her, or so you say, anyway, so what do you care about whether she was bruised or not?”

“Don’t remember?” said Nothshire. “You hit her a lot, I suppose? How’s it working? Is all that correction making you hit her less? Because it seems to me, if that’s the purpose of punishment, it should. Or else, I suppose, you’re not doing the punishing correctly.”

Balley's nostrils flared. "This is none of your concern, you blackguard thief. You dare to lecture me on the ins and outs of morality? You?"

"Maybe you're not hitting her because she did anything wrong but simply because you like the way it makes you feel. Maybe it makes you feel powerful."

"How does it make you feel when you make men cower in their carriages and empty their purses?" countered Balley.

All right, all right. That was hitting a bit below the belt.

"Admit it," said Nothshire. "Admit that you 'correct' her more often than necessary. Admit that you 'correct' all of them for no good reason. Admit you're a tyrant and your driver is terrified of you."

"I shall admit no such thing," said Balley. Now, he was approaching again.

Well, if you would, I think I could shoot you myself, Nothshire thought. It was a weakness, these rules he made for himself. The rules took on a life of their own, and he was helpless to fight against them. If he could be certain that Balley was a wretch, through and through, it would be one thing. But this, now, without the admission of guilt, without any real evidence, only conjecture...

Damnation.

Balley kept coming closer.

Nothshire tried to convince himself to get his gun. It was loaded. He'd come prepared. He'd only get one shot, but Balley was coming right for him, so it'd be easy enough. Pull out the gun, take aim, done.

Do it, he urged himself.

Balley came closer.

Closer.

Nothshire did not do it.

Now Balley was practically on top of them. He stopped, looking from Nothshire to Dunrose. “Oh, God. It’s you. The both of you. I should have realized. Why, are we all absolute dunces in London society not to have seen it? The two of you, you’re both so... broken. If anyone would lose his mind and start robbing people, of course it would be—”

He broke off to the sound of approaching hoofbeats. He furrowed his brow and turned.

Rutchester and Arthford, neither masked nor attempting to hide their identity, galloped into the clearing.

“Oh, all four of you,” muttered Balley. “Of course.”

Rutchester climbed off his horse. He ran a hand through his long dark hair, which he grew out in defiance of all fashionable conventions of the time. He smiled at Balley. It wasn’t a nice smile.

Balley cleared his throat. “Rutchester. You, um, you and I have no quarrel, you know.”

Rutchester yanked a sword out of the scabbard that hung from his waist. The sound was a ringing noise that seemed to scream its way across the pre-dawn light of the

early morning.

Balley turned to Nothshire. “This is ridiculous. Take the stupid money, all right? I don’t even care where she is. I imagine you’ll send her back to me at some point.”

Nothshire lifted his chin and shrugged at him. “This was the best way, I’m afraid, Balley.”

Rutchester advanced, swinging the blade ahead of him, his smile going nearly demented. “You can run if you want, Balley. I like chasing.”

Balley reached down, but he didn’t have a sword, just a knife. He pulled that out, brandished it, holding his ground. “I’m not a coward,” he snapped.

“Everyone’s a coward in the end,” said Rutchester. And then he sprang on Balley.

NOTHSHIRE WIPED BLOOD spatters off his face with his handkerchief. He surveyed the red smears on it, folded it, and then went back at it, because he could still feel the hot wetness on his forehead and cheeks. It had gotten all over his mask, as well, which was ruined now. That was all right, though. He had other masks.

Rutchester had blood in his hair, blood on his hand, blood all over his shirt. He had dressed hastily and wasn’t wearing a cravat or waistcoat. His shirt was pasted to his chest with blood.

“They won’t be able to identify him when they find the body,” said Arthford, surveying what was left of Balley.

“Who’s dealing with the driver?” said Rutchester, turning to look over his shoulder at Balley’s carriage.

“Oh, hell and damnation, the driver,” muttered Nothshire, stepping around the mess of gore that had once been Balley to go off in the direction of the carriage. The driver was not sitting on the bench on the carriage anymore. The reins were lying askew and the horses were standing at attention, too well trained to have bolted, even during this.

“He fled,” said Dunrose helpfully.

“Yes, obviously he did,” said Nothshire, sighing. Just what he wanted for the rest of this hellish morning, hunting through the woods looking for someone else besides the damned viscountess.

Rutchester fell into step with Nothshire. “You want me to do him too?”

“No,” said Nothshire. “No, we don’t need to kill everyone, Rutchester.”

Rutchester wiped a hand over his mouth, smearing redness everywhere. “Well, if you want to scare him, I can help with that, at least.”

Nothshire picked up the pace.

As he cleared the carriage, he realized the driver was there, pasted against the other side of it, trembling. He looked young, maybe fifteen or sixteen. Not the usual driver, then, for that one had gone with Balley’s wife. This must be some stable hand, a boy who could drive the carriage until the usual driver returned.

The driver flung up both of his hands, covering his face. He was crying.

Damnation.

“That was easy enough,” said Rutchester, stalking toward the boy.

Nothshire's arm shot out and seized Rutchester by the back of the jacket. He yanked the other man back.

Rutchester raised his stained eyebrows. "What?"

"Boy," said Nothshire. "What's your name?"

"Oh, don't do that," said Rutchester. "You don't get their names. It even bothers me more when I know their names."

Nothshire ignored Rutchester, advancing on the boy. "You aren't Balley's usual driver."

"No, sir," said the boy in a very high-pitched voice. "No, I never drive the carriage. Usually, with Roger out of town—he took the mistress, you see, after dinner hour—it'd be George, but he lives in his own house on the other side of town with his wife, and George would've had to be fetched by someone, and the master said it'd be me, since I sleep in the house, you see, and it wasn't that far of a distance. I was afeared of it. I ain't used to driving the carriage, not at all, but you don't cross the master if you know what's good for you, you see, so I did as he said and I..." The boy sniffled. "Likely talking too much, ain't I? Always getting that. Mrs. Greer, she's the housekeeper, she says I talk a lot when I happen to be in trouble and I know it to be true. I'll shut my mouth, then, will I?"

Nothshire sighed. He considered the situation, glancing back at Rutchester and then at the boy and then at the carriage. "Can you drive it back? Alone?"

"I, er, I don't know," said the boy. Then, standing up straight, "I mean, yes, sir, if you let me go, yes, sir, of course I can."

"Your master was set upon by bandits," said Nothshire. "You witnessed that sure

enough, did you not?"

"You're a b-bandit, sir?"

Nothshire nodded. "I am." He nodded at Rutchester. "But this one, he's something else, you see that? He's not a man, he's a living demon."

"Oh, yes, sir," said the boy, his voice cracking, more tears spilling out of his cheeks.

"Oh, I do see that."

"He can find you," said Nothshire. "I'm not saying that you know any of us here by name. You're a stable boy. You may not pay attention to the comings and goings of anyone in town, so we may be strangers to you—"

"Oh, you are, sir," said the boy. "I never seen any of you before in all my life. It ain't been light enough to make much out, anyway."

"That may be true," said Nothshire. "For your sake, I hope it is. If you ever say anything otherwise, or indicate that you had any notion of our identities, any notion at all, this one will find you and he will do to you what he did to your master. You believe that?"

The boy's face crumpled.

"Good, then," said Nothshire. "Take the carriage and go."

"Wait," said Rutchester.

"Hmm?" said Nothshire.

"The ransom is in the carriage," said Rutchester.

“Oh, yes, obviously,” said Nothshire. “Let me take that, then.” He pushed past the boy to open the carriage door. Two trunks were sitting inside, and he heaved one out and then the other, while Rutchester stood there and made garish faces at the crying stable hand. “Stand there and do nothing to help me, of course,” he muttered at Rutchester.

“ Nothing to help you?” said Rutchester. “I was just roused from my bed to do violence for you, wasn’t I?”

Nothshire smiled at him grimly.

“You wouldn’t last long without me,” said Rutchester with a careless shrug. “Do you think Simon has his pipe on him? I could do with a smoke.” He smiled widely, and it was horrifying.

“Not our names, for God’s sake,” said Nothshire to Rutchester. He turned to the boy. “Off with you, then, if you know what’s good for you.”

The boy scrambled back up to take the reins. He rode off like he was being chased by the devil himself.

CHAPTER SIX

PATIENCE WALKED IN the direction that Dunrose had pointed out to her until she got to the road. She thought, at first, this was a good thing, but she immediately became confused about which way she should walk along the road.

She tried to remember which way the carriage had been facing when it had been stopped by the awful highwayman, but the more she thought about it, the more confused she became. It seemed to her that she could rewrite it in any direction, going this way or that.

She spoke to Dash about it in a low voice, trying to puzzle it out, but eventually, the dog just walked off down the road.

Well, she'd walk until she found something, a house or another carriage or something, and then she'd get help. Decided, she set off after Dash.

It seemed that she had walked in the opposite direction of London.

But, happily, she found her carriage.

It was pulled off on the side of the road, and the horses had been detached and tied to trees, where they were lazily grazing. The driver Roger and Isabella were huddled around a small fire, looking forlorn.

They were overjoyed to see her.

Roger explained that they hadn't known what to do. "You must forgive us, my lady. I know we should have gone directly back to your husband and told him what had occurred, but..."

"No, you knew he would kill you," she said.

"Yes, but our lives should be forfeit in service of your safety—"

"No, I don't know if I agree with that," she said, shaking her head. "No, it's a fine man indeed who marches to his death for the sake of another, I suppose, but to impose that duty on another? Who can truly expect that of someone else, especially not for the sake of the salary you are given for your service to my husband. I don't blame you." Of course, she was shaken and tired and had been through an awful fright, so perhaps she was only saying this out of gratitude to have found them.

Then, they had a long debate about what was to be done.

They could simply continue on, for the country, as if nothing had happened. After all, she had not been harmed, and nothing had been taken from them, and there was truly no reason to even tell the viscount that anything had occurred.

But they all worried that it would somehow come out and that they would be badly punished for the deception.

Then Isabella pointed out that it was already possible that Patience carried her husband's child. "However, if he were to ever discover what had happened tonight, he would have grounds to question the child's paternity, and then he might do wretched, wretched things."

This seized Patience with a kind of awful terror, for she knew Isabella was right. Her husband was the sort of man to drown a child if he thought it wasn't his or even to

strangle her if she was heavy with child to do away with both problems. She knew this with a cold certainty borne of her dealings with him thus far. She could never let him know what happened.

On the other hand, Roger said in a low and dull voice, they didn't know what the highwaymen had done. They might have already issued a demand for ransom, and if so, all their discussion was for naught.

"It's too risky to conceal it," said Patience. "If he discovers it later, he will think there is a reason for subterfuge, and I cannot chance the life of my unborn child. We shall go back to town, yes, but not to my husband's house. We shall go, instead, to my brother's house." Her brother had sold her off to this man, true, but her brother would not stand for murder. She would say that her bleeding was already late, that she had not been trifled with, and her brother would demand a promise of her safety or she would not go back under Balley's roof.

Roger and Isabella agreed with this course of action and they extinguished the fire and get the horses attached to the carriage.

Patience was not at all sure it would work.

They drove back to London as the sun began to struggle into the sky. She made it to her brother's house, but her brother wasn't there, having apparently stayed out all night drinking and carousing or the like. She said she would wait until his return and Isabella stayed with her.

Roger left to go and see what he could discover at the Balley town house. He was back rather quickly with horrifying news.

He outlined that a ransom request had come to the viscount, who had taken a stable boy and a carriage out to meet the blackguards, but the stable boy had watched as the

viscount was set upon by bandits who cut him to pieces. His body was, even now, somewhere in the woods outside London. They were seeking out his remains now, or—if he had survived—perhaps he could be rescued. Of course, the stable boy was adamant that Balley was dead, that it was impossible he had survived.

Patience had a somewhat horrible reaction to this news.

She started laughing. The laughter burst out of her in relief and, frankly, joy. She had not realized until now, but her dearest wish in the world had just been granted.

Balley dead!

It was like an answer to all her prayers.

But she couldn't laugh, so she buried her head in her hands and made as if she was sobbing.

Thankfully, Isabella took over, then, saying that her mistress had suffered an awful shock after a night of sheer terror and that the viscountess must be bundled off to her own bed at once.

Once there, they were greeted by the news that Balley had been found. His body was borne back but she was assured that she must not look upon him, that he must not be laid out in the parlor, nothing of that sort.

Patience went to bed, as advised, and she slept the most peaceful sleep she'd slept in some time, since perhaps before her father had died.

When she awoke, the atmosphere in the town house was nearly celebratory. All the servants seemed cheerful, seeing to their duties with a skip in their step. The cook was preparing some kind of ridiculously elaborate dinner, which was foolish, for she

was the only one to eat it, and Patience giddily decreed that they should set aside all ceremony and the servants must join her in the dining room where they would all serve themselves, like a breakfast, with food set out on a sideboard.

This would never have been permitted, but the air seemed charged like a feast day, a day when all things wrong had been righted, and they all ate together that night, laughing and drinking until far too late.

Patience ordered them all to leave the mess for the morning and sent everyone to bed.

The next morning, Balley's nephew arrived.

Well, he was the new Viscount of Balley, in fact, so he would hitherto be known by his intimates as Balley. She must think of Balley by his first name now, she supposed. Reginald. It didn't seem to suit him, she thought. It was too fine a name for the man.

The nephew, the new viscount, was appalled at the state of the house, for everyone had slept late, and he spent the morning bellowing at the servants who scurried about, cowed again, and Patience felt a dull anger.

But there was nothing for it.

She was not to stay in this house, after all.

There was a dowager house, but it was not in town. It was attached to Balley's holdings in the north, another estate even than the one she'd been traveling to. It was bordering Scotland, in fact, all the way at the top of the world.

No, if Patience wanted a house in town, she would have to purchase one herself, and that would depend upon the state of her dowry and upon any provisions made by Balley for her in his will. She doubted he'd set anything up in regards to that, though,

for he hadn't been expecting to widow her so quickly.

She was permitted to stay in town through the funeral, and during that time, the will would be read. If she was with child, things might change, of course. The nephew was the new Balley, but if she had a boy child, he would be the new Balley, and that would set everything on its ear. She wasn't sure what to wish for. If she had the heir, she would be able to send the nephew packing and to move back into Balley's holdings. But she would still have to deal with Balley's nephew, for he would be in charge of the estate and the money and the lands until her son was old enough to take over. It would be an uneasy alliance, she thought. She didn't much care for Balley's nephew.

And then, the morning of the funeral, her bleeding came.

And that was that.

Two weeks hence, in her widows weeds, she boarded a carriage again with Isabella, bound for her dowager house far away. She had been right that no provision had been left for her in Balley's will, that he had bequeathed her none of his largess beyond the requirements like the dowager house and its staff and grounds. But her dowry, it turned out, was intact, and it was enough to keep her comfortably for likely the rest of her life if she didn't spend extravagantly. She could even buy a house in town if she wished. Not a large one, and not in the most fashionable part, and not with a wide retinue of servants, but she could.

She likely would, but there was no reason to do it now.

It was late summer now, and everyone was leaving London, anyway. Furthermore, she was in mourning. Full mourning for six months, which meant no social engagements, and then half-mourning for another six months, which meant she could go out and about, but she would need to be dressed in greys and must not dance at a

ball or anything like that.

Passing her mourning in the country seemed the easiest course of action, truly. She left the stifling dullness of the city behind and traveled off into the fresher air of the north. Dash traveled with her, hanging his little doggy head out of the carriage window sometimes, happy and excited, wagging his tail and looking up at her from time to time.

Dash would like the country, she thought.

The dowager house turned out to be drafty and old and in need of repair. But the staff was cheerful and willing to work hard for her comfort. She had a small staff, comprised of only four servants in addition to Isabella, and the housekeeper (truly more of a maid of all work) was Mrs. Higgins, though she told Patience that she could call her by her first name, Charlotte. She was quite young for a housekeeper, only a few years older than Patience herself. Charlotte had been widowed as well—her husband had died off in the wars on the continent. She had a shrewdness to her, something that Isabella respected.

And it turned out that Dash did indeed love the country. He made doggy friends with hunting dogs at the larger Balley estate (to which her dowager house was connected) and he spent his time running and gamboling through the fields, having the time of his little life.

As the long fall and winter months rolled on, she and Charlotte spoke often about all manner of things. They spoke of men and of love and of heartbreak and disappointment. They spoke of their own various predicaments in life, how it seemed to both of them that somehow, they had been thrown away, left to widowhood too young, but now—in the eyes of many—used up and somewhat worthless.

By the time that spring breathed warmth back into the world, Patience quite

considered Charlotte a friend.

So, when Isabella came to Patience sometime in April, sobbing so much that she went through three handkerchiefs, with a story about how she had accidentally fallen in with a tenant farmer attached to the lands of the nearby Balley estate (to which the dowager house was part of) and that she had accidentally found herself carrying the man's child, Patience felt a bit pleased to be shut of the girl, in all truth.

It was no worry. The farmer was eager enough to marry Isabella. He had a small child already. His previous wife and baby had been taken off in a fever, and he had already begged Isabella to be his wife more than once. "But," Isabella sobbed, "I knew I could not leave you alone, my lady, for I am all you have, the only person who came all the way here with you from London, and I told him no ever so strenuously."

Yes, told him no to marriage but not to lying on her back for the man, but Patience didn't quibble. She assured Isabella she would manage fine without her. "After all, I have become rather adept at dressing myself when you are wanted elsewhere in the house, have I not?" Or when Isabella was having trysts with the farmer, Patience now surmised, for her maid had often been absent without a reason, not that Patience had decided to make an issue of it. She was managing fine, after all.

"But what will you do when you go back to London, my lady?" Patience wailed.

Hmm. What would she do?

She could already be back in London, even now. The Season was in full flush, and most of the ton had already returned. She could have secured her small house in town and taken callers and attended balls. She could even have sought another husband, if she wished.

"Maybe I shan't go back to London," she said with a shrug.

“But, my lady, I shall never forgive myself if I put my happiness above your own,” said Isabella.

“No, no,” said Patience. “You must do the best you can now for your babe. Your responsibility is as a mother now.”

That night, Patience cried.

She had not cried when her bleeding had come that morning of the funeral, but she began to think back on all of it, and she began to realize that may have been her only chance for a child of her own.

She wasn’t sure how she felt about that.

Patience was not old. She was a bit getting on if she had been never married. She was only twenty, though, and she had quite a bit of time to have a child if she wished. Was that what she wished?

Well, but the issue was, however, to have a child, she would have to get married again.

And that seemed dreadful.

She’d lose this lovely dowager house, for it belonged to the Balley holdings. She would lose Charlotte, who was attached to the house. And she would have to surrender, yet again, her dowry to the safekeeping of some man. It wasn’t that she thought all men were badly motivated to take women’s money, of course, but if she got married and a man spent all her dowry, she would have no recourse whatsoever.

She was safe now.

She had everything she would need, all on her own. She didn't want to take the risk of marrying some other man who might turn out to be like the late viscount, or who might be even worse. For as bad as Balley had been, she didn't deceive herself to think that she could not end up in a situation that held even more misery.

She spoke to Charlotte about it, who agreed with her.

"There are a number of honorable men in the world, and I know there are," said Charlotte. "But the problem is that the men who are dishonorable pretend to be honorable. How is one to be sure what sort of man one is marrying before making the commitment? It's one thing in my class, my lady, for we are freer to move about and find information, but women of your class are often kept ignorant of such things. There is a prevalent idea that women like you cannot understand complicated things, and they keep you ignorant."

"Yes," said Patience. "Yes, exactly."

"But I think of it, too," said Charlotte, wistful, looking off, her gaze going soft. "Of having my own babe, holding it in my arms, the feel of it, the smell of a sweet little darling. You know the way babies smell, don't you?" She turned back to Patience with a little smile.

Patience nodded. "I do."

"But it seems unlikely," said Charlotte. "I live here, and I run this household, and I don't think I shall ever meet the sort of man who I could marry. I try not to think of it, in fact."

"What about orphans?" said Patience in a small voice.

"What?" said Charlotte.

“Well, there are these houses in town,” said Patience. “I know of them. They are open to women who end up in bad situations, with babes sown inside them that they cannot care for. The women come there and give birth and then they seek better homes and better lives for the children. Those children need a loving home, and you and I should like a baby, and... well, perhaps that’s our solution.”

“ Our solution?”

“You will come with me to London,” said Patience. “As it happens, I need a new maid. But then, we shall raise the children together.”

Charlotte gave her one of her shrewd looks. “Those would be your children, my lady, if you adopt orphans.”

Patience nodded, looking down into her lap. “You’re right. I can see how it wouldn’t appeal to you.”

“No, I didn’t say that,” said Charlotte, sighing. “No, that might suit me rather well, in fact, my lady. A child that is yours, but that I am allowed to cuddle from time to time? One who calls you ‘Mama’ but who might sit down with me and tell me some story about how he plays with his toy soldiers? That might be just as much child as I should even like. This way, I might keep my freedom.”

“This way, we might both keep our freedom,” said Patience, nodding.

Charlotte smiled. She threw back her head and looked at the ceiling. “London! Me. In London .”

Both of the women started laughing.

“When should we go?” said Patience.

“Well, whenever it suits you, my lady,” said Charlotte, still laughing.

“Soon,” said Patience.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PATIENCE HAD BADLY underestimated how badly the people in orphan houses wanted to find homes for the unwanted children.

She had been to visit three since arriving in London. It was May now, and the Season was already winding down, and she was still in half-mourning, so it wasn't as if she was in need of some social whirlwind, but she was just as alone here as she had been in the north. The house here was unknown, and she'd had to hire new staff, and Charlotte seemed to be settling in a bit less well than either had hoped. She complained of the constant noise and crush of the city. People out in carriages at all hours! And the grime. It's everywhere.

But all of this could have been fine, for Patience could have adopted a babe and then made plans to simply go back home.

However, it seemed that a widow of her age wanting to adopt a child seemed to strike everyone as somewhat horrific.

They all chided her, saying she must simply get married again, that there was no reason she could not have a child of her own. They said that she needed a husband to care for the child, though when she put serious arguments as to what, exactly, it was that this husband was meant to do for the child, they could find nothing to say.

Sometimes, they blustered about how he must provide for the child, but when she pointed out her adequate financial situation, they all seemed to fall silent.

They would come out with something about how the child must have a proper father figure to observe in the household, and nothing she could say seemed to make them waver from this idea.

In the end, they would all say something like, “This is just highly irregular.”

At the fourth place, when the woman she was speaking to, a matronly type with gray streaks in her hair, started in on all of it, Patience decided to jump right past it.

“I’m aware, yes, that this is highly irregular. I might consider marriage again, I suppose, but the truth is, my last husband hit me. And I suppose it’s irregular that my first emotion, when I heard of his untimely demise, was relief, but that is the bald truth. I can’t subject myself to the risk of it again. Before I married him, I certainly had no inkling he would hurt me, and I don’t see how, if I entered into a marriage again, I could be better informed. But I am young and I wish... these children need a mother, do they not?”

The woman stopped. She was silent for a time. Then she lowered her voice. “Come back in ten years, Lady Balley. In ten years, I think the resistance will be much lower.”

“Ten years,” whispered Patience, horrified by this.

“My dear,” said the woman, “when I was your age, I had the notion that perhaps I could write an opera, one that might be performed in one of the bigger opera houses. I eschewed all offers of marriage, spending all my time writing music and playing on the piano. And then one day, he walked into the sitting room at my parents’ house, and everything was different.”

“Who did?”

“Why, my husband,” she said with a laugh. “He wasn’t yet my husband, of course. He was just a man, and when I saw him—no, when I heard him speak...” She shrugged. “You’re too young to commit yourself to a life alone, that’s all I’m saying. You never know what the world has in store for you.”

“But... what? You stopped writing operas?”

“Well, yes. It was a silly dream, a dream of my youth. I realized that what I wanted from all that, from being a celebrated composer of operas, was actually love. I wanted to be loved by many, but that is a foolish dream, not a dream that is really a true dream of a woman. I had confused my desire to be loved by a man with it, that is all. You will find someone else, someone you can trust.”

“I don’t wish to commit myself to a life alone,” muttered Patience. “That is precisely why I am looking for a child.”

“You don’t want a child, you want a husband,” said the woman.

“I assure you, I do not,” said Patience.

“Well, in ten years, it won’t seem like a waste is all. I did have a friend, one who ran off with a band of traveling gypsies and went all over, even into the Ottoman Empire and to Greece with them. That was because she wished to be an opera singer, you see. I was going to write the operas and she was going to star in them. She never did marry, but she died of the French disease in some brothel. Don’t throw yourself away on a foolish dream of your youth, my dear.”

Patience did not see how wanting to adopt an orphan was anything like going off with a band of travelers to Greece.

But she could see she was getting nowhere, and so she left.

That night, she cried again.

Charlotte stood behind her, combing her hair, the sensation of the comb against Patience's skull soothing her sobs away.

"There are other considerations," Charlotte said quietly. "Things that have occurred to me that I have not wished to mention for I did not wish to make things more difficult for you. But there is the fact that you would have little to give this child for its future, have you thought of that?"

Patience sighed. "I suppose."

"My lady, you have no means to earn an income of any kind. You have enough to live on and to take care of yourself and a child, but what do you have to establish that child into its adult life? You cannot give a girl a dowry, for instance, and who would she marry? No man would marry some girl who is adopted by a widow. You would raise her coddled and cosseted, and then she would have to go into service or something."

"Perhaps she could be a governess," Patience said quietly.

"Perhaps," said Charlotte.

"I could adopt a boy," said Patience. "And then he could have a profession."

"Yes, that might be better. You could pay for his schooling, and he could be a solicitor or a surgeon or something. But he, too, would face a feeling of having been brought up in your world, with a viscountess mother, who would then never ascend to those heights."

Patience shuddered. "So, it is some selfish idea I have, some idea that would not do

anything but sow misery.”

“I haven’t said that,” said Charlotte. “Ask a motherless and fatherless child whether he’d like to grow up in a workhouse or with us, and... well, no question, I think. But if you do decide to wait and think it over and, well, see if there might be someone else who you do wish to marry—”

“I don’t want to get married,” said Patience.

“It’s only that I might,” said Charlotte. “I feel as if you are counting on me here, to choose this life with you, but if I should fall in love—”

“No, of course, there is no question of that. If you wished to marry, I should never stand in your way.” Patience sighed again. “Why must everything be so complicated?”

“I don’t know,” said Charlotte, “but it is.” A pause. “I told you about that invitation that came today?”

“Oh, everyone in the entire town has been invited to that ball. It will be crowded and stuffy and ridiculous,” said Patience. “I do not wish to go. I am still in half-mourning, and must be in mourning until July. There is no reason to go to a ball in mourning.”

“All right,” said Charlotte. “But you might stand with a bit of something diverting, that is all I am saying.”

CHARLOTTE BROUGHT UP the ball only six more times. In the end, Patience acquiesced to it just to put an end to the subject.

She had a new dress made, which seemed foolish, a mourning dress, but she didn’t have any mourning dresses that were suitable for evening wear, so it was necessary.

And then she resigned herself to a truly dull evening of standing on the periphery and watching people dance.

She definitely didn't think he would be there. That thought never crossed her mind.

In all truth, she never thought about that highwayman. Never.

It was odd, because she should have tried to figure out who he was. It would have made sense to attempt to divine his identity. She knew that he'd been an associate of the Duke of Dunrose, at least that seemed likely. So, if she had put her mind to it, considered it even a little, she might have discerned his identity rather easily.

Dunrose ran around in a pack of dukes. There were four of them, and they were fast friends. They spent their autumns together in the country at a house belonging to one of them. When they finished a hunting party at Dunrose's place, they all went together somewhere else. There were four Lords of the Crossroads, and four of them.

It was laughably obvious.

Of course, the Lords of the Crossroads weren't being talked of anymore. Everyone was going back through the crossroads these days. If she had heard rumors of some group of French-speaking terrorists who claimed to be taking wealth from the English gentry in the name of Napoleon, she had not made a connection to the highwayman who'd captured her that night.

He was there at the ball.

They were all there. The Duke of Dunrose, the Duke of Arthford, the Duke of Rutchester, and him—the Duke of Nothshire. They were mingling readily in the gathering, dancing here and there, standing together in a clump and laughing together at various points, laughing at each other's jests.

She watched him across the room, and he was so obviously him that she wondered at herself.

Why had she given this man no thought?

Why had she never wondered how it was that Balley fell victim to bandits trying to deliver her ransom?

Why had it never troubled her that she'd been part of an aborted kidnapping attempt?

Surely, she should have asked someone to do something about their villainy. It was the bare minimum she should have done to responsibly protect the rest of society from these men.

It was only that deep down, she had sort of suspected that they'd killed her husband.

And deep down, she was rather pathetically grateful to them for that, as shameful as that might have been.

So, in the end, it was no wonder she didn't like to think about any of that.

They weren't looking at her, so she looked at them. She stared at them from her vantage point on the other side of the room, clutching her glass of punch. She didn't even try to hide that she was staring at them.

Then, of course, he looked up, and he saw she was looking at him, and their gazes locked, and her heart began to pound in her chest and she looked away in mortification.

But now, gazing into her glass of punch, she wasn't looking at him, so she didn't know what he was even doing.

She looked back up.

He was still staring at her.

Dash it all.

She looked away again, and now the panic was rising in her chest like a live thing trying to claw its way out of her throat. She didn't know what to do, but she began to think that she must flee the ball immediately. She started to catalogue all the things she must do in order to leave. She would have to find a servant to go and fetch her carriage driver, who had left and was not bound to return for some hours yet. She didn't truly wish to trouble the servants at this house, so she began to think if it were possible that she might simply walk home. Of course it was farther than she would have liked, for she could not afford a house in the fashionable part of town, and that seemed impossible, after all.

She looked back up.

He was gone.

They were all gone.

She could not breathe.

She looked about for some surface, any handy surface, to deposit her drink upon, and eventually left it on top of a bookshelf against the wall, and then she lifted her skirts and went for the door to the ballroom.

Now, she was in a hallway, and she rushed down it, heading in the direction of the entryway.

“Lady Balley!” called a voice behind her.

She recognized it as his. She should have kept going, should have picked up speed and run for her very life, because she was beginning to realize that there was no real reason that he shouldn’t have silenced her, since she knew who he was.

But she didn’t do that. For some unknown and indiscernible reason, she stopped and turned and waited.

He approached her, his gait slow.

He was tall. Taller than Balley had been, taller than her brother. He had broad, broad shoulders and large hands. She remembered those large hands wrapped around her much smaller arm, jerking her along through the forest, and a strange sensation went through her.

It should have been fear.

It was like fear.

It was different.

Her breath caught in her throat.

He was practically on top of her now. She remembered that his whiskers had been dark points against his jawline under his mask when he’d taken her from the carriage. Now, the sharp line of his chin was clean shaven. His nose was long and straight and nearly regal. And his eyes, his eyes were huge and brown and so very expressive. Mournful eyes, she thought, which was a foolish thing to think, and certainly nothing about him had been mournful when he’d kidnapped her.

“Lady Balley,” he said.

“I don’t think we’ve been properly introduced,” she heard her own voice saying, and she sounded dismissive and vain and every ounce the proper and contained lady, though how she was managing that when she felt as if her entire being was unraveling, she did not know.

“Oh, I do,” he said. “I’m certain of it, though it was before you were married, back when you were Patience Hawthorne. It was at the, erm, the Lakely house, wasn’t it? You played lawn bowling with a kind of determined passion I’ve rarely seen since.” He was amused. He smiled at her, but his eyes were still mournful.

Stop thinking about his eyes, which aren’t mourning anything, she snapped at herself. “That must have been a very long time ago.”

“I’m Benedict Taylor,” he said. “The Duke of Nothshire. I don’t know that I was a duke back then either. I had a courtesy title, the Marquess of Millins. That might jog your memory?”

She swallowed. “Oh, yes, sir, I do remember you.”

“Yes,” he said. “Of course you do.”

A moment passed between them, full of unspoken conversation.

“You seem to have found your way back to London,” he said.

She inclined her head

“And you’re all right,” he said. “I wanted you to be all right, and it seems you are.”

What? She furrowed her brow. “You did not,” she whispered.

He gave her a little half-smile. “If there’s anything you require, you need only ask it of me, you know? There’s no reason to go around spreading bits of gossip about anything at all, and if I can do something to see to your comfort—”

“Are you bribing me, sir?” she said.

“No,” he said. “You haven’t said anything thus far, and I can only hope that remains the case.”

So, this was the way of it, then. He’d pursued her because he was worried she would tell tales about his activities as a highwayman. “I haven’t heard tell of the Lords of the Crossroads, anyway,” she said. “What is there to say?”

“Good,” he said.

Then, it was silent.

He fidgeted with his cravat, clearing his throat. “I do mean it, my lady, even if I see why you might have reason to doubt me. I do wish for your comfort and happiness, I promise you. And if there is anything I can do, I am at your disposal.”

She looked him over. What? Had he... killed her husband because he had somehow known she wished it? That couldn’t be. She had given him no reason to think that she would have been pleased with Balley’s demise.

She hadn’t allowed herself to really think about how it had happened, she supposed. It was too horrid to admit to herself, how pleased she was with her widowhood. So, whenever she thought on it, a great well of horrified shame welled up in her, and she could not bear it, so she didn’t dwell upon it.

But now, she was very quickly having a number of realizations about the way it had all happened. Her husband had been lured to his death. To hear the stable boy tell the story, he'd been attacked straightaway, with no warning. They had planned to kill him and take his money.

Had that been the plan all along? She was trying to sift through the half-remembered conversation she'd had with the highwayman in that room with the awful pictures in that brothel, and she couldn't remember it well.

They hadn't killed anyone else, so far as she knew.

She supposed it might not have been him. Could there have been some other violent band of criminals in the wood that night?

Come to think of it, why did a duke turn to thievery in the first place? What need did he have of her husband's coin or jewels? There were titled men who had lands and status but very little in the way of actual wealth. Her brother had been one, after all. But these dukes were not.

"Anything you can do for me?" she said coldly. "What if I say I'd like my ransom returned?"

His lips parted. "I wasn't aware you were in a situation where finances were a concern, but if you are, yes, I might be able to see what I can do."

"No," she said, shaking her head. "No, I'm not asking for some sort of handout. You stole from me. From him. I realize I don't even understand why."

"Keep your voice down," he said. "This is exactly the sort of thing I don't think needs to be spread about."

Oh, well, then. It was bribery. It occurred to her that she had power over this man. This man with the broad shoulders and the large, large hands was worried that she could ruin him, just by talking .

She was not the sort of person who ever had wanted that sort of power over anyone at all, but she had come to understand her place in the world as rather powerless, and it seemed foolish to throw away anything that might be advantageous. “Anything that you can do for me, indeed,” she breathed. She lifted her chin. “Let me think about it, Your Grace.”

His expression flashed something—alarm, yes, but something else. A kind of respect, something she hadn’t seen in his expression before. She had never seen anyone look at her in that way, truthfully. Men looked at each other that way, but a man to look at her—a woman, a widow—like that ...

It was startlingly gratifying.

“All right, my lady,” he said, and his voice was different now, more liquid, more expansive. “How much time do you need to think?”

“I really don’t know.”

“One night, perhaps? I could call upon you tomorrow. We could discuss this somewhere more privately.”

Oh, she could have callers now, and it would be different than before, when she had been an unmarried virgin, always needing to be chaperoned. As a widow, she could meet with a man alone.

A thrill went through her and she wondered at herself.

Anyway, she wouldn't be alone, not entirely alone. They might be alone in a room, but she had a houseful of servants, and she was not ever truly alone. He could not hurt her, at least she didn't think so.

Would he hurt her?

That feeling again—the not-fear feeling that was like fear. It was a little bit delicious, wasn't it?

“Yes, call upon me,” she said. “We shall discuss what business there is to discuss between us.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

NOTHSHIRE HADN'T THOUGHT of her in some time.

Right after it had all happened, he'd been practically obsessed with her, tracking all her movements, having his servants inquire with her servants about her mood or the things she'd said. He'd found out far too much about her, intimate things he oughtn't have known, like that her bleeding had come the day of her husband's funeral, and that she'd barely reacted to the news, even though carrying her husband's heir would have changed her standing quite a bit.

She hadn't even indicated to anyone that it was a possibility, and truly, a woman who thought she might have a future viscount in her womb would usually say something, especially when some other man vying for the viscount title was in the process of sending her packing from her home.

He'd worried about her at that point, worried he'd done irreparable damage to her.

Women like that, titled women, they were so fragile, after all. Pretty fripperies, as he'd always thought.

He'd felt like a clumsy boy who had trampled a glass figurine. He'd tried to console himself that she was truly better off without Balley, even if she was being sent off to what sounded to him like exile in some drafty, northern dowager cottage.

But the others kept poking fun at him when he spoke of her.

Arthford said that he must rent a house in the north and call upon the pretty widow and marry her himself. You have never been interested in any woman at all, and you likely never will be again. This is your one chance, Nothshire.

And the others all laughed, even Rutchester, who had once confided in Nothshire that he was a virgin.

No one made fun of Rutchester, of course. One didn't do that if one liked having his limbs attached to his body.

But then, time passed, and she was gone, and the one time he sent someone to spy on her in the north—check on her, he amended, not spy—he got a report that she seemed in good spirits and was happily ordering repairs to her dowager house.

Of course, he'd told the others that the only reason he was so concerned with her was because he worried she'd talk. He said it was about protecting them from gossip, though sometimes he wondered if they were all being particular idiots about everything.

They were dukes .

Certainly, they'd done a very dreadful thing, one that—if it came out—would be disastrous to their reputations. But in terms of true consequences, he didn't know if there really would be any.

His own father had done things, awful things, and a great many people knew of them, and there had been no recourse. The King, he supposed, could order them all hanged or something. But the King was out of his head, as everyone knew. The Regent, then, but even so, it was highly unlikely that he would intervene. He was concerned with running a whole country, which happened to be at war, on a number of various fronts, both in the continent and in the Americas, and it was simply not something that he

would care about, even if it was... dreadful, what they'd done.

Why they twisted themselves up into knots to conceal it, he wasn't even sure anymore.

But they did.

And Champeraigne, well, he was a right arsehole, through and through.

Still, sometimes, he wondered if they all wouldn't be happier if it came out. If they were free of it.

It was very important, at any rate, that they did not think she would tell anyone, because the others could be ruthless. Not Dunrose so much, true, but Rutchester, certainly, had no concern for human life of any kind, and Arthford had only a passing attachment to any kind of moral compass himself. He told himself that he couldn't allow the viscountess to be harmed because it would be wrong .

It was strange, though, wasn't it, how quickly he had begun to style himself as her protector.

"Did you find her?" said Arthford now, as Nothshire wandered back into the ballroom. "What did she say?"

"She's no worry," said Nothshire, who didn't want to get into it. Truthfully, he'd been a bit stunned when that crafty expression had come over her features. Let me think about it, she had said. It was not what he'd expect from a woman like her.

Perhaps a woman like Bess would behave in that manner, but on women like that, something about it turned his stomach, a pretty thing curdled by a hard world, he thought. She didn't seem curdled at all. She didn't seem like an empty-headed

frippery either.

He was fascinated by this woman.

“How can you be sure, though?” said Rutchester, who was eating a cucumber sandwich. He had an entire plate of them and he had been steadily eating them throughout the evening. “I don’t mind paying a visit to her and making quite sure she’s too frightened to ever speak.”

“No,” said Nothshire. “No, I have told you to leave her be, if you please, Rutchester.”

“I don’t mind killing women, if it comes to that,” said Rutchester around a cucumber sandwich. He chewed and swallowed. “I know everyone else seems to think that it’s different, but it’s not. Everyone bleeds the same, you know.”

“Oh, truly, must you always say things like that?” said Arthford, taking a cucumber sandwich off Rutchester’s plate.

“Did I say you could have that?” said Rutchester mildly.

Arthford shoved it into his mouth. “What are you going to do about it?” he said, his voice muffled as he chewed.

“That’s disgusting,” spoke up Dunrose. “Close your mouth when you chew, Arthford.”

Arthford opened his mouth to show Dunrose the contents of his mouth.

“Oh, Lord, must we all behave as if we are but twelve years old?” exploded Nothshire.

Arthford turned to show Nothshire his half-chewed mouthful.

Nothshire's nostrils flared.

Arthford closed his mouth, sanguine. He chewed and swallowed. "Really, though, we must be careful if we're going to be talking of these things here. I think we should go. How about we spend the rest of the night at Rathby's?" It was a gentlemen's club where they could retire to a smoky corner in relative privacy and talk without worry of being overheard."

"We spend every night there," said Dunrose. "Also, there are no women there."

"We could go to Bess's," said Arthford with a shrug.

"No, I have bedded all the strumpets there thrice," said Dunrose, looking about the room. "Here, there are women I have not even spoken to."

"Who you can't take to bed," said Nothshire.

"I don't mind looking at women," said Rutchester, eating another cucumber sandwich. "Let's stay. Nothshire says there's nothing to worry about, and he's the smart one."

"I'm the smart one," countered Arthford.

"You're the smart one because you read and you smoke a pipe?" said Nothshire.

"Precisely," said Arthford.

"Pipes aren't even fashionable," said Dunrose. "Smoking isn't fashionable. Which reminds me, has anyone seen my snuff tin?" He felt around in his inner jacket

pockets. “I don’t know where I—” He broke off, smiling, pulling it out. “Oh! There.” He opened it and offered it to the others.

Rutchester took some; so did Arthford. Nothshire declined. The other three snuffed up the powdered tobacco together, gazing out at the dance floor.

“I’ve a dance with someone after this song, I think,” said Dunrose. “I just can’t remember whom. They should really give men dance cards as well. It would make everything easier. I’m going to start walking about and see if anyone looks at me as if she’s expecting me.”

Arthford sighed. “I don’t have anyone to dance with. I think I’ll see if I can remedy that.”

The two men walked off, leaving Rutchester and Nothshire together.

“Eventually,” said Rutchester, “we’re each going to have to marry one of them, aren’t we?”

“Not for another ten years,” said Nothshire with a shrug.

Rutchester turned on him. “If you marry her, you could keep her quiet, I think. She’d be tied to you, so she wouldn’t wish to destroy you, and you seem to like her.”

Nothshire let out a gurgling gasp at that.

“Oh,” said Rutchester, surveying what was left of his plate of cucumber sandwiches. “I thought that would please you. I don’t really understand it, I must say. Seems barking mad, lying there with some other person, entirely naked, and trusting them.”

“I am not interested in marriage,” sputtered Nothshire.

Rutchester pointed at him, balancing the cucumber sandwich plate on his other hand. “And nothing about how women aren’t just as conniving and untrustworthy as men, if you please. That isn’t true, no matter what anyone wants to think about it. Women are just men without pricks, if you want to know what I think about it.”

“Yes, well, thank you for that sage observation, Rutchester,” muttered Nothshire.

“She didn’t say she was going to keep quiet, though, did she?” said Rutchester. “You have some other plan to keep her quiet, though, and you’re not telling everyone what it is because you think Arthford will insist we hurt her, and you don’t want to hurt her. And, really, Nothshire, the others are stupid sometimes, but you seem less stupid than that, and I...” He sighed. “Don’t be wrong, all right? Don’t let whatever it is that makes men go vaguely out of their heads when it comes to women make you make miscalculations.”

“I won’t,” said Nothshire.

“Good,” said Rutchester. “I won’t let her talk, and you know that.” He stuffed another cucumber sandwich in his mouth.

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CHAPTER NINE

PATIENCE ALMOST ASKED Charlotte what she thought she should ask the Duke of Nothshire for in return for her silence.

Almost.

But she had never told Charlotte about any of it, and she didn't think she could really rally herself enough to get into the whole story with her friend. She hoped that Charlotte would not judge her, but in all truth, the fact that she had kept quiet about it for so long warranted some kind of judgment.

They were violent men.

They were thieves.

They were terrorizing the ton.

They needed to be stopped, and Patience had kept their secret all along because she felt as if she had somehow been tacitly brought into it when they had dispatched Balley, and she didn't feel as if she could tell anyone that.

So, she just tried to puzzle it out herself.

She could ask for money, she supposed. There was always something to spend money on, and she could always have more money. But she didn't know where that money would come from. The Lords of the Crossroads seemed to have ceased to stop

carriages, but that didn't mean that any funds that Nothshire would present to her wouldn't be ill-gotten in some way. She didn't want that sort of money.

So, she dismissed that notion entirely.

What she really wanted was a child. That was why she'd come to town in the first place. Of course, her conversation with Charlotte had muddled her thinking about it all. Did she want to raise a child who would be trapped between worlds, neither one of the gentry nor one of the working classes? It did seem cruel and difficult in some way.

And furthermore, she could not imagine how it was that the duke could assist her in that way. She had a sneaking suspicion, however, that if a duke went to ask for an orphan, he'd be treated differently.

Perhaps not. He was a young man on his own and she couldn't think that there wouldn't be objections to his taking a child himself. People might do a duke's bidding, but they would think it just as highly irregular as her position.

So, she thought that through inside outside and sideways and couldn't quite see a way through on it.

She tried to think of anything else she might want, though, and she could think of nothing, really.

She stayed up half the night thinking, coming to no real conclusions. She sat up at breakfast, gazing off into space, a furrow in her brow, feeling more and more frustrated.

By the time the duke called at her small house, she was no better off.

“I need more time,” she announced to him as she poured his tea. They were sitting in her sitting room, him on the end of one couch and her on a tufted chair. The servants had been quite excited that she had a caller, a gentleman caller, and Charlotte had given her a look of shock.

She was going to have to tell Charlotte something, she supposed. She simply didn’t know what.

“Well, perhaps you could have sent me a missive to that effect before I came all this way,” he said.

“All the way from Albermarle Street,” she said, faintly mocking him. “Yes, quite a journey, I am sure.”

He smirked at her. “You’re funny,” he said. “You’re, um, you’re different than other women.”

She thought about this. Was she that different? “What do you mean?”

“I just mean, you’re so intelligent,” he said. “And you’re a bit ambitious and willing to seize on whatever advantage you have presented to you.”

“I don’t think that makes me much different than other women,” she said. “Anyway, I’m not ambitious. Truly, Your Grace, if this is the way you typically speak to women, it is no wonder you have such a low opinion of them, for they are likely always simply trying to be rid of you.”

He let out a guffaw, smiling as he looked away. “I never said I had a low opinion of women.”

“Pardon me,” she said with a shrug. “I mean no offense. How do you take your tea?”

Two sugars?"

"Just milk," he said.

She prepared it. "I understand you intended it as a compliment, but you must see that it does denigrate my entire sex."

"I do not see that," he said. "As it happens, I have a high opinion of women."

She handed him his tea. "You think so?"

He accepted it. "I'm quite devoted to my mother."

"Who you think is unintelligent?"

He winced, looking away, and she could see that, yes, he quite did think that about his mother. Well, then.

"I should not have defended women, I see. I should have used your ignorance of the collective intelligence of womankind to my advantage. I could have pretended to be as stupid as you think all women are, and then run circles around you," she said.

"I don't think women are—" He cleared his throat, thinking better of this statement, apparently. He set his tea cup down in its saucer. "You're speaking this way to me because you don't like me. You don't have any reason to like me, it's true. I won't insult you by trying to convince you otherwise."

Was that it? No, he was wrong. It wasn't that she disliked him. She couldn't rightly say that she liked him, she supposed, but there was something about him that produced the strange, thrilling, not-fear emotion within her. But he was correct that she would not usually speak this way to a man, especially not a duke. The reason she

did now? It was power. When one had power over another person, one could get away with speaking her mind. It was intoxicatingly addicting, actually. She could quite get used to it. She didn't correct him, however. It might serve her purposes to have him think she disliked him.

Unfortunately, she didn't have any purposes. That was the real problem.

He sipped at his tea, eyeing her as he did so. "So, then, how much more time would you like to consider what you wish to extort from me in exchange for your silence?"

She really did not think more time was going to make anything occur to her, which was the other problem. "I don't know. Perhaps you must simply call upon me, from time to time, listen to me insult you, and wait until I sort myself out."

He smirked again. "I must say, it's strange, but I can't say there's a part of me that isn't keen on the prospect of being insulted by a woman like you on the regular."

She laughed. She was enjoying herself far too much. "I thought about asking for money, but then I decided I don't want money from you, because I can't be sure how you are getting it. I suppose you've already spent whatever you took from my late husband, haven't you?"

"Who says I took anything from your late husband?"

"Well, someone did," she said. "He brought a ransom out into the wilds and it never came back. You kidnapped me for the precise purpose of getting him to pay you. You expect me to believe that was all just coincidental?"

"You're the one who said he would never pay for you."

She busied herself with putting sugar in her own tea. "Yes, that's curious. I didn't

think he would.”

“Because it didn’t seem to you that he put much value in you, I suppose, not with the way he treated you.”

She lifted her gaze to his. “I never told you anything about the way he treated me.”

“You didn’t have to,” he said. “That bruise on your face told the whole story. Also, your insistence in his indifference. I know about that sort of man, you see. The sort of man who collects people like possessions and then treats them that way, like things .”

Oh, that might explain the mournful look in his eyes, might it? That pain? He had been badly used by someone. But he was a duke, and there was no one who could have— “Your father, then?”

He straightened, looking shocked. “I never said—”

“You didn’t have to,” she said.

He eyed her with renewed respect. “You’re a formidable woman, Lady Balley.”

She looked back into her tea, unsure how to respond to that compliment. She stirred her tea, thoughtful, and then she took the spoon out and set it on the saucer. “So, that’s why you did it.”

“Did what?”

“We both know what,” she said. “You rid me of him.”

“What happened to your husband was a tragedy.”

“Yes,” she said. “And don’t think to get me to admit that I’m grateful, or then you might start thinking I owe you something, and I do not. I never asked you to do that, and also, you were well paid already.”

“I didn’t do it for you,” he said.

She drank her tea and leveled her stare at him.

“I didn’t,” he protested, though she’d said nothing further. “It was expedient at that point, and anyway, I don’t do things like that for people.”

“No, of course,” she said. “It doesn’t do to go about doing murderous favors for women you’ve barely met.”

He smirked. “It does not indeed.”

“Why were you even doing it? Robbing people on the highway? You don’t need the money. I know that your holdings are perfectly adequate.”

“That’s none of your affair.”

“You said you didn’t have a choice, I seem to remember,” she said, because it was all becoming clearer to her now. Bits and pieces of the conversation were coming back to her with startling clarity. She hadn’t thought about it, but she did remember it. She remembered it very well.

“What happened to your dog?” he said.

She wrinkled up her nose, thinking of little Dash. “He dearly loves it in the north. He has doggy friends there, the hunting hounds who live at my late husband’s estate, and he has so much space to run and gambol, and I couldn’t bring myself to confine him

to the indoors here. Besides, I didn't think I'd be here for very long."

"Why did you come to town?"

"That's none of your affair," she echoed sharply.

He sipped his tea and smiled at her. "Well done, my lady." He regarded her. "Shall I guess?"

"No," she said.

"I suspect you're here to find a husband."

"No!" She looked at him as if he were an imbecile. "Why would I seek a husband now, in half-mourning, wearing washed-out grays and dark blues all the time? Who could I possibly attract?"

He shrugged. "All right, then, you came to town to take advantage of your widow status to have a raft of affairs with any number of men, all of whom you would cajole into giving you expensive gifts."

"You have a horrid opinion of me," she said, shaking her head at him. "Oh, no, it's women in general, that's right. I forgot."

"I'm sorry. What else do women want?"

"Besides men? Oh, dear, is this a sincere question?"

"Perhaps you came for another dog. A companion to that awful yappy bit of a thing you had. Perhaps you're going to breed them."

“If you really must know,” she exploded, “I was trying to adopt a child!”

He drew back, quite stunned at this answer.

“Oh, dash it all,” she said. “I don’t know how you needled me into revealing that. The truth is, I had thought to ask for your assistance in an adoption, but I discarded the idea as impossible. I had thought that no one refuses a duke anything, but then it all seemed so irregular that I thought it must draw questions and it would not do.”

“A child?” he murmured, shaking his head.

Wait a moment. She was having an idea. She set down her tea cup, thinking it through, nodding to herself. Yes, perhaps it might work if they did it that way. “Perhaps you could help, though. We’d have to go elsewhere. Some city, some distant city where neither of us are known and where they also have those sorts of places for women who cannot keep their babes. But if we did, we might pretend to be husband and wife, not a duke, no, but just some respectable couple, perhaps in trade, and I don’t know, if there are documents one might need to forge to prove such things, I rather imagine you have connections with the sorts of underhanded people who could create such things. If I went there with a man, if I were married, they would not say no to me, not the way they have been. No one will give a young, unmarried woman a child, it seems.”

He set down his own teacup. “You were saddened when it turned out you weren’t carrying Bally’s child, then.”

“How do you know that?” She was horrified.

“But not because of wishing to use the child to prop up your own station. I shouldn’t have even suspected that. Just because you wish to have a child of your own. Of course. I should have realized. What do women want besides men?”

“Look here, it is not as if the only things that women want are husbands and children,” she said.

“Clearly, you do not wish to have a husband,” he said.

“There are other things that women want, all manner of things,” she said, though she was beginning to realize that she had not much considered anything else for herself. She certainly had never entertained any idea that she could write operas like that woman she’d spoken to days before. Why had she never thought such things? Why had she never even considered anything like that?

“Why not?” he said.

“Why not what?” she said.

“Why don’t you wish to get married again?”

She was flustered. “It’s too much risk, of course. Can we come back to the matter at hand? This is what I wish from you, to pose as my husband so that I can adopt a child. And perhaps I do wish for a bit of money, just enough to put away for the child to make her life easier when she is grown. And perhaps I don’t care how you get it, as long as you promise no one has died in order for you to get it. It would not be for me, so I suppose it’s excusable.”

“Too much risk,” he said, nodding. “You and Rutchester should compare notes, perhaps.”

“The Duke of Rutchester? He’s one of your compatriots, I gather,” she said. “Agree to do this for me, or I shall run about shouting from the rooftops that you are all four The Lords of the Crossroads and that you killed my husband. Agree and purchase my silence. That is why you are here.”

He raised his eyebrows. "All right, my lady, all right. It is why I'm here. And you are certain this is what you want from me?"

"Yes," she said.

"Well, I am in no position to refuse you," he said.

"You are not," she said, picking up her teacup again. "Good, then."

He picked up his own teacup. He nodded, slowly, as if he was thinking it over. "And if I do this, you promise never to tell anyone what you know?"

"I do," she said.

"Good, then," he said.

CHAPTER TEN

WHEN NOTHSHIRE ARRIVED at Rutchester's town house, there was a muffled din from within, the sound of female voices shrieking and a number of shattering noises.

The butler at the door flinched each time something shattered. "Forgive me, Your Grace, allow me to see if His Grace is at home."

"Everything all right?" said Nothshire.

"Likely," said the butler, swallowing hard. "He is, erm, hard on the furnishings of the place, but he rarely hurts anyone. Usually." He cleared his throat. "If he is, in fact, at home, of course."

"Yes," said Nothshire, knowing that if the butler came back and said Rutchester wasn't there, it was because Rutchester was in no mood to receive guests.

The butler disappeared, but he was back in moments and told Nothshire to follow him. He was led into the dining room, which was covered in a mess of food, broken plates all over the floor. Rutchester himself was standing on the table, no jacket or waistcoat, his shirt unbuttoned, hair wild. He was screaming profanities at the top of his lungs.

Upon seeing Nothshire, Rutchester took a breath. "One moment, Benedict," he said in a fierce voice and then turned back to point at a maid who was cowering in the corner. "And tell Cook if she ever prepares that dish again, I shall tell her to cook me

her own leg!”

The maid squeaked, ducking down her head.

Rutchester drew in a breath and then another. He leapt off the table and started for Nothshire. “Clean this up,” he called to the servants, waving carelessly behind him. He put an arm around Nothshire and led him out of the room. “Let’s go to my study.”

They walked through the hallway together, and one stray servant saw them and ducked out of the way, looking green.

“You didn’t like dinner?” asked Nothshire mildly.

“Ghastly dish,” said Rutchester. The door to his study was open. They went inside and Rutchester let go of him, seeming to realized, belatedly, that such a display of closeness between them was improper and strange. That was Rutchester in a nutshell, though. Too much, too intense, no forethought, all reaction. Rutchester rubbed his face, looking perturbed. “I likely overreacted.”

“I imagine the staff is used to you by now,” said Nothshire.

“True,” said Rutchester, nodding. He turned away, surveying the study, which was clean enough, though quite bare. Nothshire remembered several other chairs that used to sit in the room, and he wondered if Rutchester had destroyed them recently in one of his passions. Nothshire wouldn’t put it past him. Rutchester wandered over to his desk and sat down on the corner of it. “This is a surprise. I wasn’t expecting you. Not to mention that this isn’t a typical calling time, dinner hour. Is something wrong? That viscountess, isn’t it? She’s caused some trouble.”

Nothshire shifted on his feet. Why was he here?

He had thought about going to Arthford. He often talked things through with Arthford, in fact. But Arthford had been teasing him about Lady Patience Needbrooke far too much. Nothshire couldn't bear subjecting himself to that.

And Rutchester was celibate, anyway, or sort of, so, it would be likely he'd be more understanding. On the other hand, Rutchester had said that awful thing about marrying her.

"Why does everything think I have designs on that woman?" said Nothshire in frustration. "What did I do to make everyone think that?"

"I don't know. Killed her husband."

"You killed her husband."

"Yes, but for you."

"Look, just because a man kills a woman's husband doesn't mean he fancies her," said Nothshire. "There are a lot of other perfectly reasonable reasons to murder a man."

"Lots of other reasons to murder a man for a woman?" said Rutchester.

"For money," said Nothshire firmly.

"This is why you've come to speak to me?" Rutchester raised his eyebrows.

Nothshire sighed heavily. "She has some convoluted scheme she's dreamed up and I've agreed to it, and it's all mad. She wants to adopt a child and she says no one will give her a child because she's a young, unmarried woman, so she wants me to go with her and pretend to be her husband. She says if I do that, she'll stay silent about

our identities forever.”

“Do you believe her, or do you think she’ll come up with more demands? Because we do already have Champeraigne doing that to us, as you well know. We don’t need more people to be obligated towards.”

“You’re not killing her,” said Nothshire, glowering at the other man.

“I didn’t say that,” said Rutchester.

“I believe her,” said Nothshire. “But I don’t want to do it.” He was just now, at this precise moment, realizing this.

“All right,” said Rutchester, gazing at him, bewildered. “Why not?”

“I have no idea,” said Nothshire. He looked around the room, found one of the spare chairs and sank into it. “It’s convoluted and stupid, for one thing. We have to go somewhere where no one will know us, so that means travel, and that’s an annoying inconvenience. And... and...” He didn’t know .

Rutchester shrugged. “It does sound ridiculous. You know, if she wants a child, and she doesn’t really care about where the child came from, there are urchins in the streets to procure from her. She could go down to the seedier part of town, wander around looking at them, and take her pick. No one would stop her.”

“I think she wants a newborn babe.”

“Well, even so, I’m sure there’s a way to find that without the charade she proposes and the travel and everything else. If you’d like me to make some inquiries—”

“No,” said Nothshire, shaking his head. He folded his arms over his chest. “She said

she didn't want to marry again because it was too much risk."

"Just so," said Rutchester with a firm nod.

"Yes, I thought you'd agree with that sentiment. But it makes me angry."

"Oh?"

"Yes, because it's not fair. She's, well, you only look at her, and she's so very young and full of life and so spirited and passionate. It just seems a waste, as if she's cutting herself off from all manner of opportunities because of unfounded fear. And the fault lies with Balley, and if I could kill him again, kill him myself this time, I would. He did deserve it, and I knew it, but I was too fastidious to take matters into my own hands."

"Yes, you always think too long," said Rutchester. "But then I don't think enough, so it's a good balance, between us."

Nothshire nodded. "True enough."

"I simply don't understand why it matters what she does, however. You made it very plain to me before that you don't actually want her for yourself—"

"That's definitely not the reason for this!"

"Yes," said Rutchester. "So, in that case, you are being ridiculous and you should capitulate, give her what she wants, and be done with it. The sooner it's over, the less you have to worry about how little sense your reaction makes, I suppose. That's what I'd tell myself."

Nothshire looked him over, sighing. "I suppose that is what you'd tell yourself."

“Did you come to me for advice?” said Rutchester, giving him an odd look. “Because you’re smarter than that, Nothshire.”

Nothshire laughed.

“You know that’s true,” said Rutchester, grinning at him.

“I suppose I do, at that.”

IT ALL HAPPENED rather quickly after that. Patience told Charlotte the duke was an old friend, one who owed her a favor, and that he was going to assist her by posing as her husband. Charlotte was a bit skeptical, pointing out that Patience had never mentioned she had a friend who was a young and handsome duke who was willing to do her favors.

Patience was vague, saying that she had forgotten about him, but they’d become reacquainted at the ball she’d attended and that he had indicated his willingness to help her, and then she changed the subject rather pointedly. Charlotte furrowed her brow and pursed her lips but didn’t ask any other questions.

Nothshire got in touch with her days later, sending a letter through a trusted servant outlining that he had made preparations for them to go to Watford, a half-day’s journey by carriage. He said that he had sent a letter from a fictitious man in trade inquiring about a child and that a response had come back in the affirmative. She fretted over documentation, something to point to if their ruse was questioned, and sent a letter back with a servant herself to this effect. He wrote back that it wasn’t going to be necessary, that his written correspondence was going quite well. There was a child to be born soon, and that they would be contacted when the mother went into her labors and could come and take it that day.

So easy, then, if one was a man. She couldn’t even find it within herself to be angry

about it, however. In all truth, she had expected the enterprise to be easy. These children were unwanted, in need, and she had thought that it would be a simple thing to step in, for she was simply solving a problem that needed solving in society.

One morning, a letter came from Nothshire that today was the day, and she was giddy and breathless with the thought of it, but also a bit apprehensive. She had not prepared, and she wondered at herself. There was no cradle in her house, no baby clothing, nothing of that nature. She had not interviewed wet nurses.

What had she been thinking?

Did she even want this?

No, of course she wanted it. She had come here for this.

And now there was no time, so she must simply muddle through.

Nothshire came in his carriage to collect her. There was some awkwardness as he offered her his hand to help her up inside and she touched him and they both sort of flinched at the contact.

She blushed.

He blushed, too.

Then, they were both in the carriage, driving, and it was frightfully silent, awfully silent, and she felt the urge to make conversation, but then she kept telling herself that she didn't like him and she didn't owe him anything other than uncomfortable silence, except that she was uncomfortable, too.

"We should get it straight before we're there," said Nothshire.

“Our story, you mean?” She smoothed her skirts. “I think you must say that you think it is your problem, because you would know, having never sired a babe in any of your many conquests.”

He made a face.

“Oh, don’t be that way,” she said. “It’s not even you. It’s a pretend persona.”

“I don’t think they’re going to ask about that,” he said. “It’s not their business why we want a child. We can be taking one in as a companion to our own children, or for extra help in the kitchen or something. There’s no reason to belabor that point.”

“Oh,” she said with a nod.

“I meant that...” He licked his lips. “When I touched your hand to get into the carriage, you... reacted.”

“So did you!”

“Well, we likely shouldn’t do that in front of them. That might look suspicious.”

“I don’t see as there will be any reason for us to touch in front of them. Do you regularly see married couples being physically affectionate in public?”

He inclined his head. “No, true, of course.”

“So, no touching,” she said.

“Yes, obviously,” he said.

More silence.

It dragged on and on.

She should have brought a book.

“We could play a game,” he said. “Looking out at the passing countryside, looking for things that begin with various letters of the alphabet or something of that nature. It can pass the time.”

She hunched up her shoulders. She was dreadfully bored. “All right.”

So, together, in stilted voices, they looked out the window and spotted things and passed the journey in that way.

When they arrived at the house, it was a stiff looking stone house with only a small square of a garden, and it empty of anything except neatly trimmed grass. No ornamental shrubbery or flower bushes or the like.

They were shown into a sitting room by a male servant.

Nothshire glared at the man, who noticed, and muttered an apology. Nothshire said, in a low voice, “That’s my wife you’re ogling like that.”

The man apologized again, but Patience certainly hadn’t noticed any ogling.

When the man left, she hissed at Nothshire not to do that.

He said that he was only playing the part of her husband, and she said that he was being strange and awful.

More silence, then.

Then, after a long interval, a woman came into the room with a sleeping baby in her arms.

“You’re Mr. and Mrs. Barnes, then?” she said brightly. “This is little Naomi.” She shrugged. “Oh, the mother named her Naomi, but you may change the name, if you wish, of course.”

The woman put the baby right into Patience’s arms and gave them both a bright smile, talked about how the Lord would richly bless them for their charity, and then backed away, still smiling.

“Oh, is that all?” said Patience.

“Yes, best if you’re off now,” said the woman, her smile wavering.

Something about that struck Patience as odd.

When they went out into the hallway, distantly, she heard the sound of a woman wailing like a broken thing.

“No, no, nothing to worry about,” said the woman. “They do take on sometimes, but she’ll be all right once she realizes it’s best for everyone.”

Patience’s entire body lit up in horror. “Is that Naomi’s mother?”

“You are the only mother Naomi has now,” said the woman with a bright smile. “That woman isn’t worthy of a babe. She’s a sinner, a scarlet woman. She’d only lead this tiny, innocent soul down the path to destruction.”

“But...” Patience looked down at the sleeping child. “The mother did give up Naomi willingly?”

“Oh, yes,” said the woman. “Now, off with you.” She made shooing motions.

Nothshire gave her a questioning look. “All right, Mrs. Barnes?” He was truly asking, and she could tell that if she said it was not all right, he would do something about that.

This badly affected her. She didn’t know if anyone, in her entire life, had truly inquired after her well-being in a way that implied that she was allowed to say that her being was not actually well. To be permitted to have such a feeling, it was an alien feeling. She was so struck by it that she nodded at him.

He touched her shoulder, even though they’d said no touching.

Together, they walked out of the house, her clutching the small bundle in her arms, Nothshire’s hand on her shoulder, and it all felt rather nice in a way that made her feel tender somewhere deep inside.

The carriage loomed in front of them. Nothshire let go of her to go and open the door for her.

At this moment, little Naomi squirmed in Patience’s arms. The babe woke and began to squall, wrinkling up her tiny face.

From within the house, the woman’s wails intensified.

There was a noise, as if someone was banging on a door or a wall or something.

Patience’s heart squeezed. She looked up at Nothshire. This didn’t feel right to her, not now. She didn’t know what to do, however.

Suddenly, the door to the house burst open and a woman wearing nothing but a shift

ran across the garden toward them. The woman's brown hair was wild and tangled, and her face and nose were red from crying. She ran straight for them, arms outstretched. "My baby," she was screaming. "My baby, my baby!"

The man who'd let them into the house pursued the woman, along with three other people.

"No," Patience said breathlessly. "No, Nothshire, stop them."

Nothshire obeyed her immediately, advancing on those pursuing the woman.

Patience nodded at the woman who was running towards her. "Get in the carriage."

"My Naomi!" sobbed the woman.

Patience transferred the crying baby into the woman's arms, tears pricking her own eyes. She pushed both the woman and Naomi towards the open carriage door. "Get in, get in!" she said, and she went right behind them. She helped them all in and scrambled in herself, yelling, "Nothshire, now!"

Nothshire looked up from punching the other man and hurried for the carriage. He shut the door and banged on the ceiling and the carriage took off.

The woman was sobbing, and Naomi was screaming, and tears were running down Patience's cheeks.

"What just happened?" said Nothshire.

The woman looked at both of them, her eyes wild, shaking all over. And then she turned to the baby in her arms and began speaking to it in a soothing voice. "Mama's here, sweet one. It's all right. It's all right." She gave the babe her breast to nurse and

Patience looked away and Nothshire looked away and then it was silent, no noise except the carriage wheels going over the road.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“YOU CANNOT TAKE her,” the woman was saying, her voice hoarse, her matted hair in her face. “I will not let you take her. I will not let you take her.”

Finally, Patience broke in. “It’s all right. No one will take your baby. I swear it to you.”

The woman looked up at her, searching her face for some truth there. Seeming to find it, she turned back to Naomi, who had fallen asleep again, head thrown back, tiny little lips open.

“What’s your name?” said Patience.

“Janet,” she said hoarsely.

“What are we doing?” said Nothshire to her.

“Well, I don’t know, improvising,” said Patience, turning on him angrily. “This was not what I thought it would be!”

Janet let out a labored breathy noise, the echo of tears. She shut her eyes and leaned her head against the side of the carriage. She looked exhausted.

“W-well,” said Patience, “do you have anywhere else to go?”

Janet opened her eyes. “Yes. I told them. I said it weeks ago, that I wished to leave

and go to my sister's house. She offered before, when she heard about what happened, but I thought then... I thought I could go through with it. But then..." Her lower lip trembled. "Feeling her in me, dancing about at night, rubbing my hand over my belly, her in there... I knew she was a girl, you know, I just knew it. I started to sing to her at night, and she would quiet. She knew my voice." She sniffed. "My sister, she has her own three wee ones and I didn't wish to be a burden on her, though she offered. I told them that I had written to her, that I had changed my mind, that I wished to leave. But they wouldn't let me go, then. They said that I was denying Naomi a better life, that I was selfish and sinful and wayward. They wouldn't let me go. I tried to go, but they wouldn't let me go."

"That's disgusting," said Patience. "It's all appalling, and I am horrified. We should have that place torn down."

"They had payed to feed and clothe me, you see," said Janet. "They said that if I left, I must pay them back for it. But if I stayed, they would get money from her new parents."

"Wait a moment," said Patience. "Did you give them money for this baby, Nothshire? Did you buy this child?"

"You wanted it quick, my lady," said Nothshire with a shrug.

Patience let out a horrified noise.

"I thought your name was Barnes," said Janet, looking at Nothshire. "They let me read your letters about the house and the grounds and the dog and..." She turned to look at Patience. "You just called him something else."

"Don't worry about that," said Patience brightly. "Where does your sister live?"

“In Essex,” said Janet.

“All right, well, you’ll tell the carriage to go directly there, yes?” She nodded at Nothshire.

He shrugged. “That’s what you wish, my lady?”

“You’re a lady?” said Janet, looking quite confused.

Patience sighed heavily. She reached up and unclasped a necklace she was wearing. She had put it on that morning for no reason that made any sense, because she was not supposed to be a woman of means, not one who could have jewels like this. But the necklace had been easy to tuck away and hide under her fichu, which she’d worn to look modest and matronly. Something had called to her about it. Wear it, a voice inside her had whispered. Take that one.

This must have been why.

Patience held it out to Janet.

Janet looked at her, quite confused.

“Take it,” said Patience. “You’ll need it. Make sure you find someone who will give you what it’s worth. You will not be a burden to your sister with this.”

Janet blinked and accepted the necklace. She looked at, in her palm, her lips parting as she gasped. “I don’t... understand.”

“Oh, neither do I,” said Patience. “I don’t understand either.”

IT WAS A long drive to the town in Essex where Janet’s sister lived. They had

brought food along, thinking that they would need to eat a mid-day meal, and so they ate that. But when they arrived, it was rather late in the day.

They did not tarry to watch Janet's reunion with her sister, though she and the babe were greeted with a warm embrace of the older woman, who had hair the same color as Janet's, and who touched Naomi's head and pronounced the baby girl beautiful.

They left before anyone could think to question them or to thank them or anything of that nature.

Inside the carriage, Nothshire laid out their situation. They would be hungry soon. They would need to find something to eat. The horses had been run ragged and if they wished to travel further, they must get fresh horses. Alternately, they could stop somewhere and get rooms for the night.

Tired and wrung out, Patience thought food and a bed sounded like just the thing. She agreed to it.

They didn't talk much as they drove off in search of an inn. She asked if the people from the place they'd come from would come after them, and he said they didn't even know their real names, which was true. She asked if they'd come after Janet and Naomi, and he said that sounded like far too much effort for them to put forth. Besides, they had the money he'd sent them already.

"Oh," she said. "You are probably cross about that expenditure."

"It wasn't really that much," he muttered.

"Oh?" she said, shocked. "What is the going rate for a human child?"

He only sighed.

When they arrived at the inn, she told him to instruct the staff to bring food to her room when he was getting their lodging. She intended to ensconce herself in solitude for the rest of the night and attempt to calm her nerves and make sense of whatever had just happened.

Oddly, she was somewhat relieved she wasn't bringing home an infant.

It wasn't that she didn't want a child, she mused, later, in her room, having managed to undress herself without the help of a maid, which really was harder than it had any right to be, she thought. Some buttons were frustratingly difficult to get to oneself.

It was only that she needed more time to adjust to the idea, really.

A bottle of port had been sent along with her dinner, an entire bottle. She would never drink that much, she thought, but as she ate and mused, she found herself filling up her glass again and again.

Her thoughts were tired and frayed, and they began to take on a drunken sort of nonsense. But they didn't seem like nonsense. It seemed to her that she was thinking real sense for the first time in a very long time.

If a woman was with child, she had nine long months to become accustomed to the idea. Whatever had happened to poor Janet, she'd obviously not been prepared to be a mother at the beginning of that nine months, but then she'd become ready in the course of it.

And perhaps something happened to a woman while a child was growing in her body, something that altered her in some fundamental way. It would make sense if that happened, would it not? Would not nature ready a mother to be a mother before the birth of a child?

Maybe the reason she—right now—did not actually feel quite ready to be a mother was because she had not had a child growing in her body.

Of course, she couldn't have her own babe, not without a husband.

Of course, Janet didn't have a husband, did she? That was entirely the problem with Janet's situation. Janet had only her sister to turn to, her sister who was already overburdened.

But Patience had resources.

No, no, no, what was she thinking? She could not have a child without a husband. It would destroy her. She might keep all her property and her wealth, but she would be shunned. Her brother would never speak to her again. She'd be barred from all society.

Yes, but what if no one knew it was her own child?

Could she not retreat to the north, back to her dowager house, claim to have come down with some awful illness? Perhaps consumption, yes, that might work. She would only allow Charlotte to see her, and she would stay hidden in her room for months, and then...

Well, giving birth might be noticeable.

She poured more wine, letting out a little giggle. "Yes, just a bit noticeable," she said aloud and giggled again.

She settled back in her chair and looked up at the ceiling. Well, all right, maybe she'd simply dismiss all the servants and she and Charlotte could manage the house themselves. It wouldn't have to be for the entire pregnancy, but just for the final few

months, when she was showing. Then, they could hire a whole new raft of servants and tell them the child was a foundling.

No one would ever have to know.

Of course, she'd need a man to put a babe in her belly in the first place.

And she had found the act that led to that rather distasteful and uncomfortable.

It happened, however, that she was rather numb with the port at the moment. And Nothshire was thrilling in an odd way, wasn't he? He was in a room just across the hall, right now, very handy.

She got to her feet and let out another giggle.

It turned into a snort.

"Well, no, it must be now!" she announced to the room. She picked up her glass of port and toasted the air. "To courage," she said to no one in particular. She drank down the rest of the port, set down the glass, and then charged out of the room.

She knocked on Nothshire's door, but he didn't answer.

Feeling bold and silly, another giggle bubbling out of her throat, she tried the latch.

The door opened.

It was dark inside.

She blinked for several moments until her eyes adjusted. He'd already laid down for the night. Was it late? She tried to gauge the time from the light outside the window,

but it was just dark out there. She had no notion.

It didn't matter.

She made her way inside and carefully shut the door behind her. "Nothshire?" she whispered. "Are you awake?"

Nothing.

But she could see the outline of his body on the bed. She moved forward, all the way forward until she was standing right beside the bed. She probed him with one finger. He stirred.

She bit down on her lip and then, unsteady from the port, she lurched forward and fell into the bed with him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

NOTHSHIRE WAS DREAMING .

That was what he thought anyway.

Someone was in his bed with him, giggling as she tried to extricate herself, squirming her warm, soft flesh all against him. She was not really dressed, only wearing a shift, something he knew because he'd started exploring her body as she writhed and giggled against him.

She smelled like port.

It was a very realistic dream, he thought, wondering about the last time he'd smelled something in a dream.

She sighed, making a strange gurgle of pleasure. "Oh, do that again ."

He moaned. "It's you, the viscountess. Of course it's you. Of course I'm dreaming about you. They're all damnably right and I do want you."

"Mmm," she said with a giggle. "Well, that works out nicely, then." She stretched out next to him in the bed. "Take me, then."

Definitely a dream.

"No," he said in a low murmur. "No, what I'd do, if I could, my lady, is give, not take

at all.”

“What does that mean?” she said, snuggling in against him. “You’re very firm, do you know that? Just... firm and... large.” Her voice had gone throaty. “At the ball, I was thinking about how large your hands were.”

Good dream, he thought, and he put one of his large hands around the soft, springy give of her breast.

She sighed in obvious pleasure.

He kissed her.

She tasted like port, but her tongue was a sweet and wet discovery as he claimed it. He kissed her long and hard and thoroughly, feeling her nipple pucker through her thin shift.

Oh, Christ, he was painfully hard. He shifted position, entwining their legs so that he could keep kissing her, keep toying with that little stiff peak of a nipple he’d just created and also drive the length of himself into the warm softness of her upper thigh.

She gasped when she felt it. “Oh, well, then,” she said. “That’s very firm, too.”

He chuckled, kissing her nose. “Is it? Tell me more about what you think about that part of my body.” Because it was a dream, and he could pretend she was some sort of skilled bawd who would seduce him with her clever words.

“It’s big,” she whispered. “Bigger than Balley’s.”

“Of course,” he said. “I imagine he had an extraordinarily tiny prick.”

“Well... no,” she said. “But I don’t want to talk about him.”

“No, definitely not,” he agreed, kissing her lips again, plucking at her taut little peaked tip, rutting into her leg.

“Mmm,” she moaned, clamping her thighs around his thigh, the one he’d thrust between her legs. “Oh, that pressure there, that’s... oh .” She shivered against him, and her nipple got even harder.

“Yes?” he breathed. “That’s what you like?”

She started to press herself against him, the heat of her sex pulsing through the thin fabrics of both of their nightclothes. She went back and forth, making tiny little noises. “This... I used to do something like this with a pillow.”

He laughed. “Really?” This was a very strange dream, wasn’t it? Wait, this couldn’t be...

“Yes,” she panted. “Yes, and I didn’t know what it was, and my nanny found me doing it and I got in terrible trouble. I was probably eleven years old, maybe twelve. She said it was frightfully dirty and that I would go straight to hell if I did it again.” She began to move her hips more frantically against him, in little circles.

Oh, damnation, this was real. This was happening . He didn’t dream about... he didn’t know women used pillows or that they went at themselves like that, really, although that should have been obvious, what was wrong with him?

He needed to stop her.

“And I tried,” she gasped, her voice frayed. “To never do it again, I mean, but... well... sometimes...”

She was really enjoying herself, though, and he was enjoying her enjoying herself, and what was the harm really, if she gave herself a little release on his thigh?

She's fucking drunk, he realized. She doesn't know what she's doing. She's going to despise herself in the morning.

He should stop her.

Oh, I can't, he thought, cringing, putting his hand back to her nipple. "Does that help, then?"

"Oh, yes, please," she gasped. "Yes, that's very helpful."

"Good, then," he said, soothingly. "Good, then, you keep at this for as long as you need. I'm quite at your disposal, my lady."

She moaned, a sound that was so erotic it went right to the root of his cock. No, you don't, he thought at himself, even as his own hips were starting to move again, even as he was starting to rut into her again.

This is wrong, he told himself again, and usually, usually, he wouldn't do things that were wrong, not unless he could convince himself that they weren't actually wrong.

But was that really true about him? Was he truly some bastion of moral uprightness?

Fuck it.

He kissed her again. He touched her other breast.

She gasped and cried out into his mouth.

He ground himself into her, grunting. The wrongness of it was making him more aroused in some awful way. He was going to spend on her shift, get her nightclothes all ruined with his mess, and that was so wrong and so good that he nearly crested.

But then he stopped himself, because what if that would distress her and mean she couldn't crest?

No, let her come, and then come all over her, he thought darkly. Christ, I think I hate myself.

She clutched at his nightshirt with one hand. "Oh, I didn't mean to... get so distracted with this. This isn't how it's supposed to work."

"This is exactly right," he countered. "I think you're doing a very, very good thing here."

She giggled. "But... you want... your, um, your..." She giggled again. "Your prick must be disappointed," she said, all in a rush.

"No, no, my prick wholeheartedly approves of this situation," he said roughly. His brain and his soul, that was another story, but he seemed to be ruled by his prick right now.

"Oh," she said. "When you say things like that..." She moaned, her hip movement going a little jerky. "It makes me feel..."

"I very, very much approve, my lady," he breathed. "I want you to feel what you're feeling."

"I feel good," she groaned.

“I want you to feel good,” he said. “I want to you feel as good as you possibly can feel. Be a very, very good viscountess and make yourself come, then? Hmm? Will you do that for me?”

“I... I don’t know what that means,” she gasped, and then she cried out in a tiny little voice, and he felt her spasm against him.

It was so overwhelmingly erotic that he drove his hardness into her twice more and spilled onto her.

She gasped.

“Fuck,” he groaned, already regretting it. Why was it that a thing seemed such a good idea right before one was about to have an orgasm, and immediately afterward, it was only horrific? I’m a very bad man, he thought.

“No, that was supposed to...” She reached down to touch the stickiness between them. “I needed that.” She sat up. “Can you do it again? Quickly? Because Balley sometimes could, and I can’t very well be gotten with child if you’re putting that on my leg.”

He sat straight up in bed and seized her by the shoulders. “With child? ”

She shrank from him.

He let go of her. He flopped back onto the bed.

She hugged herself. “I suppose I didn’t really explain myself, did I?”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“YOU DID NOT ,” Nothshire said in the darkness, his voice hard. “You just climbed into my bed and woke me and I was not even in my right mind when you started... I thought I was dreaming.”

Patience shrank from him, steeling herself instinctively. Then, she realized she was waiting for a blow, and she relaxed. He’s not going to hit me, she thought, and she knew that was true.

She felt more sober now, though. Maybe it was the aftershock of the pleasure she’d found. She couldn’t believe she’d done that. If she hadn’t gotten distracted by that, she could have gotten him to put it inside her, and she hadn’t even really tried. She’d just rubbed herself into his body like a wanton thing. What was wrong with her?

“Apologies,” said Nothshire. “This is my fault. I’ve taken advantage of you here, and you’re too drunk to know what you’re doing.”

“I’m not,” she said. “I know what I’m doing. I came here to get you to give me a child.”

“Yes, you said that,” he said. “But that’s ridiculous.”

“Is it?” She shrugged. “I doubt you’d mind getting it on me, in the end. You seemed to be enjoying having a go at my leg, didn’t you?”

He groaned.

“I enjoyed it, too,” she said with a sigh. She had not expected that. She hadn’t expected to enjoy anything about it at all. He was different than Balley in a number of ways, wasn’t he? Balley had always been rough with her. He’d mauled her breasts and tweaked her nipples, laughing when she cringed or cried out. This had been so very lushly different, Nothshire’s hands reverent and soft against her, just the barest of teasing. It had been quite nice.

“You say that now,” said Nothshire, “but you won’t in the morning when you wake. You will see it all very differently then, I assure you. You will be appalled. With me. With yourself. With the amount of port you drank.”

She probed the place on her shift that was soiled from the wet spot of his spend. She should probably mind that was against her skin, shouldn’t she? She sort of liked it, though, which was positively disgusting. She touched it gingerly with one finger. “I don’t wish you to talk like this. I wish you to simply get your prick hard again. Do you think you could?”

He let out a noisy breath. “All right, my lady, you need to go back to your bedchamber now,” he said gruffly.

“Because you couldn’t?” she said. “What if we light a lamp very low and I take everything off. I understand that men find it arousing to look upon women’s bare bodies, and you were sort of inspired at touching my bosom before, so perhaps you’d find that interesting to look at—”

“Stop.” He sat up next to her. His gaze went to her finger, and he watched her rubbing at the wet spot on her shift. He swallowed visibly, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat.

She watched as his prick stood straight up inside his smallclothes. They were soiled too, of course. “There,” she whispered. “Now, you put it inside me like it’s supposed

to work.”

“No.” His voice was a rasp.

She looked up at him. “But why not?”

He reached down and seized her by the wrist, stopping her from touching the wet part of her shift. “Stop that,” he said in an insubstantial voice. “That’s... uncleanly for you to do that.”

“ You’re the one who made me uncleanly,” she said, blinking up at him. She’d like it if he kissed her again. When it came down to it, kissing wasn’t very cleanly either, was it?

“I know,” he rasped, “and I’m very sorry about that. It was a bad thing to do, to get my filth all over you.”

“You liked it,” she countered. “You want to cover me in your filth.”

He swallowed again.

She pressed in closer, putting her hand on his chest. “You want to spurt that filth inside me, don’t you?” She dragged her hand down over his abdomen, going for the hard part of him between his legs.

He reached out and stopped her before she could touch him. “My lady, I have said stop. I have said no. And I can’t help but feel as if you’re simply not listening to me.”

“If you don’t want me to touch you, stop me.”

“That’s what I’ve just done, isn’t it?”

She felt doused in a bucket of cold water. Now the wet spot on her shift did seem positively uncleanly and disgusting. She wasn't sure what could have possibly driven her to like it before. She scrambled out of the bed. "Fine."

"You're going back to your own bedchamber, then?"

"Yes," she said, glaring at him.

"I am sorry, my lady. I'm incredibly sorry. I really should have stopped it earlier."

She didn't say anything to that. She wanted away from him now. She was starting to feel the edges of mortification. What had she been thinking? She rushed towards the door. She put her hand on the handle. She paused. "You did like it," she said, and then she let herself out of the room and scurried back to her own room.

THEY SET OUT in the carriage together the next morning, and Patience had a pulsing headache that seemed to hurt worse every time they went over a bump in the road.

"We don't have to talk about it," said Nothshire from the other side of the carriage. "We can pretend it never happened."

She didn't have a spare shift, of course. She had not packed to spend the night anywhere. She was wearing her dress from yesterday, but with nothing at all underneath it except her stays. It wasn't entirely uncomfortable. On the other hand, having only the one layer of fabric—her dress—between her skin and the carriage was a quite odd feeling.

"You can't have been thinking things through when you were that drunk," said Nothshire. "I've done stupid things while drinking as well. I don't hold it against you, certainly. Of course, I did a stupid thing to you last night, and I wasn't drunk at all. I

am sorry. But the more I think about it, the more I think we're both equally in the wrong. You shouldn't have sneaked into my room and my bed while I was sleeping. I shouldn't have touched you, definitely shouldn't have done that. I shouldn't have put my leg between yours. That was my fault. So, it was both of us, and that's why I think we should simply never speak of it."

She was embarrassed, of course.

She would never have come up with such a ridiculous idea sober.

But more than she was embarrassed, she was annoyed. Why couldn't he have just done it? Why had he sent her off like that? What was wrong with him?

No, she thought. It must have been her. Something must have been wrong with her that he didn't actually want her. He had wanted her when he was half-asleep, but then he'd come to himself and realized what was going on and then he hadn't been even a little interested in her.

"Anyway," said Nothshire, "I just think it's better to move on from it and leave it in the past. I promise not to chastise you if you promise not to chastise me, and I think that's fair. Let's just forget it ever happened."

"You say you wish to forget it happened, and yet you won't stop talking about it," she said tersely.

He shifted on the other seat, uncomfortable. "I am sorry."

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, so am I."

"Good, then," he said. "We shall put it behind us."

“In one moment, if you don’t mind,” she said. “Tell me what it is, if you don’t mind?”

“What it is? What are you talking about?”

“What it is that’s wrong with me.”

“What are you talking about? Nothing’s wrong with you.”

“Well, you didn’t want me, so—”

“I obviously wanted you. I spent all over your— This is why I don’t wish to talk about it.” He groaned, turning to pointedly look out the window.

“Yes, but I don’t suppose that means much of anything,” she said. “As I understand, men are spilling their seed all the time, rubbing themselves in their beds each night before they fall asleep, ruining handkerchiefs and the like. I don’t see why—if you don’t prize it at all—you couldn’t spare some of that seed for me, for my womb, that is all.”

He turned back to her, lips parted, his expression dumbfounded. He sputtered. “You did not just say that.”

She hunched up her shoulders, her face feeling dully hot. She was embarrassed, yes, quite embarrassed. “Well, then, just tell me what’s wrong with me!”

“Attend to me, Viscountess Balley, it is one thing to wish to bed a woman and another thing entirely to do it. There’s nothing wrong with you. Obviously, I utterly approve of your...” He gestured. “You’re quite lovely, and you know it, so don’t act like some imbecile in that way. Why are women always so insecure?” He clenched his hands into fists.

“Are they?” she muttered and her face felt even hotter.

“Oh, that is neither here nor there, I suppose, but I can’t understand it. You have seen yourself in a looking glass, I assume?”

“You don’t have to call me an imbecile,” she muttered.

“I apologize for that, too, but hell’s bells, woman, I lost control because I wanted you so badly and then you act as if I rejected you.”

“You did ,” she said.

“I did not.”

“You wouldn’t...”

“What?”

“Oh, you know what you wouldn’t do.”

“Do I?”

“You wouldn’t fuck me.”

“I don’t wish to get you with child, obviously! ”

She cringed. There was a long pause. She licked her lips. “Perhaps, we should both try to keep our voices down so as not to broadcast this to the driver.”

He sighed. “Perhaps.”

A long silence passed.

“Why not?” she said. “Why wouldn’t you wish to get me with child?”

“That’s... are you seriously asking me that? It would be a disaster. I’d have to marry you. Honestly, if you weren’t a widow now, I’d feel compelled to marry you. I likely should, strictly speaking, offer for you, and if you wish it—”

“No! I don’t wish to get married.”

“I know,” he said. “Which is why I assumed you were just out of your head on port last night.”

“I have an idea of how I can hide the pregnancy,” she said. “No one will know the child is actually mine, and I shall raise it as a foundling—”

“My child? As a foundling? I don’t think so.”

She blinked at him. It had not occurred to her that he would care about such things, or that he’d feel any kind of attachment to the child. But why hadn’t she thought that? She’d been close to her own father. She knew that men often doted on their bastards, even to the chagrin of their wives. Was she particularly stupid? “You could be involved, I suppose. I mean, the child couldn’t know you were its father, but you could visit and you could be some sort of... perhaps an uncle or—”

“I am not going to pretend not to be my children’s father,” said Nothshire, irritated. “I am going to be sure never to sire children besides in a womb that is my wife’s, when I get married, and I am going to be known as their father to them and to take care of them. All of my children will be legitimate. I’m not creating some child that has no place in the world. That’s a horrible thing to do to a child.”

“Well, that’s a fine sentiment, but you can’t exactly guarantee that you don’t ever sire any children except with your wife.”

He laughed. “I can’t?”

“No, because you...” She fell silent, feeling particularly stupid, because of course he could guarantee it if he didn’t indulge in the act. “So, that’s why you said no.”

“I might... with a different sort of woman... there are things. French letters or pulling out and spilling elsewhere. It’s not as if I don’t ever...” He sighed. “Mostly I don’t, though, truthfully. With anyone. It’s not you, it’s me.”

“Right,” she said with a sigh. “So, I’ll just find someone else.”

“No,” he said immediately.

She looked up at him.

He grimaced. “I have no idea why I said that. What you do with yourself is your own business, of course.”

“Indeed, it is,” she said.

“On the other hand,” he said in a very low voice, “I never liked it that you were going to adopt some child, anyway.”

“No?” she said. “What do you mean? Why did you care?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “But I don’t like the idea of you with some other man, and I did kill the only man that had access to you in that way. And I don’t like you with some other man’s child, either, whatever that means.” He sighed. “That’s positively

wretched.”

“It is,” she said. “And who asked you to meddle in my life, Your Grace?”

He folded his arms over his chest, and glowered at her, sulky. He did not answer the question.

She lifted her chin. “Well, as it happens, I find myself relieved not to be coming home with an infant. I don’t know if I’m really quite ready to be a mother, but I think if I had nine months of preparation, maybe it would be easier.”

“I don’t want to get married for another ten years at least,” he said gruffly.

“All right,” she said with a shrug.

He looked at her. Pointedly, without saying anything.

She folded her arms over her chest. “What?”

“You don’t wish to get married ever, I suppose.”

“No,” she said. “I do not.”

“Because you don’t find men trustworthy, none of us.”

“Is there a reason we’re having this conversation again?”

“I don’t wish to marry you,” he said, shaking his head. “I really and truly don’t.”

“Well, I don’t want to marry you either,” she said, quite confused. “Why would you bring that up?” Actually, he’d said something about it earlier, hadn’t he, that it would

be the right thing to do to offer for her?

“It’s only that it occurs to me that if I don’t want anyone else putting their hands on you and I don’t want you to have some other man’s child to raise, that’s one way to guarantee neither of those things happen. And if you really want a child, the only way you’re getting one of mine is if you’re my wife.”

She didn’t know what to say. “If that was a proposal, it was the worst one I’ve ever heard.”

“No, it was not a proposal. I just got done saying I don’t wish to marry you.”

“Well, I don’t want to marry you, and I don’t want you to sire children on me.”

“I think you do, though,” he said. “I think I want to sire them on you, too. I think we’re both very aligned in that regard.”

“No! You were convenient last night, that is all. I just need a man, any man, to get a child on me. If you won’t, I shall find someone else.”

“I don’t think so,” he said. “No, it makes me feel sick to my stomach to think of anyone else on you like that.” He sighed heavily. “I have done this, all of this, because I must have wanted you all along. When did it start? Why didn’t I notice? Damnation.”

“You don’t want me,” she said, shaking her head. “You rejected me.”

“We could go to Scotland,” he said. “We could elope, right now. Just keep going past London and turn northward.”

“No, I’m not marrying you. But anyway, if we were going to get married in a hurry,

you're a duke, so you just procure a special license, couldn't you?"

He thought about that. "That's true. Yes, it could be done. But I'm not asking you for your hand in marriage."

"All right, well, that's good, because I'm saying no."

He regarded her, thoughtful. Finally, he looked away, back to the window, nodding once. "All right, then. Like I was saying, let's never speak of this again."

"Agreed," she said. "Never again."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WHEN NOTHSHIRE FINALLY got home, Champeraigne was there, waiting for him, having eaten him out of his entire store of candied orange peels. Nothshire had procured them at a shop in London, and now he was going to have to make a trip back. He had only eaten a few of them.

“No one knew where you were,” said Champeraigne, his French accent thick as he sat on a lounge in Nothshire’s sitting room. “I asked everyone, and they were all entirely clueless. Which means you’re acting secretively, and I think that is worrisome for everyone, Benedict.”

“You’re here because you want more money from us,” said Nothshire.

“I’m here because I have a little job for the four of you,” said Champeraigne.

“Job?” said Nothshire. “We don’t work for you, comte. We are not yours to command.”

“Are you not, though?” said Champeraigne. He’d once had quite a lot of land in France, but then the Revolution had happened. He’d fled, taking as much of his jewels as he could carry, but leaving behind his house and his lands and all his servants. He’d saved his neck, of course, from the guillotine, but he was angry that he’d lost so much. He was greedy for more, convinced that he deserved to have all of his wealth restored to him since it had been stolen from him.

Nothshire had to admit that maybe they did work for Champeraigne. Hitherto,

however, the comte hadn't dictated what they did, just how much they should pay him for his silence. Unless they called his bluff, though, he could always ask for more. They could easily become his puppets.

"What is it you want us to do?" said Nothshire.

"I've a bit of a... discussion I'd like to have with someone," said Champeraigne. "This someone has rather rudely declined to speak to me, however. I have tried asking very nicely and cajoling him, and I have failed. The time has come to compel him to speak to me, I think. Between the four of you, especially with Rutchester in the mix, I'm sure, you could convince him to give me an audience."

"Give you an audience," echoed Nothshire. He doubted this was really about a conversation. "Who are we talking about?"

"The Earl of Penbrake," said Champeraigne.

Nothshire furrowed his brow. "What do you wish to talk to him about?"

"Oh, that's all very convoluted," said Champeraigne. "It's not important why. It's important that you say yes."

"And if I don't say yes?"

"It'll be all over town in weeks that you four killed your fathers. Shot them down like dogs. In front of the dogs, in fact. Those poor, traumatized hunting dogs must have never quite recovered from it all."

"Maybe enough is enough," said Nothshire. "Maybe I just let you tell everyone. Maybe I doubt anyone cares. Maybe I don't know if anyone will believe you. Maybe—"

“You will run that by the others before you make that decision for them, won’t you? I know what Rutchester did to the bodies. What you let him do. You all watched.”

Nothshire couldn’t look at him. Yes, it was all quite a tale, he supposed. He could try to explain that they hadn’t been dead from the gunshots, and that Rutchester had said he was just going to go and end it for them, as a mercy, and then Rutchester had gotten... well, whatever had happened, the hunting accident story they’d planned on had become impossible to sell after Rutchester had gotten hold of the bodies. They ended up saying the late dukes must have been mauled by a bear or wolves or something, not that there were bears or wolves in the woods of the northern parts of Britain, but what else could it be blamed upon? Something, then, some creature must have done it, they said. What else but a creature could have done it?

It was really amazing they’d gotten away with it, he supposed.

Champeraigne was getting up. “You have two days to decide whether you’d like to help me with my Penbrake problem. After that, I begin spreading the tale of your patricide, hmm?” He pushed himself up on the ornate cane that he used. He was not incredibly old and decrepit, but he walked stooped over, his thin body bent and his nose hooked like the beak of a bird of prey. On the top of his head, his hair was thinning. “Thank you for the candied orange peels, Your Grace.”

“You’re so very welcome, monsieur le comte, ” he muttered.

“OH, I KNOW what this is about,” said Arthford. It was precisely three hours later. They were all gathered at Dunrose’s place, because Dunrose had been hitting the laudanum too hard to leave and go anywhere else.

Even now, Dunrose was lying sideways on a couch, one hand dangling to drag his knuckles against the floor. They were in Dunrose’s upstairs sitting room. Arthford and Nothshire were seated in chairs that flanked Dunrose. Rutchester was prowling

behind Dunrose's couch.

"What's it about?" said Nothshire. "I think it might be time to get out, I must say. This is a worrisome step up for Champeraigne. It's one thing to demand more and more money, and to leave us in a place where we must raise the funds ourselves in various ways. It's another entirely for him to start telling us to go and collect people, kidnap them, and bring them to him."

"Penbrake did something to Seraphine," said Arthford. "It wasn't recent, but Seraphine told me about it some time ago, and she must have decided to share it with Champeraigne."

"Wait," said Rutchester, stopping his pacing. "We're going to collect a rival for him, one of his mistress's other bedfellows?"

"No, you know it's not like that," said Arthford. "Seraphine does as she pleases and it's a requirement of all of her 'bedfellows' if you want to call us that, that we don't interfere with the others. She decides, not the men, not even Champeraigne."

"But he's the main one, isn't he?" said Nothshire.

"No," said Arthford, sighing.

"The Marchioness de Fateux is most often seen on his arm," said Nothshire. "Everyone thinks of her as his."

"But she's not," said Arthford.

"Look, you have some thing with this woman," said Nothshire.

"I'm in love with her," said Arthford. "Something none of the rest of you can

possibly understand.”

“You can’t be in love with some woman who’s fucking at least ten other men all the time,” countered Nothshire.

“Can’t you?” said Rutchester. “I’m not sure how that makes any difference, really.”

“Well, she doesn’t love you,” said Nothshire.

Arthford sighed again. “She has instructed me not to interfere with Penbrake. But I have to say, I don’t like him. So I don’t mind if we do it. I don’t know what Champeraigne has planned, but it’s likely a duel or something similar.”

“Champeraigne can’t duel,” said Nothshire.

“He’d name someone as a substitute, likely,” said Arthford. “Maybe he’d let me do it. Of course, I think he hates it that I’m with Seraphine. I don’t think he likes sharing her. She says that she dislikes that about him, but I don’t think she’s being honest about that either.”

“I have never understood what you see in this woman,” muttered Nothshire.

“No,” said Arthford, “but that’s because you have no interest in women at all.” He gestured up at Rutchester. “And neither do you.” He glanced at Dunrose. “And Dunrose would understand, but his first love is opium.” He shrugged. “You’ll all have to take my word for it, I suppose, but when it comes to the woman you love, you’re not in your right mind. I’ll do it if even the other three of you won’t, I think. But it would be easier for me if you’d help, because Seraphine would be more likely to forgive me, I think, if I was working with the group of you instead of on my own.”

“We don’t have a choice,” said Rutchester. “We have to do it.”

“We don’t, though,” said Nothshire. “We are dukes, and we can likely get by with having done what we did to our fathers.”

“Easy for you to say,” said Rutchester. “All you did was pull a trigger.”

Arthford glanced up at him. “No worries, Rutchester, no one’s going to tell anyone anything about you.” He turned to Nothshire. “It’s one thing for you. Your father didn’t do the sorts of things that other people’s fathers did.”

Nothshire bowed his head.

“You always said,” spoke up Dunrose, his voice dreamy, “that we had to be together on this. We had to be four acting as one. Are we four or one, boys?”

“One,” said Arthford immediately.

“One,” said Rutchester.

They all looked at him.

“One,” he said, with a nod.

“WHAT DID PENbrAKE do?” said Nothshire to Arthford. They were outside Dunrose’s place, waiting for their respective carriages.

“Ah, yes,” said Arthford. “Well, bad enough for your code to kick in, I think.”

“He forced himself on her?”

“He drugged her,” said Arthford, “likely with laudanum. Had his way with her while she was asleep.”

Nothshire thought about this. “Well, had she agreed to it beforehand?”

“What? To having him fuck her while she was sleeping?”

“Just to the fucking, I suppose. I don’t know, but is that the same thing, if you’ve already indicated it’s all right for the person to fuck you?”

“No,” said Arthford. “She said it was the most horrifying thing she ever experienced. She didn’t understand why she was so exhausted and overly drunk, because she’d been drugged. She fought sleep and then woke up with her body all tender in the wrong places and—“

“Oh,” said Nothshire with a curt nod. “Monstrous, then.”

“Indeed,” said Arthford.

It was quiet.

“If you could marry her, the Marchioness de Fateux, would you?”

“What? Seraphine? No, she wouldn’t let me marry her,” said Arthford.

“But say she would. Would you?”

“What kind of question is this? You’re simply going to torture me about her,” said Arthford.

“I torture you? You are always saying wretched things to me .”

“Well, whichever of us gets there first with the mocking silences the other, I suppose.”

Nothshire sighed. Where was his carriage? He peered down the street. It was growing dark now. He was quite tired. He'd spent too many days moving, and now they were going to all have to go on some chase of Penbrake. What he really wanted was an entire day in bed. "I think I wish to marry the Viscountess of Balley."

"What?"

Nothshire glanced at him. "Well, if you're going to poke fun, do it and get it over with."

"You swore we did not kill that woman's husband because you wanted her. Good God, you're King David and Bathsheba, aren't you?"

"No." He glared at him. "That's not why I did it. Exactly. He was a bad man. She was unhappy."

"I thought you just got her some brat to raise on her own. That's what Rutchester said you were up to when I couldn't find you after Champeraigne was asking after you. You know, it annoys me that he insists on speaking only to you. He sends servants to us to ask about your whereabouts, yes, but why not just come to one of us and tell us that he wishes us to go after Penbrake? You are not the leader, you know that?"

"I do," said Nothshire, because he wasn't. Maybe he sort of was. Sort of. "Anyway, everything went wrong with the infant orphan. The mother didn't want to give up the child, so we ended up spiriting her off to her sister's house, and then the viscountess gave her some valuable necklace, and then she and I had to stay overnight at an inn, and she drank too much port and she came up with some mad scheme to—" He broke off. "Do you think we could be married? Or would it be irresponsible to attach oneself to a woman when Champeraigne controls us?"

"Mad scheme to what?"

“No, I’m not getting into that.”

“You tugged her, didn’t you?”

Oh, look, there was his carriage. He started towards it as it pulled up the curb. “We shall set off in the morning, then, yes? To find Penbrake?”

Arthford caught him by the arm. “No, you don’t. You don’t run off. You did. You lifted those skirts. What sort of woman tempts a man like you to do such a thing?”

He shook him off. “She’s a widow. It’s not strictly all that wrong. Anyway, I didn’t.”

Arthford scoffed.

“Am I mad, though? To marry now? I’m not even thirty. You wouldn’t marry, not even this woman you say you love.”

Arthford lifted a shoulder. “She’s not that way, Benedict.”

“And this doesn’t bother you?” He lowered his voice. “I think I just want to marry the viscountess because I don’t want anyone else to have her, really. And the idea of her with a child, one that’s not mine, it’s...”

“So, you wish to marry her to possess her, then?”

He looked up at the darkening sky overhead. “Damnation. Don’t I sound just like him?”

“You’d never hurt her. It’s different.”

“If we’re to have people we treat like toys, at least we play nicely with them, you

mean?” said Nothshire.

“Well, it’s something,” said Arthford.

“She doesn’t want to marry me,” said Nothshire, opening the door to the carriage. “If I were truly all that different than my father, that’d matter to me. But I don’t think it does.” He tried to pull the door closed.

Arthford stopped him. “You won’t, Benedict. You won’t force yourself on her. You’re not like that.”

“I was this close, though, Simon,” he said, holding up his fingers. “This close.” He shook his head. “What good is a man’s code if he meets the qualifications he thinks justify death? I’m as bad as any of the men I kill.”

“Maybe we all are,” said Arthford quietly. He shrugged. Then he shut the door to the carriage.

Nothshire banged a fist into the ceiling. The carriage took off.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

NOTHSHIRE WOKE THE next morning to his valet standing at the foot of his bed, shaking his ankle. “Wake up, Your Grace, wake up,” he was whispering.

“I’m awake.” Nothshire yanked his foot back. “What’s going on?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, sir, he forced us to come in and disturb you. He has been here for almost half an hour, and he is insistent he talks to you,” said the valet.

“Who is?”

“The Duke of Arthford, Your Grace. So sorry, truly, but he will not rest until we have awakened you. He is, even now, without in the room just beyond your bedchamber.”

Nothshire groaned. He staggered out of bed. “Banyan.”

“Here, Your Grace,” said the valet, helping him into the robe.

Thus covered, Nothshire padded out into the other room, yawning.

Arthford was still wearing the same clothes from last night.

“Haven’t you been to bed, yet, Arthford?”

“I went to do some preliminary looking about for Penbrake,” said Arthford. “Just asking here and there, just a few inquiries in a few places, that’s all.”

“You haven’t seen your bed tonight.”

“It’s only that you’ll never guess where he is,” said Arthford.

“Where?” said Nothshire.

“He’s in Kent, at Lisbil’s End,” said Arthford.

Nothshire furrowed his brow.

“That’s right, he’s a guest of the brother of your wife-to-be.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, Arthford, I never said I was marrying her.”

“You said you wanted to. Look, it’s perfect. We can go to Dunrose’s estate near there, yes? And you convince her to go to her brother’s house—”

“She doesn’t do my bidding. She doesn’t want to marry me.”

“Well, you were doing her some favor—”

“Yes, in return for her not telling everyone in town that we were the Lords of the Crossroads,” said Nothshire. “I did my part, but it didn’t turn out well, so I don’t think she’ll count that as my having held up my end of the bargain. So, I think she’ll say I still owe her a favor.”

“Well, do her a favor, then.”

“No, because what she wants from me, I will never give her.”

“What does she want?”

Nothshire sighed.

“Look, get her on your good side, please. And then she goes to her brother’s, and you can call upon her, because you’re courting her, because you’re going to marry her.”

“I am not.”

“This is how we get Penbrake.”

“Oh, hell and damnation, Arthford, let’s just ride up there and stake out the house and nab him. It can be that easy.”

“What did Champeraigne say? That he wanted to have a discussion? So, I think he wants Penbrake to come willingly.”

“He said something about how helpful Rutchester would be in the mix, so I don’t think he’s opposed to our using force.”

“We can’t simply nab an earl from his visit to someone’s country house!”

“Why not?”

“What does she want from you?”

“She wants a child, Arthford, a child.”

Arthford was confused. “She doesn’t want to get married, though.”

“No, she thinks she can take my child and raise it as if it’s a foundling. She wants to conceal her entire pregnancy, and pretend it’s not her child or my child, and I can’t—”

“You want to marry her, though, yes?”

He swallowed. “W-well, I shouldn’t.”

“Get her with child and then try to work on her,” said Arthford. “I have a feeling she’ll be more amenable to the idea once she’s gone with a babe inside her. I hear women get all kinds of emotional, then.”

“That’s devious,” said Nothshire.

“Is it? Really? Why doesn’t she want to marry you?”

“I don’t know. Probably because I killed her husband.”

“Why’d you tell her you did that?”

“She figured it out.”

“And you couldn’t deny it?”

He sighed heavily. “I can’t... get her with child as a scheme to coerce her into marriage.”

“Against your code?”

“It sounds just as bad as drugging a woman who’s already consented to taking your cock so that you can do it while she’s asleep,” said Nothshire. “Maybe worse. And you wish to kill a man for what he did to the woman you love, but—”

“Does she hate you?” and Arthford. “Because if she wants your babe in her belly, it doesn’t sound like she does.”

“It doesn’t matter to her whose it is. I happened to be there when she came up with the scheme, that is all.”

“Just go and tell her you will father her child if she’ll go to visit her brother and allow you to call on her there.”

Nothshire shook his head. “No. I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Well, what if she... what if she won’t marry me? Then I have a bastard out there, one I can’t even claim or bring into my own household. I’m not that sort of man. I swore I’d never be that sort of man.”

Arthford shrugged. “If she won’t marry you, Seraphine has something, a tincture perhaps, that can kill a babe growing inside a woman—”

“I’m not killing my own child! What is wrong with you?”

“It’s all ridiculous, that’s what it is. Why can’t you actually just come to terms with the fact you’re not actually a moral man?”

Nothshire shook his head. He didn’t quite know. It seemed fairly obvious, didn’t it?

Still, maybe there was a way around it. A way that would allow him to indulge his desire for this woman but wouldn’t involve any dire consequences. And a way that would mean that he could help Arthford as well.

Maybe, he could agree to take her to bed for the purpose of getting her with child, but he could simply not spend. He could pretend to. She wouldn’t know the difference if he claimed he’d done it. There would be no child, nothing to worry about in that way.

He could convince her that she must go to her brother's house. He could call upon her. This would be the way in to reach Penbrake.

Everyone would leave happy.

Well, except her, when she wasn't with child.

But maybe if he had her, truly had her, really did it, skin on skin, his hard prick sunk all way inside the tight, wet center of her, her thighs wrapped around his hips, their bodies flush against each other...

Maybe that would help him work the idea out of his system, giving in to it.

On the other hand, maybe he'd like it too much. Maybe he wouldn't want to give her up. But if so, maybe he could convince her to marry him.

Truthfully, there were no downsides to the entire plan.

"All right, I'll do it," he said to Arthford.

"You will?" said Arthford, quite surprised.

"I will," he said.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

WHEN PATIENCE GOT home that evening, she was wrung out. She retired to her bedchamber and would have asked someone to send up some sort of liquor to drink, except she was still feeling the effects of drinking all that port the night before, so, instead, she simply asked for some chocolate. It was a morning drink, usually, but it wasn't nearly as caffeinated as tea, so she thought it might be warm and comforting.

She sipped her hot chocolate and felt wrung out, and then Charlotte gently knocked on the door. Patience let her in.

She started talking.

Somehow, it all came out, the entire story, every bit of it. She told Charlotte about the night that Balley had been killed, about being captured by Nothshire, about seeing him at that ball, about essentially blackmailing him. She told Charlotte about Janet and the tiny Naomi. She told her about the way she'd felt that she was not ready to be a mother, about drinking too much port, about drunkenly attempting to seduce Nothshire, about the way he'd insisted he wouldn't do it.

Charlotte listened. She took cups of chocolate when prompted, until there was no more chocolate to be drunk.

When Patience finally stopped, she didn't know what else to say, and it seemed that Charlotte didn't know what to say at all. Charlotte gazed into her empty mug, glancing up at her here and there, and then looking away.

It was dreadfully silent.

“All right, well, I suppose I’ve decided—once and for all—that there is no real benefit to being a Papist,” Patience finally declared. “Confession is not good for the soul after all. I feel worse having said it all aloud. I feel embarrassed and wretched.”

“No,” said Charlotte. “Don’t. It’s... you are extraordinary, my lady. I am in awe of you.”

Patience scoffed. “Off with you. I need to sleep.”

Charlotte stood up. “I’ll take down the chocolate tray, shall I?”

“I don’t care,” said Patience, slumping into her chair. She did not care about anything.

Charlotte got up, and she put her mug on the tray and Patience’s mug on the tray, and then she hesitated. “I knew, of course, I obviously knew, but I hadn’t realized it mattered so much.”

“Knew what?”

“That you had not loved your husband,” said Charlotte. “I sort of thought that you must have loved somebody, though why I thought that, I can’t even say. It doesn’t make any sense. You never have, so now that it’s happening to you, it’s badly affecting you.”

“What?” Patience sat up straight. “Now that what is happening to me?”

“You are obviously in love with that Nothshire person,” said Charlotte.

“I am not. He’s a horrible person.”

“Well, I suppose,” said Charlotte. “But he did sort of rescue you, didn’t he? From Balley? And I can tell you don’t like the idea of needing rescued, really. I don’t like it either. But maybe you should just marry him.”

“He doesn’t wish to marry me! He made that very plain. And I don’t wish to get married at all!”

Charlotte opened her mouth to speak and then closed it.

Patience felt a dull rage building inside her. “Go,” she said.

“Yes, my lady,” said Charlotte. She took the tray and started for the door. At the door, she hesitated. “It’s only that love is like that. It’s about allowing other people to see us weak and vulnerable and allowing them to rescue us sometimes. That’s how trust is formed and that’s how attachments are made. If you never let anyone see you vulnerable, you simply end up with nothing and no one. I’m not saying that this Nothshire person is a rational choice, but I’m afraid love often tends not to work in rational ways. It would be lovely if we all acted in accordance to our best interests all the time, but we don’t. Much of life is simply accepting that and making the best of it, I think. I have trusted you, my lady, with things I shouldn’t have trusted someone of your class with knowing about me.”

“I would never harm you.”

“I believe you,” said Charlotte. “Whether or not it’s wise to believe you is another story.”

“But Charlotte, I would never—”

“Never mind,” Charlotte sighed. “Never mind, forget I said anything.” She hurried out of the room, shutting the door behind her.

Patience got up to go after her, but when she got to the door, Charlotte had disappeared. She was too tired to call her back and finish that conversation, anyway. She fell into bed instead, pulling the covers over her head.

And she fell asleep rather easily, fell into a deep and dreamless sleep that tugged her down into a warm darkness of rest.

When she woke, it was barely morning. She was not alone in her room.

She knew it, somehow, with a sixth sense, though she realized she had probably heard something and that had woken her from sleep.

She sat straight up in bed, pulling the covers up to her chin.

He was standing inside the doorway.

“Nothshire,” she breathed, horrified.

“Can’t be an effective highwayman if one hasn’t learned to sneak around,” he said. “Don’t scream and alert your staff, if you don’t mind. I won’t do anything you don’t like. I promise.”

Her heart was pounding. “No one knows you’re in here?”

He shook his head.

“Why are you here?”

“I need a favor, viscountess. I need a favor, and I thought the best way to get you to do me a favor was to do one for you.”

“What sort of favor?”

“I need you to go and visit your brother in Kent, and I need you to accept me as a caller. It’s not about you, per se, it’s about a guest of your brother’s, the Earl of Penbrake.”

“My brother doesn’t even really like me,” she muttered. “I doubt he wishes me to visit and have callers.”

“But he would accept you in his household, wouldn’t he?”

She shrugged. “Why would I go there? Why would I do that for you?”

“I’ll give you what you want,” he said. “I’ll get you with child.”

Her mouth was dry.

“I’ve illustrated well enough that I can come and go from your bedchamber without anyone being the wiser, have I not?” He gestured with one hand. “As many times as it takes, I’m at your disposal.”

She squirmed on the bed, clutching the blankets tighter, which was nonsensical, because she was actually much warmer all of the sudden. “You said you wouldn’t.”

“I’ve changed my mind.”

“Why?”

He shifted on his feet. “Why do you care? I have, and that is all that matters.”

“Anyway, that was payment for my not telling anyone that you were a highwayman!”

“Yes, and this will be more than that, because I shall not interfere in any way. You wish to have a child and pretend it is not yours and not mine, and I shall go along with that, which is... awful . So, that pays for this other favor.”

That didn't make any sense, she didn't think, but she could not remember why, because she was so warm. She thrust the covers away from her heated body and glared at him. “Well, something has changed since we spoke last. What do you care about the Earl of Penbrake?”

“That's my affair,” he said with a shake of his head, but he was greedily gazing at her in her nightclothes, staring at her not-entirely-clothed body in a way that was making feel a little dizzy.

“Your affair.”

“I don't entirely have a choice in that.”

“Just like you don't have a choice about being a highwayman? Are you going to tell me about that, ever?”

“I don't see why I would, no.”

“I don't know anything about you, and what I do know doesn't entirely recommend you to me.”

“Well, my lady, you are not exactly a proper widow, are you? You are not meek or submissive or even properly feminine. Everything about you makes me...”

“Makes you what?”

He stepped closer to her bed. “Agree or don’t.”

“I don’t,” she said, but she was breathless, and as she said it, she crawled out of the bedcovers toward the bottom of the bed. “I don’t trust you, Lord Nothshire. You are the very definition of untrustworthiness.”

He advanced all the way to the foot of her bed and looked down at her. “If you think I shall allow you to let some other man put a child in you, you’re mad. I shall not. Never.”

A thrill went through her. She, on her hands and knees, glared up into his face, and seethed. “I hate you.”

“Yes, well, I already know that.” His gaze slid over her face. “I can see down your nightdress.”

She should have covered herself. She didn’t. She undulated instead, pushing out her breasts, feeling them jiggle just a little as she did so.

He sucked in an audible breath. “I’m going to put my hand down your nightdress and touch your bosom. I’m going to do it right now unless you tell me not to.”

Her body felt alight with a delicious tautness. She let out a series of noisy breaths and did not tell him not to.

But he didn’t actually move. He only looked at her body, like a man fascinated by witchcraft. His expression was pained, as if he wasn’t even enjoying himself, as if he was angry with the way she was affecting him.

She rather liked that for some perverse reason. She moved, settling back on her knees. She gathered up handfuls of her nightdress and began tugging them up to expose her knees.

He groaned, really groaned, and his expression went needy and pleading. He ran his tongue over his upper teeth, waiting.

She bared her upper thighs.

He climbed onto the bed with her, bracketing her body with his own thighs. Now they were inches away from each other. “I keep thinking about the way it felt to kiss that little eager mouth of yours. I remember the way you tasted of port.”

“I probably taste like death right now,” she taunted. “I’ve just woken up, and everyone’s breath is awful in the morning.”

“Probably,” he said. He reached up and started fumbling with his cravat, gazing at her lips. “Very probably.”

“Do it, then, if you want to so badly,” she said, haughty. Oh, Lord, what was she saying?

He kept one hand on his cravat and the other shot out and seized her face. He trapped her chin between one of his massive thumbs and his thick forefingers, and he kissed her.

A shudder went through her as their tongues touched. Kissing him made her feel lit up, not just warm, but hot , all over, and she felt as if she was going to lose control. But maybe she never had control around this man, maybe she never had, maybe she never would .

“Chocolate,” he breathed. “You taste like chocolate.” He pulled his cravat free.

She let out a whimper. “I drank some before bed.”

He shrugged out of his jacket. One-handed, he started in on his waistcoat buttons. “Stop me, then, my lady.”

“You wouldn’t stop,” she said.

“No?”

She licked her lips. “Fine, then. Stop.”

He froze.

Moments passed, both of them just looking at each other, searching each other’s eyes.

Abruptly, he got up off the bed, letting go of his waistcoat, which was half unbuttoned. He fished his jacket up off the floor. He thrust one arm into it, turning his back on her.

“Wait,” she said, flabbergasted. “I didn’t mean...”

He turned back to her.

She squirmed. “Don’t stop,” she said in a tiny voice.

He eyed her. “We have a bargain, then? I do you a favor, you do me one?”

“I...” She suddenly felt the enormity of it settling into her. This was what she wanted, wasn’t it? The idea to go to his bed, it had been borne of her drink-addled brain, she

was realizing, and she had not thought it through while sober, not without also feeling peeved that he had denied her. But was she really angry that he'd denied her a child or that he'd denied her something else?

Her gaze went to his crotch.

Oh.

She could see the way his trousers were straining there. He wanted her, and that went all through her like a rush of scalding water poured into a bath, and she didn't even care anymore, not about thinking things through, not about the future, not about being with child. She didn't care, because she was out of her head with want.

She nodded, eager, biting down on her bottom lip.

"That's a yes?" His voice was gravelly.

"Yes," she managed, her voice trembling. "Yes, please, yes."

He shrugged off his jacket and climbed back onto the bed.

She yanked off her nightdress, tossing it behind her and showing him her bare skin, like some kind of mad, wanton woman.

He let out a noise in the back of his throat, and he seized her about the waist, one hand on the small of her back. He pulled her close. His other hand found one of her breasts, cupping it, but gently, so gently, even though his hands were so, so huge, and he kissed her again.

She sighed, her tongue moving against his, pressing her bare breast into his hand more firmly. She started to undo his waistcoat buttons.

He groaned again. He broke the kiss and kept toying with her breast. Her nipple was tight and stiff and sensitive against his palm, and it felt divine, whatever he was doing to her. He watched her unfasten his buttons. “That’s very good, my lady. Aren’t you an eager little thing? I thought, before, maybe it was because you were drunk—”

She pulled her hands back, shy. “A-apologies.”

“No,” he breathed. “I like that.” His fingers trailed up and down her back. “Women usually don’t—” He winced. Now, his voice went sardonic. “Oh, yes, Benedict, that’ll reassure her. Talk about others you’ve had in your bed. Well done.”

She looked up at him from beneath her eyelashes. “I thought it was the drink, too, actually.” She hadn’t thought it through, but it would have only made sense for that to have affected her behavior. But she was not even a little bit drunk now. “I’m not like this usually. I was never like this with—”

“No, let us definitely not talk about him ,” he said.

“It’s you,” she breathed. “You make me like this.”

He kissed her again, a hard and positively tingling kiss.

They fell back on the bed, his body over hers.

She was wearing a pair of drawers, nothing else, and his waistcoat gapped open. The sensation of his shirt against her bare skin was shockingly good. She arched into it, rubbing into him, still wanton, and a bit embarrassed, but she didn’t care, she didn’t care . She remembered before, and she moved one of her legs, entwining their thighs as they had been on his bed in that inn. She clamped her thighs around one of his, and there, that, it was like spun sugar, it was so good as to wipe all thoughts from her head. She writhed.

He propped himself up over her, breaking the kiss, grinning at her, delighted. “Oh, yes, I definitely want you to do that again, my lady. Definitely. But may I take my trousers off first? I want the feel of your bare little cunny against my skin.” He tugged on the drawers. “These off, too?”

She bit down on her bottom lip and nodded again, her breath catching in her throat. That sounded quite good.

He sat up and started to undo the falls of his trousers.

She watched. She watched as he pulled his shirt free and took it off, took off his waistcoat at the same time. His bare chest was the most interesting thing she’d ever seen in her life. He was so broad . He had bits of dark hair clinging to the most interesting parts of his body, especially around his flat, small nipples, and in a little trail traveling down his abdomen. He was somehow powerful and strong and yet also vulnerable bared to her like that. She liked the way those things jumbled together—both true at once.

He glanced up at her, then looked at his own chest, and then—adorably—he blushed, turning bright red, and there were little splotches of that on his chest. She couldn’t stop herself. She reached up to touch them, reverently tracing little patterns into his skin.

He gasped.

He kissed her again.

She rubbed her skin into his skin—oh, that was the most wondrous thing she’d ever felt. She could likely spend the rest of her life like this, crushed against him, both of them bare, safe here with him, safe against his broadness. She sighed and tilted back her head and he kissed the tip of her chin and the front of her throat, and she let out a

long, low sort of noise, something nearly as gravelly as the noise he'd made before. He echoed it approvingly.

"I like you liking it," he whispered. "I suppose I didn't think women did. You're so... the way you give yourself over to your pleasure, it unravels me."

She felt self-conscious. She looked up at him, and she blushed, too, but maybe that was all right, if they were both blushing. She thought of that thing that Charlotte had said about vulnerability.

Maybe... maybe it wasn't trust, not in the end, if you were assured of a person's good behavior. Maybe trust could only be trust if there was risk. He was risk, all risk, but maybe this risk was worth it, somehow? She ran her hands over his chest. "I do like it," she said softly. "I like the way you look. Quite a great deal, I find. I've never liked anything in this way."

He groaned again. He kicked off his trousers, kissing her again.

She wriggled out of her drawers.

Then they were both bare, and she ran her hands over him, all over him, until her fingers touched a thatched mess of scarred skin, starting at the back of his lower back and continuing all over his buttocks.

She could tell because she explored it all with trembling, shocked fingers.

Until he stopped her and moved her hand. "Not there," he breathed into her ear. "Don't touch me there."

"What happened?" she whispered.

“Just... whipping,” he said.

Whipping with what? A horse whip? How many times? Why was he so scarred? Who did that to him? She started to ask all of those questions, but he shook his head at her in such a way that let her know he wasn't going to answer any of them.

Then he did what he'd said, pressing his bare leg between her thighs, against her sex, and it felt, well, it felt like heaven . She got distracted as she wriggled there, rubbing herself against him like she had done before, in the same way she'd rubbed against pillows, controlling the pressure to the exact way she liked it. She didn't think about the scars. She thought about how good it felt. She was soaring in no time.

Oh, dear, it was going to happen quickly, then, wasn't it?

It usually didn't happen so quickly, but it was building, her pleasure, building and building. She yanked his face down so that he could kiss her again, and then... she needed... “Touch me.” She picked up his hand and put it to her breast.

“Oh, like this?” He toyed with her stiff nipple.

“Please,” she gasped. “Yes, please, like that.”

He made a male noise of deep satisfaction and she suddenly just crested, tightening her legs around his thigh as her climax barreled through her like a waterfall crashing over the rocks, turning frothy and white and frenzied. She cried out.

“Shh,” he said, clamping a hand over her mouth. “The servants will hear you.”

It should have stopped her pleasure, but she was too far gone. She rode it, the frenzy crashing and crashing and crashing...

Until it left her and she lay boneless on the bed, struggling to breathe around his hand.

He removed it, whispering apologies. “Did you... already...?”

“Should I not have?” she breathed.

“You should have,” he said. “You should do that constantly, and if you can use any part of me to do it, you should feel abundantly free to use it.”

A giggle burst out of her.

He laughed, too. “You’re going to send me straight to hell, aren’t you?”

She furrowed her brow. “Am I?” She touched his chest again. She felt bold and loose and good. She touched his belly, touched below his belly, touched—

There.

She had him in her hand now, and he was so very, very hard and hot. It was the same thing—that vulnerability along with some kind of fierce power. With this part of him in her hand, she controlled him, but he could use it to take control of her, to pierce her, and she wanted to surrender to that, to give herself over to him.

He shivered, shutting his eyes, a moan leaking out of his lips. “Well, you’ve, erm, you’ve found that.”

She squeezed him.

He grunted. “You’re good at that, aren’t you?”

This made her remember Balley, his little tutorials, the ways he'd instructed her to touch him, and she almost dropped Nothshire's prick, but she didn't, because this was different. That had made her feel stupid and dirty and embarrassed, like Balley's servant to command, but this was her own choice, and she liked being in charge of it, of him, of her Nothshire.

But he wasn't hers, she thought.

She stroked him anyway.

He panted. "Very, very good at that," he breathed.

"I want it inside me," she said. "That's why you're here. That's what you'll do this time."

"Oh, yes," he said in a low voice. "I want that, too. That is definitely why I'm here."

"So, now, then?" she breathed. She pulled on him, struggling to extricate her leg so that she could line him up, put him where she wanted.

He simply knelt there, eyes closed, letting her do as she liked. This pleased her, and she giggled again, giggled as she rearranged them.

"I'm funny like this, I suppose?" he said dryly. "I think you've entirely mastered me, my lady. Do what you will with me."

"I shall," she said brightly, moving her hips, pulling on his hard member. She put it against herself, but then she rubbed him against the top part of herself, the sensitive part, and she got distracted from tucking it inside. Instead, she just rubbed the head of him against the slippery, just climaxed little nub of her own body, and it was heavenly, perfectly heavenly. She moved her hips, moved his prick, made little

breathy sounds, and decided she could likely do this forever, too.

He put his hands on her hips. He lifted her, moving her, moving away from the part that felt good, prodding her, lower and lower and—

She gasped.

He grunted.

He was in.

He slid in easily, all the way to his hilt, and he was huge and thick and taking up every spare bit of space inside her. She felt an echo of the top of him behind her belly button. She felt the stretch of him at her opening. She mewled, because it was so much. Was it good? She didn't know. It was too much like it had been with Balley, she thought, maybe worse than it had been with Balley. Balley hadn't been this big .

She must have tensed.

Because he stroked the outside of her thighs, not moving inside her, not doing anything, and his voice was gentle, questioning. "If you're not all right, it can stop, viscountess," he rumbled. "It can stop any time, any time at all."

She only shook her head. She didn't know what she wanted.

"You feel like the tightest of silk gloves," he murmured. "You feel like everything good in the entire world. I want... are you all right?"

"Fine," she managed, but her voice squeaked a little.

He met her gaze, his brow furrowed. He moved one hand, questing. His thumb

brushed against her little sensitive nub.

She let out a breath. “ Oh. ”

He smiled. “There, then.” He brushed her again, and he thrust his hugeness in and out.

She shuddered, and it was a good shudder. Was it a good shudder? She didn't know. She needed to be sure. “Do that again,” she gasped.

He chuckled and obeyed.

She liked that. Oh, she very much liked that. She liked how big he was, how much he was, how she could think of nothing else except this reality, one where she was pinned down to her bed by his weight and girth, where she was invaded and jammed entirely full of his enormousness, where he was taking her, having his way with her, where she was consumed by being had by this man.

She started to gasp.

He thrust into her, again and again, slow and deliberate, and with each intense thrust, he brushed the sensitive nub of her with his thumb. His finger was so gentle there, just barely touching her, feathering against her, even as his thrusts seemed so forceful, so intense.

This man was just this way , she thought. He was a delightful bundle of opposites, gentle and ferocious, all at once. Balley had only been ferocious. He'd been missing this other part, this sweet part, this human part.

She let out a moan, and she started to climb again, for another climax. Oh, yes, she wanted to feel what it would be like to clench around him, with him stuck all the way

inside her when she did. “Please,” she said, shutting her eyes, tilting back her head. “Please, give it to me again.”

He gasped. “I...”

She opened her eyes.

But he gave her a stiff nod, even as he moved inside her. “I can hang on for you, my lady, I can. Whatever you need.”

So, then she gazed into his eyes, and he looked into her, and she looked into him, and her body swelled and pulsed as he worked himself within her and kept up the gentle pattern of his thumb brushing her again and again, and she climbed and climbed and climbed .

It was intense, and she wanted to look away, but some force stopped her, something kept her looking directly into his eyes as the pleasure took on some other quality inside her, something impossibly good, something incredibly intimate, something that belonged not just to her but to them both.

And when it happened, when she did crest against him, her body clenching madly on his huge hardness inside her, there were tears in her eyes.

He gasped and yanked himself out of her and she was confused, letting out some noise of protest, one so loud that it must have been heard throughout the entire town house.

He was off the bed, taking some article of his clothing with him, turning his back on her.

“What...?” She sat up, reaching for him.

When he turned, he was bundling up his smallclothes with one fist, and his nostrils were flaring.

“What happened?” she said.

He clenched his massive hand around his smallclothes, panting. “Nothing,” he said.

She furrowed her brow. “You did... inside me, didn’t you?” she whispered.

He climbed back onto the bed and pulled her into his arms. He kissed her forehead. “That’s the bargain, isn’t it, my lady? I wouldn’t go back on my word.”

She looked up at him, looked into his eyes, and it was just the way it had been when their bodies had been joined and they had been looking into each other, and she felt sure she could see the truth of him, the truth of his very soul, and she was mollified. She touched his chest. She could feel that she was slippery between her thighs, anyway, and she had never been that slippery with Balley. He had.

And then the knowledge of that hit her and she buried her face against his chest. “Oh, Lord,” she breathed. “Oh, Lord, oh, Lord.”

He dragged a hand down her spine, a soothing large hand. His breathing was ragged. “You’re... you’re all right?”

Her voice was muffled, but it all came out in a rush. “You said there were ways around it, didn’t you? Getting a woman with child, I mean?”

He breathed, noisy. “I... did.” His voice was careful.

“I just wonder if we...” She pulled her head back. “M-maybe... you don’t want to get me with child, anyway, do you?”

His mouth worked.

She cringed. She put her face into his chest again.

It was quiet for several long moments.

He spoke again, and his voice was very deep. "I'm confused, my lady."

"I am too, Your Grace," she whispered. "That wasn't... I didn't know it was ever like that, I suppose."

"Me either," he rasped.

"But I liked it," she said. "I liked it a lot, and... and..."

"Oh, yes," he said. " Yes. "

"So, then, just that," she said. "More of that. That's enough of a favor, I think."

He cleared his throat. "You're saying... you wish me to bed you in exchange for going to your brother's house?"

"Mmm," she said. "You said you can sneak in. Can you do it there? At his house?"

He cleared his throat again. "Shouldn't prove to be too much of a difficulty, I don't think."

"But then, from then on, you simply go around it, and we wait."

"Wait," he repeated.

“Yes,” she said firmly, now suddenly feeling decided. “Yes, eventually, I shall wish you to actually get me with child, of course. Eventually. But no reason to rush it, perhaps.”

He only breathed.

“You don’t wish to make that bargain,” she muttered, trying to pull away from him.

“Oh, I’d be a fool not to make that bargain,” he said. “An utter fool, and I...” He sighed. “I am only thinking that I perhaps should tell you something.”

“What?”

“Well, why are you saying this?” he said. “Why are you suddenly changing your mind?”

“I don’t know,” she said, shrugging. She struggled against his arms.

He let go of her entirely.

She rolled over onto her back and addressed the ceiling. “Maybe I didn’t think it all through in the strictest of senses is all? When I think of being with child, it frightens me, I suppose. I’m not sure if I’m quite ready, just as I wasn’t ready for that child of Janet’s, when it was in my arms, and I was relieved not to have had it, and then I... now... I suppose I could be now, which I find makes me rather—”

“I didn’t spend inside you.”

She sat up, her eyes wide.

He groaned, and he reached over and picked up his smallclothes. He uncrumpled

them, and there it was, the telltale wet spot.

She let out a noise of disbelief. “But you said—”

“I know.” He tossed them away.

“You were lying.”

“Marry me,” he said.

She gasped. “You have not just said that.”

“Whatever this is between us, my lady, it must mean something.”

She bit down on her bottom lip, looking him over. “Because it’s so different, you mean, for both of us. So good.”

“A fucking lightning bolt from the heavens,” he said. Then he winced. “Apologies, I didn’t mean to swear in front of you.”

“I’ve heard that word before,” she said softly, shaking her head. “I don’t know, though, I don’t know. I still don’t trust you.”

“You trust me to hold your pleasure in my hand, to look at your bare body, to—”

“It’s not enough,” she said, pulling her legs up to her chest, hugging them there.

He let out a breath. “You wouldn’t want to be married to someone like me, anyway.”

“I don’t think I would,” she said.

He dragged both of his hands over his face.

“So, you came here with the intention of lying to me,” she said softly. “Of making a bargain with me and not holding up your end of it.”

He was quiet.

“Not going to deny it?”

He sat up in the bed and found his trousers. “Well, I suppose I understand it now, what I was asking Arthford last night. He is in love with some woman who will never marry him, and I was confused about that, but I see it rather clearly now, so that’s interesting.”

Had he just said he was in love with her? Her heart gave a mighty little pulse in her chest, just one, a squeeze that made her tingle all over. She bowed her head.

“Look, all right, fine. We don’t get married. I don’t get you with child, not yet, anyway. We’re agreed on that, are we not?”

“W-well, you’re not trustworthy at all. You are a liar.”

“All right, I suppose so, yes.”

“You came here with the intention of... of fucking me, and you did that just because you... you...”

“I’m a man, what do you want from me, my lady?” He got up and began buttoning his trousers.

“Well, I wish to say I want nothing from you,” she said. “But I think if I did, we

would both know I was lying, and I—unlike you—am not a liar.”

“You’re indescribably better than me in nearly every way. That goes without saying.” He put on his shirt. “But can we not simply have this, whatever it is, for however long it lasts, please? Because you are mine now—”

“I am not,” she said, clenching both hands into fists.

“You are,” he said. “And if it will please you to hear, I shall freely admit that I am yours. I don’t entirely know what you could get me to do for you at this point. It rather frightens me, I have to say. But it’s done now. Please say that we…” He looked at her, his gaze so very vulnerable that she knew she had the power to crush him with one word. She had looked into his eyes while he’d been inside her body, while they’d been joined together in some ancient and powerful joining, and now, they belonged to each other, as he was saying. “Please.”

“I’m not happy about it, I don’t think, but yes,” she said in a resigned voice. “You’ll come back to me, then?”

“Definitely,” he said. “As often as possible, I think.”

“Good,” she said.

He gave her a little smile. “I don’t wish it as a bargain, not at all. I wish it to be willingness on both our parts. If you won’t go to your brother’s, then I shall understand that.”

“But you want me to do it.”

He nodded.

“What are you going to do to the Earl of Penbrake?”

“Someone who I owe favors to wishes to have a conversation with him, that’s all,” said Nothshire.

He was lying to her. He was a liar. She was in love with an untrustworthy liar who would do all manner of awful things if it suited him.

Well, at least I am not gone with his child, she thought. Actually, that’s a very good thing.

“That’s where you’re going? To Lilsbil’s End?” she said. “And if I don’t go, I won’t see you until you get back?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“So, then, I’ll go,” she said.

He smiled at her again. “Good.”

“And you’ll come to me there?”

He nodded again, his smile widening. “Nothing could keep me away.”

She couldn’t stop herself from smiling back. “Good.”

They stared at each other, grinning fools.

“I want to kiss you again,” he said.

“All right,” she said.

He beckoned.

She got out of the bed and went to his arms.

She would never tire of his kisses, she didn't think. Never. What had she gotten herself into? What was she going to do about it? This was a disaster.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CHARLOTTE HAD TO know. She was Patience's lady's maid, and she would be attending her. She would come along to Kent, to visit her brother. But Patience didn't want to tell her, because it was all very dreadful.

So, then, she didn't.

She told Charlotte that they were going to visit her brother, and Charlotte didn't seem to care much about that, only wishing to revisit the conversation they'd been having last night.

"I don't want you to get some impression that I don't trust you, my lady," said Charlotte. "I was trying to say the exact opposite, in fact, that I do trust you. I don't know if I made that plain."

Patience could hardly even remember what they'd spoken of now. It seemed a thousand years ago. "I don't worry about that, Charlotte."

"Well, I thought you might counter that you have trusted me with all manner of your secrets, but I wish to point out that it is not the same, because we are not equal—"

"What do you mean by that?" said Patience, tilting her head to one side. "I don't think of you as lesser than me, Charlotte."

"I mean, our statuses, in society, they are different. By virtue of the fact that you are my employer, there is simply less risk in your confiding in me."

“Now, that’s not true,” said Patience, shaking her head. “Servants’ gossip is quite a danger to me.”

“Danger to what?” said Charlotte.

“To everything,” said Patience.

“To your reputation, perhaps,” said Charlotte. “Which means that you would have no one to associate with, I suppose, but you’re already isolated, so I don’t see how it would matter. And if I told your secrets and you found out, you could destroy me. You could dismiss me without a reference. You could make it nearly impossible for me to get another job, and I might end up on the streets.”

“I would never do that,” said Patience.

“I know you wouldn’t,” said Charlotte. “I am only saying that you could. And this is why you don’t trust men, do you see? It’s similar. They have the capacity to rob you of your wealth and your means to survive. But I am telling you that I have trusted you, and that you might need to simply trust someone, even if he has that sort of power over you. I think you do wish to get married.”

Patience sputtered.

“Oh, this is not my place,” said Charlotte, sighing, touching her forehead. “I have become far too free with you—”

“I do not wish to get married, no matter what it is that you wish. I know that your marriage was different than my marriage, so perhaps you are hopeful about such things. However, I cannot be!”

“I am only thinking that it is no kind of life, running away from even the slightest hint

of danger, that is all. You may end up perfectly safe, but you may not have anything to live for. You have never been in love, my lady. You can't live a life without ever knowing what that is."

Patience bowed her head.

"And I'm not saying that you should be in love with the Duke of Nothshire, of course. He sounds like a very bad choice. I don't know. Perhaps it's good if we are going to your brother's house. We can get you away from that man. Absence is likely just the thing."

Patience cringed inwardly. She should tell Charlotte that Nothshire would be there.

She didn't.

"CHAMPERAIGNE," SAID NOTHSHIRE , stepping into his sitting room. It was early morning still. He had just arrived back from sneaking out of the viscountess's house. Upon entering his own house, he'd been informed that he had a visitor waiting for him.

If it had been anyone else, they'd have been turned away, but Nothshire had told his servants not to do that with Champeraigne. It didn't do to insult the man who was blackmailing you, after all.

"Good morning," said Champeraigne. "Have you come to your senses, then, and decided to do my little job?"

Nothshire groaned, sitting down. "I didn't send you word," he said, sighing. "That slipped my mind somehow. Have you already told anyone anything?"

"So, you have come to your senses?"

“It was decided last night,” said Nothshire. “I spoke to the others. We are already working on a plan. Penbrake is in Kent, at Lilsbil’s End, the Hawthorne estate. We are going to Dunrose’s nearby house, and I have someone who is within the house who will allow me to come and call upon her.”

“Oh, so resourceful,” said Champeraigne. “I should really delegate more to the four of you, shouldn’t I? What couldn’t the Lords of the Crossroads undertake?”

“We’re not the Lords of the Crossroads anymore,” he muttered.

“Lilsbil’s End,” said Champeraigne, nodding. “Hmm. That seems fortuitous. I could make arrangements to be there myself, I think. Then you can bring Penbrake to me.”

“Where will you be?”

“I don’t know yet. I have acquaintances, friends, the like, with whom I can stay. Let me find that myself. You’ll be at Dunrose’s, and I shall send word there. We shall determine our next move. Tell Arthford, if you please, that if he attempts to deal with Penbrake himself, I shan’t like it.”

“He thought you might want him to stand in for you in a duel.”

Champeraigne laughed. “A duel. Just like Arthford to think in that way. No. Do not assume that you know what I am after.”

“This isn’t justice for something that Penbrake did to your mistress, then?”

“The marchioness is quite capable of taking care of herself,” said Champeraigne.

“Yes, I should have realized you’d never be interested in justice.”

“The world is not just, Nothshire. Perhaps you hadn’t noticed.”

NOTHSHIRE STOOD IN the warm spring air outside the carriage, gazing off into the distance. This was the fourth time they’d stopped the carriage for Dunrose to vomit.

Arthford was puffing on his pipe and handing it off to Rutchester here and there as the three of them stood in companionable silence. The only sound was Dunrose’s retching. He was on all fours in a ditch, moaning here and there.

There would have been a time when one of them, maybe all of them, would have been more compassionate toward Dunrose, but they were all past that at this point. There was nothing to be done. They’d tried everything with him. They’d tried being nice. They’d tried being cruel. Dunrose was committed to destroying himself, however, and this was simply something they all accepted at this point.

Dunrose rocked back onto his knees, pumping a fist into the air. “Better!” he declared.

“When did he stop drinking, do you reckon?” said Arthford around his pipe.

“Two hours ago,” Dunrose returned, getting to his feet. He wiped at his mouth, giving them all a devilish grin. “And I wish I’d brought something for the road.”

“No,” they all said, more or less in unison.

Dunrose snickered. He half-walked, half-staggered back toward the carriage, feeling around inside his jacket until he came out with his snuff tin. He snorted a bit of that, wiped his nose, wiped his mouth again and then beckoned for Arthford’s pipe.

“I’m not letting you put your mouth on this,” said Arthford dryly.

Dunrose lifted a shoulder. “Oh, fine,” he said and got into the carriage.

Nothshire followed him, as did Rutchester.

Arthford stayed out there, puffing away.

“Oh, just bring it into the carriage,” muttered Nothshire.

“No, no,” said Arthford. “Dunrose says it turns his stomach.”

“My stomach’s fine now,” said Dunrose, yawning as he scrunched into the corner of the carriage.

Arthford dumped out the pipe anyway before climbing inside.

“At this rate, we’ll be getting there in three weeks,” said Nothshire, shutting the door. He called for the carriage to take off again.

“Is she there yet?” said Arthford.

“Who?” said Rutchester.

“Oh, you didn’t explain this?” said Arthford to Nothshire.

Nothshire had, in fact, told none of them anything. He wasn’t sure that Arthford was going to take well to the mysterious nature of Champeraigne’s interest in Penbrake. And he didn’t know how to talk about whatever had passed between himself and the Viscountess of Balley.

He didn’t know if he rightly should talk about it. It seemed very private and nearly sacred, something that belonged to only the two of them. Talking about it might

cheapen it somehow, he thought.

It had never been like that with him and a woman.

Admittedly, he hadn't had a lot of experiences, and most of them had been with women he'd either paid or had only been with him because they were getting something out of it. There had been nights wherein he was carousing and women were along because they wanted to partake in the drink or the celebratory atmosphere or even because they were looking for some roof over their head for the evening. He'd been younger, then.

All of the experiences had been sort of painfully awkward. He had the idea that he was supposed to take charge of it, so he had, as much as he'd been able. He'd almost always been drunk. But he couldn't ever shake the idea that the woman in question didn't really like it, that he'd been sort of imposing himself on her in some way, and that she was only doing it for him, that she would have been just as happy not to deal with his prodding prick under her skirts.

Generally, he sort of tried to get it over with as quickly as possible.

With the viscountess... Patience, he thought reverently. He could likely call her by her first name, couldn't he? Now, that intimacy would be very appropriate. He thought of her calling him Benedict, and he got an embarrassing cockstand out of nowhere.

Hell and damnation, what was this woman doing to him?

With her, she'd wanted him to hold back, stave off his pleasure, because she was enjoying him that much. He'd never seen a woman have an orgasm until her. He'd thought he had, but he'd realized, when he felt her twitching against his leg that night in the inn, that every single one of them had been feigned by women who had likely

simply been trying to speed him along, get the entire business over with.

Nothing in the world had ever compared to that sensation, riding the edge of his pleasure like a jagged thing, something that wanted to overwhelm him, something that he kept in just for her. Staring into her eyes, watching her own pleasure cloud her expression, knowing he was responsible for making her feel that way, it had been a heady thing, something too wondrous for words.

He could not wait to see her again. Not just because he wanted to be back between her thighs, either, because he did. But because he liked the feeling he'd had with her, the feeling of being wanted, of bringing pleasure to someone. He'd never felt it before. It was the best thing he'd ever felt.

"Our way into the Hawthorne household is through the Viscountess Balley," Nothshire told the carriage. "Penbrake is staying with her brother. She will be visiting her brother as well. I am going to call upon her. We can all go, I suppose, though why I'm bringing you courting with me, I don't know."

"You're courting her," said Rutchester, looking him over. "So, that is what you're after, in the end. Are you going to marry her?"

Nothshire deflated, including his embarrassing cockstand. He wanted to marry her, but he didn't suppose that was a good idea, considering that he would not be good for her, not in any way. Bringing her into the circle of his life was only endangering her, making her life worse. But perhaps it was inevitable at this point. He'd likely kill anyone else who came near her, his code be damned.

She was his.

That was all.

“He’s made some bargain with her because she wants a child,” said Arthford. “It’s convoluted, truly, but Nothshire is reliably making it extremely convoluted.”

“It’s not a bargain anymore,” said Nothshire hotly, because suddenly, he wanted it known that this woman just wanted him around, just liked his prick inside her, just gazed at him and accepted him in a way that made him feel more like a man than anything he’d ever done in his damned life. And then, of course, he knew he couldn’t say that out loud, because it made him sound pathetic and needy in some other way.

“What?” said Arthford, grinning at him. “What happened, Nothshire?”

“Never mind,” said Nothshire. “I don’t wish to talk about this. There are some things that are simply not the affairs of others.”

“But it’s us ,” said Dunrose, sitting up. “I would tell you anything about me, anything at all.”

“We know this, Dunrose,” said Arthford. He grinned at the others in the carriage slyly. “Well, when I left Nothshire, he was in the midst of making some plan to talk his way into her bed, and I assume he did exactly that and then... what?”

Nothshire decided to change the subject. “I spoke to Champeraigne, and he says he is going to come to Kent, and he will send word to Dunrose’s about where he is staying. He seems to think he’ll dictate to us what we are to do next.”

“I thought we were going to drag him out of there kicking and screaming,” said Rutchester.

“No need for an elaborate ruse to get into the house where he’s staying if so,” said Nothshire.

“But Champeraigne wishes to duel him or something, yes?” said Arthford.

“He said it definitely wasn’t a duel,” said Nothshire, remembering that he hadn’t wanted to bring this up. Damn everything to hell.

“No?” said Arthford.

Nothshire sighed. “Perhaps we might travel in silence.”

“What else did he say?” said Arthford.

“He said that you shouldn’t hurt Penbrake,” said Nothshire.

“But this is about Seraphine.”

“I don’t know if it is,” said Nothshire. “He says that the marchioness can take care of herself.”

Arthford said nothing. He didn’t outwardly react. He was quiet and still, and Nothshire wasn’t sure he liked that, necessarily.

“Go back to the part where you wormed your way into the viscountess’s bed,” said Dunrose, smiling lazily. “What did her bosom look like? Does she have very large nipples or those tiny, little pink ones?”

Nothshire reached across the carriage and hit him on the back of his head.

“Ouch,” said Dunrose, glaring at him.

“Oh, then,” said Arthford in a soft, assessing voice. “Our Nothshire is growing up, is he?”

“What do you mean?” said Rutchester, furrowing his brow.

Arthford gave him a look, and Nothshire looked away.

“Nothshire,” said Arthford, “if it was her, if it was your viscountess that had been ravaged—”

“We can’t cross Champeraigne,” said Nothshire.

“But if it were, you wouldn’t care, would you?” said Arthford.

“This isn’t the same thing,” said Nothshire. “Your marchioness is not even your marchioness. She is married to another man and it is his business to see to her protection, not yours.”

“Married to another man and fucking half of London,” said Rutchester pointedly.

Arthford looked sidelong at Rutchester. “I thought you would be on my side in this. I thought you’d be quite pleased to have a chance to cut him to ribbons.”

“If you all want all these people dead so badly, you might think about actually doing it yourselves,” said Rutchester. “I don’t actually enjoy murdering people.”

They all just looked at him.

“I don’t,” said Rutchester. He nodded at Arthford. “You always travel with a book, don’t you? Or five, since you can’t decide which one you might wish to read? Give me one of them.”

Arthford opened up his travel bag. “Help yourself.”

Dunrose shrugged. “I don’t see what the obsession is with having a woman all to yourself, anyway. Frightful amount of responsibility if you ask me.” He yawned again, and then shut his eyes. “I think I’d like a nap.”

Rutchester pointedly opened a book.

Arthford looked out the window.

The rest of the journey passed with little conversation.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

WHEN PATIENCE ARRIVED at her brother's house, he seemed a bit put out that she'd imposed on his hospitality, which she'd expected. He made some comment about how she seemed to have done all right for herself, hadn't she? Hadn't they both?

After all, he'd been able to make use of the money that Balley had given him to get out of debt, and she had her dowager house and her dowry, and neither of them had to put up with Balley himself anymore.

Then he said, "Dreadful business, what happened to him, of course. Quite dreadful." He looked over her clothing. "You're still in mourning, aren't you? Should you even be out visiting people?"

"Visiting my family?" she said, all innocence. "I am so happy to have your support in this sad time."

The household, however, was a bit of a bachelor bacchanal, she had to admit. Her brother was there, along with the Earl of Penbrake and three other unmarried titled men, and they seemed to be engaged primarily in talking about going hunting, but really spending all their time playing cards and drinking.

The first day she arrived, there was a formal dinner, and she dressed for it. The men all left after dinner for cigars and drinks and she, the lone female, was sent off to the sitting room to wait for them. Just when she'd decided she'd go to her room and read, they all appeared and expected her to entertain them.

She had some skill with the piano-forte. All women of her upbringing did, or with some instrument or other, and she had a passable singing voice. So, she sat down and played and sang, and they sang along, already drunk. As the evening wore on, they began to leer at her and make comments about her that made her brother fume and point out, over and over, that his sister was in mourning .

When she finally got back to her room, she exploded to Charlotte about all of this, who listened patiently for some time as she helped her to undress.

Finally, however, Charlotte paused, hands unlacing her stays and said, “My lady, why have we come here?”

Patience groaned. She was caught, now, and she must explain. “It’s a favor for the Duke of Nothshire.”

Charlotte let go of her stays and took two steps backward.

Patience turned around. “I know. I should have told you before. I didn’t know how to say it. I’m a bit ashamed of myself, truly.”

“When did he get you doing favors for him? I thought you were holding your knowledge of him over his head and forcing him to do things for you? ”

“I was,” said Patience. “I am. It’s only that everything is complicated now, because he said he didn’t want things to be bargains between us, just both of us willing, and it seemed like such a high-minded thing to say in the moment, but I was still reeling from his fingers and his kisses, and I suppose I—”

“Kisses? So, he spoke to you about this in that inn, when you threw yourself at him after you’d had too much port?”

“Well, no. It was a different time.”

Charlotte took a deep breath. “You... my lady... for all your words about not trusting men, I don’t think you’re particularly good at protecting yourself.”

Patience’s face fell. It was true.

“What is this favor? Why?”

“I don’t know. He wouldn’t tell me that.”

“You agreed to it without knowing what it was? ”

Patience was quiet.

“When did you even kiss him? When have you even seen him since that trip to get the infant?”

“He snuck into my bedchamber,” said Patience.

“Oh,” said Charlotte. “Oh, I see. So, you’ve entirely lost your head, in other words. And I suppose no more from him about marrying you.”

“Well, he actually did propose.” Patience furrowed her brow. “It was more of a command, really. It was affecting in that way. He was lying on my pillows and he has such shoulders and his voice is so deep and he said, ‘Marry me.’ And I said, ‘You have not just said that,’ and he said that I was his now and that it must mean something, that we should get married, but I...”

“Get him to marry you, by all means,” said Charlotte. “If you are going to be acting like an utter idiot for a titled playboy of a man, get him to take responsibility. If he

tries to sneak into your bedchamber again, my lady, bar the door. Tell him not again, not until he marries you.”

“But... he’s...” Patience threw up her hands. “He doesn’t seem like the sort of man who would make a very good husband, does he?”

“Well, I don’t know,” said Charlotte. “But he seems like an even worse paramour, if you ask me.”

“He’s not the least bit trustworthy,” said Patience. “He lied to me, seemed willing to say anything and everything to get what he wanted from me.”

“So, you let him kiss you, then?”

“Well, I found that out after the kisses.”

“But then you still agreed to do him this favor!”

“Yes?”

“You agree that’s mad, do you not?”

Patience sighed heavily.

Charlotte moved closer to her, gesturing for her to turn back around. She started yanking on Patience’s stays. “Is there a chance you’re carrying his child?”

“No,” said Patience.

“Only kisses, then.”

“Well...” Patience’s face felt very hot. “He, erm, outside of my body, into his smallclothes.”

“Oh, my lady, that’s no guarantee of anything at all. People think that’s going to work, and it doesn’t, not always.”

“It doesn’t?”

“No,” snapped Charlotte. “No, definitely not. Anyway, you have to get him to marry you.”

“Well, but I don’t , even if I am with child,” she said. “I can still enact my other plan.”

“This was the one where you and I are taking care of the entire household in the north, all alone, while you are heavily pregnant? That one?”

“I suppose I didn’t ask if that was something you wished to do,” muttered Patience.

“You did not,” said Charlotte.

“It’s a terrible plan, then.”

“No one will ever believe it, my lady. If you dismiss all your servants and then get new ones and claim that infant is a foundling, everyone will know exactly what is what. It will be obvious.”

“Yes, but no one really pays any attention to me, so I don’t suppose they’ll care.”

“It’s ludicrous is what it is,” said Charlotte. “You have a duke, a damnable duke , who seems perfectly willing to marry you, and you claim you don’t trust him, but you

let him have you, completely have you, and then you go off and do his bidding if he asks you for favors, so you don't act as if you don't trust him. Why don't you wish to marry him?"

Patience wasn't entirely sure about that.

"Arms up, my lady," said Charlotte.

Patience put her arms up.

Charlotte yanked her stays off. She huffed.

"Thinking of being married again, it makes me feel as if I can't breathe," said Patience, in a very tiny voice. "I don't know if I can bear it. I can't simply consign myself to that, to being some man's property again."

"You are already behaving like his property," snapped Charlotte.

Was that true?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

NOTHSHIRE ARRIVED AT Dunrose's estate and there was already a note from Champeraigne waiting, indicating that he was settled nearby, only two miles to the west, at an estate rented by the Marquis de Fateux. The marquis himself was not actually there, however. He tended to steer clear of whatever his wife did with other men, not that he could possibly be ignorant of it all, considering the marchioness was very free with herself.

Near as Nothshire understood it, the marquis and his wife had escaped France along with Champeraigne, who was the marchioness's longstanding lover. When they arrived here, they were penniless, practically paupers, and it was down to the scheming of the marchioness and Champeraigne that they all had any funds at all.

He knew the marchioness siphoned money from her lovers, practically like a courtesan. Champeraigne obviously took his pound of flesh from himself and his friends. He had other ways of getting money, also, seemingly none of them legitimate. If the three of them had any scruples, he supposed it had died in the bloodiness of the Revolution. Fleeing one's home in fear of one's life did tend to make a person desperate and willing to do anything, Nothshire supposed.

He and the other dukes were summoned there in the morning, which Nothshire wasn't looking forward to. He shared the news with the others. Dunrose was nonplussed and Rutchester was in a snit about the state of his bedchamber, having already put the fear of God into Dunrose's staff. Arthford asked if that meant the marchioness was there, and Nothshire said he didn't know. He thought about telling Arthford not to go and speak to that woman, but he had no control over whatever

Arthford did, not in the end.

And anyway, he had no leg to stand on, because he had already committed himself to the idea that he was going to see Patience.

He went on horseback, too early. He found himself lurking outside the house, looking into windows to see her playing the piano forte for her brother and his guests. He waited until she finally left and then went around the house, trying the doors.

It wasn't hard, but then it never was, to get into a country estate. There were always a great many doors, more doors than anyone could possibly guard, not even with a large retinue of servants, and these doors never seemed to be locked.

Then, the task became finding his way through the massive estate, which wasn't as difficult as one might expect, because large portions of it were entirely closed off. All of the bedrooms in an estate like this might only be filled once every three or four years, if a large party were hosted. But usually, most of the rooms were empty and cold.

He moved through those parts of the house until he found the wing that had been opened.

He tried rooms.

None of these were locked either. One thing that was true of men of his class (and women too) was that they were laughably secure in themselves, no real thought to any danger ever befalling them. They assumed they could protect themselves with their wealth and status, and the hell of it was that they were often right.

There was a cluster of rooms at the front of the wing which seemed to all be housing the men downstairs. Then there was a raft of empty rooms.

Finally, at the very end of the hallway, he found her room.

But just as he was trying the door, something moved out of the corner of his eye.

He straightened, turning, and a woman appeared, melting out of the shadows. At first, he thought it might be Patience, but then he immediately realized it was not. This woman was a servant.

Damnation. But he had coin. He'd pay her for her silence, and every servant had a price. He was glad he'd remembered his purse instead of leaving it attached to his horse.

"Don't even think about it," hissed the woman.

"I don't mean the master of this house any harm," he said to the woman in a soft voice. "I'm sure we can come to some kind of mutually beneficial arrangement if we talk. Perhaps in one of these rooms?" He gestured at one of the doors behind him.

The woman sniffed, haughty, and marched into the room.

He followed her and shut the door.

"What you don't seem to understand is how innocent she is," said the woman.

He turned away from the door. What were they talking about?

"She has been through things, bad things, things a woman shouldn't have to endure, and they have given her the semblance of wisdom, but she has no true understanding of the way the world works. Deep inside, she is practically a starry-eyed girl, and she knows that you are not a good man, but she can't help but hope otherwise. I would beg you, leave her alone. There must be someone else you can ply your wiles upon,

Your Grace.”

He swallowed. “You must be the viscountess’s maid,” he said, putting things together. “Is that right?”

She nodded. It was dark in the room. He could barely make out her features, but he could see her form well enough.

“So, she’s told you everything, in that way that women tell everything to their maids,” he muttered. “Why do women do that?”

“Stop telling her you want to marry her if you don’t,” said the maid.

“I do want to marry her,” he protested. “She’s the one who keeps saying—”

“You do not behave like a man who is trying to marry a woman.”

“No?” he said. “Why not?”

“Because you have bedded her, obviously.”

He blinked at the maid. “You do know what people do when they’re married, I assume.”

“Oh, please,” she said.

“I’m only saying, I don’t see how wanting a person in that way precludes marriage.”

“You wish to marry her? You swear it to me?”

“She doesn’t want to marry me.”

“Well, you have to change her mind,” said the maid. “And you can’t make her think that there’s some foolproof way not to put a child in her, any way besides abstaining, which you don’t seem capable of doing.”

This was... mortifying. “She really told you everything ,” he said, shaking his head. “I suppose you got some detailed description of my prick while you were at it.”

“No!” said the maid.

“Well, thank heaven for small favors,” he said sarcastically. “But I’m at a bit of a disadvantage, because she never speaks of you at all.”

The maid let out a soft, sad laugh. “Well, I suppose she wouldn’t.”

“Yes, here you are, so righteous, doing everything in your power to save her, and she likely wouldn’t thank you for it.”

The maid folded her arms over her chest.

“But,” he said, thinking it through, “this isn’t the worst thing, I suppose, because you are loyal to her, so you won’t say anything about my being here. You wouldn’t damage her reputation in that way. I suppose I should be thankful for that.” He blew out a huff of air. “I can pay you anyway. I don’t mind if you’d like a little extra to keep quiet.”

“I am not extorting you, Your Grace!” she protested, very offended.

He dragged a hand over his face. He wanted this terribly embarrassing interaction to end. How did he get out of it?

“Why did you tell her to come here?” said the maid. “What are you involving her

in?”

“Oh, no,” he said. “That is not something I am going to speak about.”

“Something very bad, then,” she said. “She says you would not be a good man to be married to. Is that true?”

He sighed heavily.

“You are taking advantage of her, and she is more innocent than you seem to understand.”

“I...” His shoulders slumped. “I know that.” He did. He hadn’t thought of himself in that way, a corrupting influence on her, a wolf preying on her, little lamb of a girl. But it was all rather true, wasn’t it? She had these ideas, things she thought she could get by with, things that would never work in the real world, and he knew it.

But it was all very strange, because she still wasn’t the way he thought of women of her class, not in that same way. She wasn’t fragile or breakable or cold. She was real and flesh and blood and good and she...

“If you know that, why?” said the maid. “Why do this to her? Do you get a charge out of soiling pure things?”

Was that what he was doing to her?

“I am sorry,” said the maid. “I am an idiot, same as her, I think. The problem is, I love her. I have never felt this way with a lady I served, but no lady I ever worked for has treated me the way she treats me, with respect. She is like my friend. I know we are not truly friends. I am not as innocent as she is, you see. But I feel that there is no one protecting her, no one at all—”

“I have protected her,” he said. “Did you do anything about that husband of hers, the one who hit her?”

“I didn’t know her then,” said the maid. “But I don’t think you did that because you wished to protect her. I think you simply wanted to take her from him. You got him out of the way so that you could sail in and... why won’t you marry her?”

“I will marry her,” he growled.

The maid regarded him. A long moment passed. Finally, she said, “If you don’t, I know all about you, Your Grace. I know all manner of things about you. Not anything about your prick, I suppose, but things you don’t want known. And I think you’ll find that I can easily spread it all about town, through a network of servants, that you regularly rob people on the highway. So, if you don’t marry her—”

“How am I supposed to force her to marry me when she doesn’t wish to marry me?”

“You’re a man. You’re a duke. There are any number of ways.”

“Yes, but I’m not that sort of man, and I’m not that sort of duke.”

She scoffed. “Oh, you are such a paragon.”

“I can’t do that to her, not if she doesn’t wish it.” He sighed.

“You have done all manner of other things to her.”

“She wanted those things,” he said. “It’s different.”

“Is it?”

“Yes.” He was firm. “It matters if a person consents to something, even if they are determined against their own good. Forcing a person to do anything, even for good reasons—”

“You steal from people!”

“As if it harms them!” he said. “They have enough to spare.”

“You kill people.”

“Not unless they need killing,” he said.

“Oh,” she said with a caustic laugh. “And you can determine such a thing?”

He sighed. “I don’t know, I suppose. Perhaps not, in the end. Perhaps not.” He stared through the darkness at her. “What is your name?” He might not recognize her in the light. He must have her name.

“Charlotte,” she said.

“Charlotte,” he said. “You’re very brave and you’re a very good maid to your mistress. But I should caution you that it’s not wise to go around threatening men who you know have no qualms about killing people.”

She went entirely still.

He turned and yanked the door open and went into the hallway.

From within the room, Charlotte let out a whimper.

He stood in the hall, debating what he should do. He’d come to see Patience, but he

felt as if all of it was strangely tainted now. He could simply leave.

If he did that, the maid would report this entire conversation to Patience. She might turn against him. For her own good, she probably should turn against him.

But between the two of them, they both knew his secrets, and he likely couldn't afford that. It wasn't only about him, that was the real sticking point. If it were, perhaps he'd offer himself up sacrificially.

But it was the others. Dunrose, Arthford, and Rutchester, they were closer to him than brothers. They all protected each other, and he was loyal to them first and foremost.

He swerved and went to Patience's door. He turned the knob.

PATIENCE HAD GOTTEN into bed, but she wasn't asleep. She was up with a candle and a book, though she wasn't reading the book. She had thought she'd heard something in the hallway, thought it was him, coming to her, as he'd said he would.

But then, the noise stopped.

She had gotten out of bed and opened the door but she hadn't seen anyone in the hallway. Now, she was trying to convince herself to extinguish the candle and sleep.

The door opened.

She sat straight up.

He stepped inside. His head was down and his shoulders were stiff. He shut the door firmly and he stalked across the room toward her bed.

She shrank from him, something instinctive going through her, because she could see

that something was wrong. If she had been a different sort of person, she might have asked if he was all right, but she had been trained, in her time with Balley, to get small and quiet and pliant when a man was upset, so she didn't say anything.

He stopped at the foot of her bed and she fought the urge to tremble. Showing fear had sometimes made Balley worse.

He furrowed his brow. She could see his expression now that he'd come close enough to be illuminated by her lit candle. "My lady? Are you all right?"

She nodded, forcing herself to smile. "Quite all right, Your Grace." Her voice was too high-pitched, though. It gave her away.

Which made her realize, somehow, that he wasn't Balley, and that her learned behavior might not be the right way to handle this situation. She let out a long, noisy breath. "You're not all right," she said.

He sighed, sitting down on her bed, on the foot of it. "I just met your maid."

"Charlotte?"

He hesitated, as if he was searching for the right words. "I know it is some female imperative to tell everything to some trusted other female confidante, and I know it is seemingly impossible for women to overcome this tendency, but I have to ask you if you could possibly tell her, at least, less."

"Oh," she said, cringing. "My apologies. I trust Charlotte implicitly. She knows all my secrets, and she would never tell anyone—"

"Well, she has just threatened to do exactly that, if I don't marry you," he said.

“What?” Patience hopped out of the bed and rushed across the room to open the door. “Charlotte,” she called into the darkened hallway.

Nothshire was there, stopping her, shutting the door. “No, no, don’t do that.”

She looked up at him. “She won’t say anything.”

“I think she’s right,” he said. “I think we should marry.”

She backed away from him, shaking her head, shaking her whole body. “No.”

He sighed.

She folded her arms over her chest. “She said that I could be with child, even if you did not spend inside me. Is that true?”

He spread his hands. “It’s unlikely. It’s unlikely enough that I considered it a negligible risk.”

“But you didn’t share that with me. You don’t share anything with me, in fact. It seems to me that you just use me. You order me about, tell me to come here—”

“You agreed,” he said.

“Yes, but only because I’m stupid when it comes to you.”

“All right, yes, we are both stupid when it comes to the other.”

“Why should I marry you? Why should I trust you? Tell me why you wished me to be here, and I shall consider it.”

He hesitated again. "I don't entirely know, to be truthful. There is someone who I am meeting with on the morrow, someone who will provide more information."

"You simply do the bidding of this someone?"

He hesitated again.

"You see? I cannot trust you to tell me anything at all."

"I have to do the bidding of this person," he said. "Because this person knows information about me that I don't want known. Something that I did, in the past, when I was very young."

She considered this. "So, you're quite used to people blackmailing you, then. That's why you came to me with the offer to do me favors for my silence. It's a way of life for you."

He sighed again. "I suppose."

"What did you do?"

He groaned.

"How badly do you want me to agree to marry you?"

"You definitely won't marry me if I tell you that," he said.

"Well, that's a rousing endorsement." She threw up her hands. She turned to look at her bed, at the crumpled bed covers. "You came here for a reason, and it wasn't to convince me to marry you, I don't think."

“No,” he agreed.

“It was, in fact, to fuck me.”

“Must you say that word?”

“As it happens, I have been waiting rather breathlessly for you to do it again,” she said. “Let’s leave off this conversation, then, and do what we both want.”

He eyed her. “You... you... damnation.”

She gathered up handfuls of her nightdress. “Perhaps if I remove this, that will entice you?”

“I’m plenty enticed,” he said. “I’m surprised you’re so easily diverted from the conversation we were having, however.”

“So am I,” she said, feeling helpless. She slowly lifted the skirts of her nightdress. “I had not thought I even really liked the act, to be honest. I thought it was awful, just awful. But you’re different.”

“ You’re different,” he countered, coming closer to her.

She yanked her nightdress off in one fluid movement.

He caught her about the waist with one hand and tugged her against his chest.

They were kissing.

She twined her arms around his neck, feeling the bright sensation that was his tongue on hers explode through her. Everything about this man made her feel mad and out of

control. It was bad. She knew it was bad, but on some level, it didn't matter.

On some level, actually, she wanted to trust him. On some level, maybe she even did. Her body trusted him, she thought, though her mind didn't. It didn't make sense to trust him, but it felt right.

His hands roamed over her bare skin—because she hadn't been wearing anything under her nightdress and she was entirely nude now—gentle but somehow desperate at the same time. He breathed in her ear, “I have been dreaming about having you close to me, dreaming about having my hands on you again. You're so beautiful. Your skin is so soft.”

She reached down and took his hand. She tugged him toward the bed.

“I can't even think,” he said, letting her pull him to the bed, his other hand going to rip his cravat free. “I shouldn't be thinking about you at all. There are so many other things to think about, and you're all I think about.”

“Yes,” she said. “For me as well.” She turned in his arms and started to unbutton his jacket.

He helped her. “You should understand... I could be a good husband to you. I am certain of it. I would worship you. We'd be happy.”

“I know that,” she said. His jacket was unbuttoned now, and she shoved it off his shoulders. “It's not about that.”

He shrugged out of the jacket entirely. He started on his waistcoat. “I know there are things about me, dark things, but I could shield you from that. I could keep you out of it—”

“You haven’t thus far,” she said, hands under his waistcoat, exploring his chest, feeling the firmness of him under his shirt.

“It would be different,” he said.

“You said before you didn’t even wish to marry me.”

“I think I didn’t like the idea of marriage in general because I didn’t understand that women could be like you,” he said. “But you’re... may I call you Patience?”

She sighed, shutting her eyes. “Yes, please.”

“Patience, you are like a goddess .”

“I am not.” She liked his saying it. She felt shy and happy.

He bent down and captured one of her nipples with his mouth.

She gasped.

He picked her up, pulled her into his arms, and climbed onto the bed. “You are, I think. Or else, it’s some kind of enchantment.”

She giggled, running her hand over his shoulders. “Yes, yes. It’s like a magic spell in some story. When do I change you from a beast to a man?”

“I’m not a beast.” He kissed her. He pulled back, looking down at her. “Maybe I am. You deserve better than a man like me, no question, but I can’t... I need...”

“No, I’m yours,” she said, sighing, writhing against him. “That’s true, even if I’m not your wife.”

He groaned, kissing her again, hard. He reached back with one hand, behind his head, and pulled his shirt off with one hand, and he took his unbuttoned waistcoat along with it. “I’m always wearing far too many clothes when I’m with you.”

“Agreed,” she groaned, hands on his bare skin now.

“And I’m always like this, half in a frenzy, and I want to take my time with you. I want to touch you and taste you—”

“Taste?” she whispered, intrigued.

He grinned at her, a rakish sort of grin. He scooted down and he put his mouth on her there .

She let out a little cry of shock. “What are you doing?”

He laughed, and she liked the way his laughter felt against her there.

She moaned. “That seems filthy .”

“Mmm,” he agreed. “Well,” he breathed into her sex, “I’m a filthy beast, and you’ll simply have to endure that, my lady.”

“Patience,” she said.

“Patience,” he agreed.

“And you are... Benedict, yes?”

He moaned into her. “Oh, yes,” he said and then he licked her, one long delightful lick, in the most sensitive and wondrous of places, and she lost herself.

Well, for a time, she lost herself, because it was very, very nice, and she liked it quite a great deal, but then she began to think that he must not like it. How could a person like doing that? It couldn't taste good, not at all, and that part of her was getting the way it did, all slippery with her body's juices, which she thought smelled strange and must taste very strange, too, and she must have tensed, because he spread her legs out and breathed that she must relax, relax, take whatever filthy thing her beastman wished to do to her, and those words sent her soaring into another stratosphere.

She was lost again.

For a time, but then she started to think that he'd been doing this forever , and he probably wished she'd just have a climax already, mustn't he? She needed to concentrate, to make that happen, so that he could stop, because even if he did like it (he couldn't) then it must still be tiring, moving his tongue like that, again and again.

But the more she concentrated, the more it seemed as if her pleasure eluded her, and she began to realize that she couldn't quite have a climax if she was thinking about having a climax.

She needed to stop thinking about a climax, think about something else .

No, not whatever it was that was so awful he'd done in his past that would mean she'd never agreed to marry him, definitely not that.

Dash it all.

“Just—”

“Hmm?” he said, his voice lazy, as if he was actually enjoying himself, rather a lot.

But no, she needed this over, it was too much pressure, all of the attention on her.

“Your prick. I want it.”

“Oh,” he said, pleased by that. He kissed her sex, then planted a kiss on each of her inner thighs, and then he climbed up over her. He was somehow not wearing his trousers. How had he shed them? She must have been too distracted to notice.

She seized his hardness and squeezed it and he made a noise in the back of his throat, a very pleased noise, and she stroked him like she had before.

He simply surrendered to her, on his knees between her spread thighs, shutting his eyes, taking her ministrations as if it were his due.

Her hand paused for a moment as she thought that through. Why did she assume she was a bother to him, that her pleasure was a bother to him? What if it wasn't? She gasped a little, tears coming to her eyes unbidden, as she began to stroke him with increased fervor.

“I... last time, I...”

“Yes?” Still that lazy voice.

She lifted her hips and moved his prick, doing the thing she'd done before, rubbing his hardness against her sensitive nub. “Do you like this?” she whispered.

“Quite a great deal,” he said.

“So do I,” she breathed, and then she shut her eyes and let herself get lost, let herself take her pleasure as her due. And because she must have actually been very close to a climax before, after all the... oh, Lord, the licking, she climbed to a high point quite quickly and found herself breaking through, as if through the cover of clouds on a high mountain, into bursts of bright, bright sun. She whimpered his name as her

pleasure twitched through her, her grasp on his member going loose.

And he, even as she was still riding the end of her climax, angled his hips and speared her, deep inside.

She cried out.

“Shh,” he said, covering her mouth with his own, moving inside her with his huge, intruding, perfect prick. “We need to do this at some point where we don’t have to worry about discovery.”

“Yes,” she sighed. “Oh, yes, we do.”

“It’s another good reason to marry me, Patience,” he said, thrusting into her.

Damn him, he was right.

“Maybe,” she said, clutching his shoulders.

“Maybe?” He was smiling.

She took his face in both of her hands and kissed him again.

He broke the kiss and looked at her.

Oh, this again, looking into each other’s eyes like this, this was going to make her fall apart. Why was it so lovely, having him all the way deep inside her at the same time as she gazed into his eyes? Why was it like being lost and found again, like being herself and no one and part of some new thing—some her-and-him thing—all at once?

She loved him.

As if he read her mind, he said it. “I love you,” he breathed. “God in heaven, I love you.”

She gasped and said it back, her voice cracking. “Yes, I love you, too. Benedict, I love you.”

And then they were kissing frantically, and his movements inside her had gone out of rhythm, and she was wrapped up in some kind of perfect warm blanket of utter goodness, and she felt as if the goodness was so good, it was seeping out of her, out of her fingertips and her toes and she had never been this happy in her life .

He tipped back his head and let out a noise, and then he swore, a string of awful swear words, before he dug his fingers into her hips, holding her in place and—

Spent inside her body.

CHAPTER TWENTY

NOTHSHIRE WAS GETTING dressed, still swearing under his breath.

She was sitting on her bed with her knees against her chest, curled up, biting down on her bottom lip.

He had apologized about thirty times, and she had said very little.

Why had he been so sure he could do that, keep control of himself in that moment of all moments, especially when she felt like warm, soft perfection around him, when he was drowning in the goodness of her, her sweet body beneath him and surrounding him, and when she was saying his first name and telling him she loved him, and—

Fuck .

“Well, if I am with child, we’ll need to think of something, I suppose,” she said in a tiny voice.

He looked down at her in the bed and then went back to buttoning the falls of his trousers. “You marry me. End of story.”

“Did you do it on purpose?”

“ No. ”

Silence.

He tucked his shirt into his now-buttoned trousers. He slowly lifted his gaze to her. "I am ever so sorry, my lady."

"Tell me," she said, sticking out her chin.

He licked his lips. He knew what she meant. She wanted to know about everything, about Champeraigne, his father, all their fathers, the robbing on the highway, the business with Penbrake, everything. "I can't."

"Tell me and I'll marry you," she said. "You have already invaded my body, have you not? You have taken me over and planted your seed inside me and if I am going to have your child, you will possess me and the babe, and we shall just be... yours. So, it doesn't matter now. I don't have a choice anymore, tell me."

He swallowed. "You have a choice. I swear I shall find a way to give you a choice."

She leveled an accusing stare at him.

He gestured helplessly. "Maybe you can... expel it."

"You really think that's going to work?"

"I don't know." He shrugged. "I did have some basic anatomy classes in university. I sort of understand how it works, and it needs to get very far in there, I think. There are things inside a woman, they're sort of like men's bollocks, but they produce something else. I did not pay close enough attention, because I have no reason to know. I am not ever going to be a doctor."

She made a very confused face. "You're trying to distract me and it isn't going to work. Tell me."

He scratched the back of his head. “My father...” But then he faltered.

She uncurled, just a bit, softening. “Of course it’s about him.”

This galvanized him a bit. “They were all fast friends, our fathers. They had these ideas about the way they would raise their sons, and we were all so close in age, and we all spent quite a great deal of time together. They were enamored with ancient Rome and Greece, with creating boys—men—who would be very strong and very capable of handling... pain.”

Her eyes widened.

“So, they hurt us a lot. For our own good, they said. Rutchester’s father...” He shook himself. “Anyway, at some point, a body can’t bear these things. When we were small, we didn’t have any notion that anyone else lived a different life, but then we came to understand that other men’s fathers didn’t torture them as a matter of course and we...”

He paused for a long, long time.

She only gazed at him.

“So, anyway, it was meant to look like a hunting accident, but it got out of hand, and they were dead but then they were... someone discovered it.”

“The man who blackmails you. Because he knows you killed your fathers.”

He nodded. “You know of him. Maybe you’ve met him. He is the Comte Champeraigne, a French nobleman.”

“Oh, yes, I have met him,” she said with a nod. “He ordered you here, and it’s to do

with the Earl of Penbrake?”

“That’s right,” he said.

“But you don’t know why exactly.”

“Not until tomorrow, when we go to see him.”

“And you always simply do his bidding? Because you have no choice?”

He nodded.

“I see,” she said slowly. She looked away, thoughtful. “I don’t see why you’d think that would make me not wish to marry you.”

He was going to start sobbing. She couldn’t have said that.

“I can’t see how anyone bears that sort of treatment from his father,” she said. “I can’t see how it was even wrong, what you did.”

He could not speak. He would fall apart if he did.

She climbed out of the bed and put her hand on his chest. “I trust you,” she said, gazing into his eyes.

A shudder went through him.

She reached up and touched his face, and he realized it was wet.

He was fucking crying in front of her. He turned away. “I need to go,” he said in a choked voice.

She removed her hand. "It's all right to weep, I think, with us, with the two of us. It's all right."

Because it wasn't done, crying, not in front of anyone , not unless you were a very small child, and even then, you probably didn't do it in front of your mother or father, even, just maybe, sometimes, with your nanny, and she would fuss over you and tell you to put a brave face on it and swallow it away, and he knew it wasn't even remotely all right.

He hurried for the door, bringing along the clothes he hadn't managed to put back on yet.

"It might be nice," she said from behind him. "Feeling safe enough to be sad near someone else. It might be very nice."

He stiffened. "Might be," he agreed. Then he wiped his face and sniffed very hard and opened the door and left her.

WHEN CHARLOTTE CAME to dress her in the morning, Patience told her, frostily, that it was all going to be all right now, that she was going to marry him, but that she would never trust Charlotte with any more confidences, and that she did not wish to discuss it any further with her.

Charlotte looked badly frightened, more than she should have looked, and this bothered Patience, so she probed her, asking more questions, but Charlotte was silent, only shaking her head and saying she was sorry and that she shouldn't have interfered, that she was very stupid.

"Tell him, your husband-to-be, that he need not worry I shall speak to anyone about any of it," she whispered.

“Wait, did he threaten you?” said Patience, who was now torn between feeling livid toward the man and thinking that it only made sense that he was the way he was. To have been raised in such an environment—he had called it torture and indicated it had been perpetrated upon him when he was very small—it would badly affect someone. It was honestly quite amazing he was still as tender and sweet as he was, through all of that.

Because she could see it in him, she could. She could still see that small and frightened boy hiding inside his huge and muscled body, and she wanted only to protect him. If she could somehow go back in time and shield that tiny Benedict from his father’s horrible ministrations, she would.

“I have said nothing,” said Charlotte, eyes very wide. “Nothing at all.”

“All right, well, I shall have a talk with him,” said Patience, sighing.

Truly, she shouldn’t have let him run off that way. They needed to talk about a number of things, not least their impending marriage. If she was with child, it might be able to wait a month or so, but that would still mean, that—as long as they were not going to procure a special license—they must have the banns read in a church, which would take three weeks, and he seemed frightfully preoccupied with whatever it was he was doing at the bidding of the Comte Champeraigne.

She had always found that man a little unsettling. She had met him for the first time when she was only twelve, she thought, and she had later expressed her distaste and, well, truly fear of him, but her father had only laughed and said that, yes, all Frenchmen were awful, weren’t they? “Dreadful accent, isn’t it, my little muffin?” Then he’d kissed her on the forehead.

But it hadn’t been about his accent.

It had been something else, something she could not explain, something that had made her hair stand up at the back of her neck.

But it was funny, wasn't it? She had never felt that feeling when it came to Balley. She had felt no misgivings about him whatsoever. The first time he'd hit her, it had been a horrible surprise.

This was why it was so easy to override those feelings about people, she supposed. If one's body had a danger detector, it was horribly faulty.

She was about to reassure Charlotte further when the door to her bedroom burst open and her brother came inside, brandishing a sword, his eyes wild and maniacal.

It was so strange and unsettling and frankly comical that she first laughed.

Then, he looked at her, swiping the sword through the air and the laughter died in her throat.

"What's happened?" she said.

"It's Penbrake," said her brother. "He's gone, and there's blood spattered all over his bed and the floor of his room. I was worried whoever it was had gotten to you."

Charlotte let out a horrified squeak, clapping a hand over her mouth.

"Penbrake," said Patience, and she knew that Nothshire had something to do with this, just knew it. God in heaven, had he come to her, climbed into her bed, had his way with her, made that awful confession, left in tears, and gone directly to Penbrake's room?

He lied to me. He knew all along he was going to kill Penbrake.

Damn that man and his lies.

No, wait, that didn't actually make sense. Why entreat her to come here if he was simply going to murder the man? Certainly, with his skills at sneaking around, he could easily have gotten to Penbrake without her being here at all.

"Stay in your room," said her brother, pointing the tip of the sword at her.

She held up both hands. "All right, all right."

He started out. "And bar the door," he threw over his shoulder. He shut the door behind him.

Patience went over to pull the lock closed.

"My lady," said Charlotte, "we have to tell someone."

Patience rounded on her. "No, absolutely not. He threatened you and you wish to betray him at the first sign of trouble? You promise me that you will not say anything. I am fairly confident that I can protect you, but he is... unpredictable." She let out a shaky breath. "I need to talk to him."

"You need to stay in your room," said Charlotte.

"No, I feel confident whatever has happened, it is not going to take place in this household," she said.

"Well, do you know where he's staying?" said Charlotte.

"Knotterly," she said. "It's owned by the Duke of Dunrose. It's only two miles through the woods. I shall go there. I think I'll be able to get out to the stables easily

enough on my own. Everyone will be in a panic. No one will be paying attention to me. You stay here, in my room, and preserve the ruse that I am still here. Simply refuse to open the door if anyone tries to come in. Say I'm too frightened. Say I'm unwell. I don't know. Say anything."

"My lady, I don't think it's wise to go to see that man."

"I don't know what happened," said Patience, "but I don't think this was his plan. It simply doesn't make any sense. He told me that he didn't even know what was to happen to Penbrake, that he would discover this today. So, I need to get to the bottom of this."

"Why? Why do you need to be involved at all?"

She probably didn't, actually. She put her hands on her hips, thinking that through. "Oh, I can't stay here, doing nothing. I'll go mad."

"Going mad here in safety is preferable to going out and getting oneself killed, I should think," said Charlotte.

"Well, there we differ in opinion," said Patience, and she couldn't help but smile.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

RUTCHESTER WAS AT breakfast and Dunrose wasn't, but that didn't strike Nothshire as anything all that out of the ordinary, as Dunrose often didn't get out of bed until the afternoon.

Arthford was missing, too, however, and he didn't know if that meant that Arthford had gone to the marchioness last night, if he'd stayed the night with her, and if he was, even now, already there.

They were meant to meet Champeraigne abominably early, however, at half past nine. He went upstairs to their bedchambers to seek them both after questioning Rutchester, who knew nothing about anything, having spent the entire night sulking after he'd thrown his fit with Dunrose's staff. Rutchester, in many ways, was somewhat stunted, and Nothshire had thought this more than once. He behaved like an overgrown toddler sometimes. It was the reason he was so terrifying.

Arthford wasn't in his bedchamber, but then neither was Dunrose, which struck him as odd. He could explain away Arthford, but not Dunrose.

He found Arthford's valet, who said he'd been told not to tell him anything at all, and Nothshire said that was fine, of course, but perhaps the valet would like to explain that to the Duke of Rutchester.

"They're in the attic," said the valet immediately. "But if you tell him that I told you, I shall deny it."

“The attic?” said Nothshire. “What would they be doing there?”

“I don’t know the particulars,” said the valet. “My master came to me in the midst of the night with blood all over his clothing, asking me to help him change and to clean the soiled clothing.”

“Blood?”

“He wasn’t wounded. It wasn’t his blood,” said the valet. “I have long ago learned not to ask too many questions when it comes to His Grace, so I didn’t.”

Nothshire went down to the breakfast parlor to collect Rutchester, and together they went into the attic.

Dunrose greeted them when they opened the door. Up here, the walls slanted, and the rooms were small and cramped. It had been designed for staff quarters, but now it wasn’t used at all. Dunrose was leaning against the wall. He was sans jacket, sans cravat, his waistcoat unbuttoned. He gave them a careless smile. “Wondered how long it’d take you to get up here. Thought you’d be here quicker, if you want to know the truth.”

“What is going on?” said Nothshire, pushing past him.

“He went to see her,” said Dunrose, “and then he came back and he was practically raving and he said that he wanted to go and find Penbrake. I went along to talk him out of it, truthfully, but I’m not really good at talking people out of things, it seems.” He shrugged.

“Oh, God in heaven,” said Nothshire, moving down the hallway, looking into rooms.

He found Arthford in the second room.

Penbrake was slumped on a bed, really just a bare mattress on a frame, seemingly unconscious. His arms were tied to the bedpost above his head. His face was bloody and swollen. He'd obviously been punched a few times. His nose might be broken. There was blood all over his clothing.

Arthford was seated in a chair, resting his elbows on his knees. He looked up at Nothshire. "No lectures. I won't hear it."

"We are meant to be going to Champeraigne right now," said Nothshire.

"Didn't kill him, I see," said Rutchester from the doorway. "The lot of you, with the lack of follow-through."

"I'm waiting," said Arthford. "I need him to admit it, for one thing. And then to express regret. And then I shall kill him. But if I kill him before he does either of those things, it's all for naught."

Nothshire cast his gaze heavenward. What had he done to deserve this?

He glanced down at Penbrake and then at Arthford and then he pushed past Rutchester, back into the hallway. "Dunrose?"

"Yes?" said Dunrose.

"Go and send a servant to Champeraigne and tell him things have changed, and we need him here."

"You can't give him to Champeraigne until I've had my satisfaction from him," called Arthford.

Nothshire called back, "The time to decide this was when I said we could call

Champeraigne's bluff. We were all in agreement that we would—"

"For me," said Arthford. "We agreed to do it for me."

"Is that why?" said Nothshire. "You really think every single one of us cares about defending the honor of your whore of a marchioness?"

"Don't you dare call her that." Arthford appeared in the doorway, hands clenched into fists.

Nothshire stared at Arthford. "Dunrose, go, please."

Arthford started for Nothshire.

Rutchester wrapped an arm around his chest from behind and stopped him. "Simon," he said softly.

Arthford turned to look at Rutchester. "Oliver, let go of me."

"Can't," said Rutchester. "Benedict's right, you know. We did not agree to this for you or for your marchioness."

"Oh, fuck you all, then," muttered Arthford, but he sagged against Rutchester, who let him go, and Arthford didn't try to come at Nothshire again.

"Dunrose?" said Nothshire.

"He's gone already," said Rutchester.

Nothshire turned to look and Dunrose had, in fact, disappeared. He dragged a hand over his face. "All right, all right, it's not ideal, I suppose, but we'll claim ignorance.

We will tell Champeraigne that we got his man, and that if he doesn't like the way we did it, he should have been clearer in his directives. Champeraigne did indicate that you should not touch Penbrake, Simon, but we'll cover for you. We'll refuse to say who it was who roughed him up or brought him here and tied him to a bed. Not four, but one."

"I want him dead," said Arthford.

"Well, we don't always get what we want, do we?" said Nothshire.

Arthford rounded on Rutchester. "It's quite convenient you chose now to decide to develop some kind of conscience."

"That's not what happened," said Rutchester. "I'm just sick of doing your dirty work. Not four, but one, and I'm always the one."

"You're right," said Nothshire. "We shouldn't ask you to do those things, Oliver. I'm very sorry."

Rutchester lowered his face, looking sulky again. "I don't mean to be... I'm not a weakling about it, you understand, it's just not fair."

"I do," said Nothshire, nodding.

Dunrose reappeared at the top of the stairs. "Erm, Nothshire?"

"Did you send the servant?"

"Well, yes, but then, as I was on my way back up, someone was at the door, and the servant was trying to get rid of her, but I recognized her as your viscountess—"

“What?” said Nothshire. “Patience is here?” He tore out of the attic, clambering down the steps even as the others yelled after him.

This entire morning could not get worse, could it? No, I shouldn’t have thought that, he thought. I’m tempting fate.

He stopped the first servant he found and wanted to know where the viscountess was, and discovered that—under Dunrose’s direction—she’d been put in a sitting room on the first floor, though the servant wasn’t sure what to do about her.

“We don’t have anything ready made for refreshments, nothing like what we’d offer a guest in the afternoon,” said the servant. “We are thinking about offering tea and there may be some biscuits, or we could take things from the breakfast parlor—”

“No, none of that matters,” he thundered and left the servant behind to go to the sitting room.

Arriving, he threw open the door.

She stood up from the chair where she had been perched. “Benedict!”

“What are you doing here?”

“What happened to Penbrake?” she said.

He groaned. “So, everyone at your brother’s house is out of their minds, I suppose. Did they leave Penbrake’s room a mess, signs of a struggle, all of that?”

“They,” she said. “I knew it wasn’t you. I knew you wouldn’t have gone and done that. Is he dead, though? Were you planning to kill him all along, because I can’t really make that make sense—”

“He’s not dead,” said Nothshire.

“Oh!” She put both hands against her chest, quite relieved.

He closed the distance between them and reached out for her. But then, he thought better of it, closed his hand, and lowered it. “You should not be here.”

She bit down on her bottom lip, abashed. “Apologies.”

He sighed.

“But I am now, so can you not tell me what is going on? Perhaps I can help. I can tell my brother that Penbrake isn’t dead or—” She scrunched up her nose. “Well, I suppose I shouldn’t admit that I left the house or that I came here or that you are at all involved. Maybe I am no help.” A pause. “I should like to be, though. If I’m going to be your wife, I shall be the one person you can trust implicitly. And what benefits you benefits me, does it not?”

He hadn’t ever thought of a wife that way, as an asset, someone who could help him. He’d sort of always thought of a wife as another liability, some other responsibility, someone weak and helpless to depend upon him. The other dukes were not weak and helpless, but they did seem like a responsibility much of the time, and he had to look out for them. They were all of them damaged in various ways, but he was the one who seemed to have come out of it the most able to function, he thought. Well, Arthford was all right, but he had his weaknesses—case in point, the marchioness, which was why they were all in this pickle to begin with.

“Let me think on that,” he said. “Maybe you can help.” He sat down heavily on a chair in the sitting room. “I am going to tell you things that I cannot have you repeating, all right? Not to your maid, not to anyone.”

“I promise,” she said, sitting down too. “I had a stern talking to with Charlotte, but I think you already terrified her, and I want you to know that you can’t go around threatening people I care about like that, but that’s another discussion. We can save that.”

He smirked. She was charming, wasn’t she? Yes, he was quite badly gone for this woman, and he didn’t even feel sorry about it. “The Duke of Arthford is having a love affair with the Marchioness de Fateux.”

“Oh, who isn’t?” said Patience with a shrug.

He laughed, inclining his head. “All right, yes, that’s rather well known, her reputation.”

“She is also, however, very connected with Champeraigne, isn’t she? They are always together in that box of theirs at the opera. Or—well, I suppose it’s not theirs, is it, it belongs to some other man she’s bedding, but he has let her use it for years now. They are a fixture, though, her and Champeraigne, sitting in that box, whispering to each other, scheming things.”

“Yes, you have quite understood it accurately,” said Nothshire, “but the thing is, Arthford truly loves her, if you take my meaning. It’s not some dalliance for him. He is devoted to her.”

She furrowed her brow. “But she isn’t devoted back.”

“Well, that’s obvious to everyone except Arthford,” said Nothshire.

She nodded slowly.

“Apparently, Penbrake did something untoward with the marchioness. He drugged

her and had his way with her, and Arthford says that's a kind of ravagement, and I don't disagree, but I also cannot summon the sort of righteous rage that Arthford has at the man. He thought we were going after Penbrake for a kind of reckoning. He assumed that Champeraigne was as outraged as he. But it seems Champeraigne is not at all interested in avenging the marchioness's honor. We don't know what he wants with him, but he specifically said that Arthford should not hurt Penbrake. When I told Arthford this, he got angry, and he's taken matters into his own hands."

"I see," she said. "So, you're in a position now where you have gone against Champeraigne, who won't be pleased, and who holds a great deal of power over you, knowing your secrets. And where, in ceding to Champeraigne, your friend thinks you betrayed him."

"Yes, that's it exactly," he said. "I have sent word for Champeraigne to come here, because there is no point in going to him, not when we have Penbrake under this roof. When he gets here, we have to deal with whatever his response is going to be."

She regarded him. "I hesitate to say this, but have you never considered that perhaps you do not need to do the comte's bidding? If you tell others what happened—"

"I have," he said. "And it is true that it's possible we might weather it. It would be socially disastrous, I think. No one would invite us to balls anymore. But in terms of there being any true repercussions? I doubt there would be. Someone would have to be angry enough with us to order us hung, and I don't think anyone is. No one truly missed our fathers, certainly not their wives. Perhaps Dunrose's grandmother, who is still alive, but beyond that, we are clear, I think."

She nodded. "Just so. Why not, then?"

"The others don't agree. We must all agree," he said. "We are all in it together."

“Well, if that was true, then Arthford shouldn’t have come and taken Penbrake out of my brother’s house!”

“Exactly right,” he said, throwing up his hands. “You see my perspective. It’s as if no one else does.”

She considered this. “What will he do, Champeraigne? Will he reveal your secret now?”

“I highly doubt it. Why ruin his best leverage against us? He extorts quite a bit of money from us as it is. If he tells, he cannot hold that over our heads. But he has other ways of making us sorry, I’m afraid. He knows a great deal about us. He knows things he has compelled us to do, smaller things, and he could reveal any number of our pettier crimes, even though many of them were done in his own service. He knows our weaknesses, and we all have them. Dunrose’s laudanum—he could interfere with Dunrose getting that and Dunrose is his puppet. He could manipulate the marchioness and make Arthford dance how he likes. I cannot enumerate all the things he could do, but there are many.”

“So, you must placate him,” she said. “And this is difficult to do when you don’t even know what he wants from Penbrake.”

“Exactly,” he said, and he had to say, he liked this, having someone to talk things through with.

“Well,” she said, “what if you were actually protecting Champeraigne by doing what you did to Penbrake?”

He sat up straight, shaking his head. “I don’t follow you.”

“I am saying, and this, of course, mind you, would require Penbrake being incapable

of saying anything different, so I don't know what I'm advocating you do to him, not precisely. I don't wish to be advocating what I think I'm advocating. But if you say that Penbrake had designs to do Champeraigne harm and then you stopped him, well...?" She spread her hands.

He let out a little delighted laugh. "You're more devious than I had given you credit, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not devious," she said, squaring her shoulders. "I suppose I've been having some practice at thinking about how to make things look a certain way while getting something else, what with scheming to have a child without getting married and the like."

"It would work," said Nothshire, nodding. "It would. But how did I uncover this thing? We haven't even been near Penbrake. If I knew it all along, it would follow that I would have told Champeraigne before, wouldn't it? So, I must have just now discovered it."

"I discovered it," she said, with a little smile.

"You?"

"Well, your cover story was that you were going to call upon me, and that was going to get you into the house in the first place. So, it shouldn't come as any surprise to Champeraigne that you and I are connected in some way, what way that is, he may have to infer. But I discovered it, and I had means to contact you, and you came to my brother's house and acted decisively, to protect both Champeraigne's interests and your own."

"Yes," said Nothshire, rubbing his chin. "Quite good. So, the only question now is, what was it Penbrake was doing?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“HE IS OBSESSED with Seraphine,” Arthford was saying. When Nothshire had floated the plan to the others, Arthford was the one who’d filled in the details rather handily, and so he was allowing Arthford to take point on this.

Arthford was seated next to the fireplace in the downstairs sitting room of Dunrose’s estate. Champeraigne was seated opposite him, listening. Dunrose and Rutchester had opted to stay in the attic with Penbrake, who was still alive, currently, but likely wouldn’t be for long. That would be up to Arthford, Nothshire had decided. If Arthford wouldn’t kill him, it would be all right, they had decided, because telling Champeraigne that Penbrake was scheming against him was punishment enough for the man. He’d spend the rest of his days trying to convince Champeraigne he hadn’t done it, but Champeraigne was a deeply paranoid person who would never believe the earl’s protestations of innocence.

“Well, who isn’t obsessed with her?” said Champeraigne coldly, eyeing Arthford. “I specifically said to Nothshire that you must not be allowed to let your anger cloud this exchange. I did not wish anything bad to befall Penbrake. I wanted to strike a bargain with him.”

“Yes, and he obviously wasn’t amenable,” said Arthford. “You needed us to intervene. So, why do you think that was?”

“I have a reputation,” said Champeraigne with a shrug. “Sometimes I need to take creative measures to get audiences with various men. But you seem to have prevented that from happening.”

“Hear him out,” said Nothshire, who was seated on a nearby couch with Patience. “I have my own information to add to it, as does the Viscountess of Balley, but we shall allow Arthford to explain the bulk of it.”

“I did wonder what she was doing here,” said Champeraigne, and Nothshire didn’t like the way he looked at her. He sucked in a breath, thinking—not for the first time—about why they didn’t simply kill Champeraigne and solve all their problems.

“He hated you for what he perceived as whoring Seraphine out,” said Arthford. “He thought of Seraphine as some meek thing, controlled by both you and her husband for financial gain. We know that’s not true, but there’s a certain kind of man who can’t conceive of a woman being anything other than controlled by some man.”

“All right, granted,” said Champeraigne, thinking this through. “I wouldn’t have thought Penbrake for being one to have some high-minded moral way of looking at the world.”

“Oh, only when it suited him,” said Arthford. “In this case, his thought was that you were preventing him from being with Seraphine.”

“But she doesn’t like him,” said Champeraigne.

“No, I know this,” said Arthford, sighing. “I know that it was her choice to reject him, but you see, he could never get this through his thick skull, that a woman would reject him. No, there had to be someone else to blame, and he blamed you.”

Champeraigne furrowed his brow. “So, this is why he would not talk to me about business propositions? I suppose it does make sense.”

“I think he drugged Seraphine and ravished her, thinking that it would quell his obsession with her,” said Arthford.

“But it only fed it,” said Champeraigne. “It wasn’t enough. He’d had her, but only unwillingly, and he wanted it to be real. He wanted her to agree to take him into her bed. And I was in the way.”

“He knew things,” said Arthford. “He revealed them to the viscountess.” He nodded at Patience.

She spoke up. “Yes, we were all together last night at my brother’s house, and the men were quite drunk. Penbrake spoke more freely with me than he might have otherwise. He said he only meant to warn me off Benedict.” She nodded at Nothshire. “His Grace, the Duke of Nothshire, I mean. He was not aware that I knew more about Nothshire than Penbrake did. After all, he was so kind as to relieve me of my hated husband.”

“So, you’ve been part of this little group of schemers and murderers for some time, have you, my lady?” said Champeraigne. “Well, well, you’re not nearly as sweet and demure as you appear, are you?”

“Careful,” said Nothshire. “That’s my intended you’re speaking about.”

Champeraigne laughed. “Yes, yes, of course she is. Of course.”

Patience gave him a haughty look. “I’m sure I have no idea what you mean by that. But at any rate, the earl spoke to me and ‘revealed’ various things to me about Nothshire and you, my lord, by extension. He said that Nothshire was not his intended target, that you were, but that Nothshire was entangled and that he would be implicated in the process. He said it was his intention to destroy you, Comte Champeraigne, because you were a meddling foreigner, come like a destroyer into our country, the enemy, draining good Englishmen of their wealth and resources like a parasite.”

Champeraigne flinched.

Nothshire hid a smile. She was rather good, wasn't she? How had she known just how to hit Champeraigne where it hurt?

"Well," said Patience, "I immediately sent word to my husband-to-be. I could not allow Penbrake to destroy His Grace, for he would also destroy my own future. It was not to be borne. It goes without saying that my engagement has yet to be announced. I am a widow, and there is no need to negotiate it with my brother, but we did deem that it might be prudent to speak to him, and that is the entire reason we are here. I am only pleased that I was able to find out this plot against you all and save us before we were attacked by Penbrake. He is a snake."

Nothshire had to cover his mouth to hide the fact he was laughing, but she was just, well, brilliant. He was quite badly in love with her. He cleared his throat, composing himself. "I went to confront Penbrake, of course. The confrontation became, erm, heated. We had to deal with him, monsieur le comte, and so we did."

Champeraigne looked between their three faces, his expression grave. "Yes, I see exactly what you did, Your Graces, my lady. I do see it."

"I know this isn't the outcome you wished," said Nothshire. "And it is likely not pleasant to understand that whatever scheme you were concocting will not work now, but I do need to point out that we have done you a favor, my lord, so you might want to consider being grateful to us."

"Ha!" Champeraigne shook his head, aghast. "How quickly you go to that, Nothshire."

"I think, considering everything, this might buy us a bit of leeway over whatever demands you think to leverage against us—"

“You cannot be serious,” said Champeraigne, shaking his head at him. “You know what your problem is, boys? ” He included Arthford in this question. “You don’t understand that the world has changed.”

“Is that so?” said Arthford. “Changed how?”

“You still think we’re playing by the old rules,” said Champeraigne. “You think your wealth and your status and your titles are going to save you. You think that you can get away with anything, even murder, even the bloody and gory murder of your own fathers. And it might have been true, once. We did used to live in that world, boys, but it’s a new world. You may think, simply because the peasantry of England hasn’t risen up and cut off your heads, that you are still free to behave like utter bastards with no rules and no consequences. But just because the English are too busy drinking tea and hemming and hawing to do anything doesn’t mean that you are exempt from this new worldview. They will hold you accountable. You have no idea what sort of consequences there will be for your behavior if I ever tell anyone what I know. They won’t feel sorry for you, do you see that? You are dukes, raised in privilege, given everything you want. Oh, I’m sorry , your fathers were so cruel to you, even as they lavished you with all the finest things. Do you think anyone believe that was your motive? Do you think anyone will believe that when you, upon their deaths, came into power and wealth? They will despise you. They will think you nothing but greedy and ungrateful brats. So, understand this, boys. I own you. You are all mine, and you will do my bidding for as long as I wish it.”

Nothshire wasn’t laughing anymore. His heart was thudding rather badly in his chest.

Champeraigne got up from his seat.

“As if you’re playing by some new moral rulebook,” said Arthford from his chair. “As if you’re not behaving just as badly as spoiled rich men always behave. Where do you have the right to say anything to us? You are no better than we are.”

Champeraigne looked down at him. “There is no ‘better’ at all. That is what no one understands, least of all the peasants. They undertook their revolution in my country to right wrongs and to bring justice. What did they do instead? The bloodiest and most violent and most awful thing a group of humans have ever undertaken together. As bad as we were to them, they were much worse. And that, you see, is what’s underneath, that’s the thing that is uncovered in the end. Just that we are all animals.” He smoothed out his lapels. “Well, then. I’m off, I suppose. If you kill Penbrake and think I shall thank you for it, or that I am somehow in your debt, think again. Animals don’t have debts, boys. Animals just have hungers .”

On that note, he walked out, leaving them all speechless.

“HE’S WRONG,” PATIENCE whispered to Nothshire.

It was dark, that night, and he was in her arms. It had likely been reckless for him to come to her, but there had been a desperation to the way he’d appeared, shedding his clothes wordlessly as he dove into her bed as he awakened her body to pleasure, as he joined with her and they gasped against each other there in the darkness.

“Champeraigne, I mean,” she said. “He’s wrong.”

Nothshire put his face into crook of her neck and shoulder and breathed noisily. “About what?”

After Champeraigne had left, she had wanted to stay there with Nothshire, at Dunrose’s estate, but it hadn’t quite been prudent, so she’d taken her horse back through the woods, made her way surreptitiously back inside, and been let back into her room by Charlotte.

Three hours later, she’d been summoned to her brother’s study, downstairs, where Nothshire was there, and her brother said that the duke wished to marry her.

They were talking of marriage, she said, in the wake of not knowing the fate of Penbrake?

No, her brother said, Penbrake had been found. Her brother didn't wish to offend her delicate sensibilities, but it wasn't good. He was dead, and no one quite knew what had happened. As it was, her brother was looking into ways to secure the estate so that no one could get in and drag his guests out into the woods and kill them. From the way he'd been found, however, her brother said they all suspected witchcraft or something arcane and awful.

Witchcraft? she had mouthed at Nothshire behind her brother's back, and Nothshire had shrugged.

Anyway, her brother had taken the subject right back to her impending nuptials. He clasped his hands behind his back and said that Nothshire had outlined a somewhat surprising set of documents, which would preserve not only her dowry but a certain allowance that could not be taken from her nor gotten to by her husband, who wished her to feel secure and safe and in charge of herself. Her husband also wished to put certain properties into her name, and any income generated by them would be her own to do with as she wished.

She felt touched. She did trust him now. Both with her body and her mind. Because, though he was a violent man in certain ways, she understood why he was violent, and she didn't fault him for it. She didn't need this legal document to agree to the marriage, but she would not refuse it either.

She could see that it was necessary in some ways, because of the way that Nothshire was at the mercy of Champaigne. This meant that there were aspects of Nothshire's wealth that were safely hers, and she would be protected in that way forever. It was a very intelligent thing to do, actually.

She gave her agreement to the match and then she and Nothshire had gone for a walk in her brother's gardens. It was late spring, and many of the blooms were being taken over by greenery, but there were still spots of color here and there.

He held her hand, and that was something simple and sweet that she had hitherto never really experienced. It was good, she found, the intimacy of simply walking hand in hand with another person. Innocent in some way but powerful all the same.

And now, she dragged her hands over his bare back, all the way down to the spot at the bottom of his back where the tangle of scars thatched over his skin and she said, "If we were only animals, no one could have ever conceived of a world that wasn't brutal. If we were only animals, you wouldn't have ever thought what your fathers did was wrong. Nor would the French peasants, for that matter. The fact that we can dream of a world in which we are good to each other, it means something."

He sighed. "Perhaps."

"No, attend to me, this is important," she said. "There is a darker nature within us. Yes, we are tempted to sin. But it is a choice. We do not have to succumb."

He lifted his face and looked down at her. "I try to believe this, too, Patience. I have tried to do the right thing, always tried only to give in to violent acts if I thought they were excusable or warranted. I have tried, but... perhaps I am simply fooling myself. Perhaps I am only an animal. You yourself called me a beast."

"No, no, we shall get married," she said. "And everyone knows that once the beast and the girl get married and she is his duchess—"

"Duchess is it?"

"Princess, duchess, what you will," she said. "Anyway, everyone knows what

happens then.”

“Oh?”

“Yes,” she said. “They live happily ever after.”

He kissed her. “We shall endeavor to do exactly that, then, shall we?”

She sighed against him. “Yes, please. And I can think of one thing that makes me ever so happy.”

“Can you?”

“Yes, it’s your mouth. Especially when you use it in such inventive ways on such filthy places.”

He chuckled. “Well, then. How could I refuse to please my soon-to-be duchess?”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“YOU KNOW, I was only serving as a lady’s maid because my mistress had this scheme to get a child to raise,” said Patience’s maid, who Nothshire was vaguely remembering was named Charlotte.

“Oh?” said Nothshire to Charlotte. They were standing outside a carriage, waiting for Patience to come down and get into it. They were on their way to the north, to Patience’s old dowager house, to collect her things, since she would no longer be in residence there. The dowager house belonged to the Balley holdings, and she would now be living with Nothshire. “Well, what did you do before you were her lady’s maid?”

“I was a housekeeper,” said Charlotte.

He eyed her sidelong. “Of course you were.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” he said, clearing his throat. “Nothing at all.” He paused. “I suppose it must feel like a demotion to you, then. Being a lady’s maid after running an entire household.”

“I never said that,” said Charlotte primly. “You are putting words in my mouth.”

“Did you like being a housekeeper?” he said. “Because, as it happens, I am losing a housekeeper. I suppose you know this, though? This is why you are bringing it up?”

My wife must have mentioned it to you.”

They had been married for precisely four hours at this point. The plan was to go to the north, collect her things, including the damnable dog, which Patience doted upon, much to his chagrin, and then they would honeymoon at his own northern estate, in Nothshire.

“You continue to think to speak for me, I see,” said Charlotte, sighing.

“The position is yours, if you wish it, of course,” he said.

“I can’t simply leave my lady—Her Grace, excuse me—without a lady’s maid,” said Charlotte huffily. “I am not angling for a job.”

“All right, pardon me,” he said, sighing. He was bewildered by this entire conversation.

“Well, that is, if I speak to her, and she is amenable, I suppose I could, if you are entirely sure that you even wish to give me such a position, think about accepting it.”

He smiled. “Think about it, then, Charlotte.”

“I think, if I am going to be a housekeeper, you must address me as Mrs. Higgins,” she said.

“Obviously,” he agreed. “That would only be proper.”

She gave him a nod. “Don’t think this means I like you, you know.”

“Of course not,” he said. “You must hate me. That is the job of a wife’s closest female friend, after all, to steadfastly hate her husband. It is known.”

She snorted.

He was still smiling.

PATIENCE WAS WORRIED that Dash would have forgotten her after her long absence of so many months. How could a tiny little dog like her own darling keep her in his little doggy head, after all? She thought he might resist being taken away from his home, and she worried that she would have to leave him behind if he was too sorrowful.

But Dash came to her joyfully and leaped into her arms, covering her face with slobbering kisses and refused to leave her side from the moment she was back in his company. He went wherever she did, and seemed quite willing to get into the carriage with her when they departed from her dowager house.

She held Dash and peered out the window as they left it behind, feeling a pang at its loss. There was still some part of her that felt as though relinquishing her widowhood was relinquishing her independence in some way.

She trusted Nothshire, but it still frightened her somewhere. She had done it, even though she'd sworn she would not. She had gotten married again. And Nothshire would not hurt her nor would he treat her badly, and she knew this, but she also... well, she wasn't free.

Her bleeding had come, so she was not with child, and when that had happened, she had gone into a bit of a tizzy. Was it foolish to marry so quickly if there was no need? Perhaps they should put it off a few months, leave things as they were, court each other publicly, allow some time to pass?

But Nothshire was still visiting her bedchamber secretively and regularly, and she was cognizant of the fact that she wished not to be constantly shushed every time he

made her come. It was likely a stupid reason to get married, she thought, but she did indeed wish to be allowed to scream.

On her wedding night, she did exactly that. She was incredibly noisy, and Nothshire loved it, urging her on, his voice scratchy in her ear as he nudged her closer and closer to her own bursting ecstasies. “Good, very good,” he murmured. “I want everyone to know just how much you enjoy being my duchess.”

She also found it rather embarrassingly arousing to be called “Your Grace” in bed. She could not say why but there was something headily erotic about it. Her husband would ask her permission to do all manner of things. “May I put my hand under your shift, Your Grace? May I touch your bosom, Your Grace? May I taste you, Your Grace?” And every time he said any of those things, she felt little trills of goodness run all through her body.

The only thing that was more erotic was being called by his last name. “You’re the most perfect Lady Nothshire, aren’t you?” he would whisper. “I couldn’t ask for a prettier or sweeter wife.” Or, with his hands delving into fantastically pleasurable places. “That seems to make you very wet, doesn’t it, Lady Nothshire? Will you be my very good wife and get even wetter for your husband’s prick?”

Anyway, they spent every night together for the first two months.

Then, he was called away, by Champeraigne, which was maddening, but there was little to be done about that, she supposed.

The two months were wonderful in every possible way, however.

When she had been married to Balley, she had been expected to do whatever it was he wanted. He had very specific ideas for the way his household should look and function, and he had indicated to her that she must follow his instructions to the letter.

If she didn't, there were consequences. If she did, there were still consequences. There was no pleasing Balley.

So, it was a novel idea to be asked if she wished to alter anything about her husband's estate. He made it clear that if she chose, the entire place could be redecorated, that absolutely everything could be changed. And when she said she didn't wish to cause undue upheaval, he told her everything in this place had been done according to his father's dictates and he would like nothing more than watching it all torn down.

So, she did it. She eradicated all the touches left by that horrid man.

And she didn't ask a number of questions about what had happened to him, sensing he would share as he was ready, which happened in small fits and starts, often in the darkness, his head resting on her breast as a pillow, his voice halting as he outlined the awfulness of it, being instructed to speak in Latin to thank his father for his beatings. *Gratias tibi ago*, he would have to say after every blow, and if his voice cracked or he showed any emotion at all, he would be beaten worse. How the punishments were a matter of course, whether he'd done anything wrong or not, simply a part of his life that he'd had to endure, that his father had said that learning to bear pain was part of being a man.

It made her cry. Sometimes she felt she was crying because he could not.

But it made her angry, too.

And when he left to do Champeraigne's bidding, she could not help but feel as if it was all part and parcel to the same sort of business, being forced to do some wretched man's bidding no matter what they wished.

She wanted Nothshire free, entirely free. She wanted them both free.

But how best to go about making that happen, that was not something that would be undertaken easily. It would take time and cunning. She was willing to wait, but not forever.

And soon enough, she was distracted, anyway, because her bleeding was late.

She and her husband had decided together, in a very grave conversation, that they had no reason to rush into making children, and he had vowed, solemnly, not to spend in her. And he did try, but he was simply terrible at it. At one point, he brought a French letter for them to try, but she despised the way it felt, because it blunted the feeling of him inside her, and so, what with everything, it just... happened.

She was terrified.

But then, she thought, maybe it was simply going to be terrifying, no matter when it happened or how prepared she was. And she did know that she'd pondered out the idea that she would have nine months to become prepared, so that maybe it would all naturally fall into place in that time.

Nothshire seemed sort of shyly pleased, but afraid to be pleased, because he knew she was terrified. He tried to hide it, but she eventually forbade him from doing so. His pleasure in it was sort of contagious, after all.

So, then, she would lie in his arms at night. (She was probably supposed to sleep in her own bedchamber now, but it was so cold and lonely there, and she had gotten used to tucking her cold toes under his legs and feeling him pull her into his arms, feeling him plant little kisses on the crown of her head.) He would put one of his enormous hands on her still-flat stomach and hold it there and muse about whether it would be a little girl with hair like hers or a little boy with her eyes and she would giggle and say that she was sure the child would favor him and he would speak about how he would make it his business to shield their children from pain, that he would

sacrifice everything he had, everything he could, to keep them safe and happy, that he would never treat a child the way he'd been treated.

Which would usually make her cry again. Admittedly, it was easy to cry now that she was increasing. She cried at the drop of a hat.

And the months progressed, and her belly wasn't so flat anymore, and sometimes, she felt little flutters inside her, like butterfly wings, and that made her breath catch in her throat, an intense feeling that overwhelmed her in its sheer goodness. (And made her cry again, but everything made her cry.)

Was she ready to be this little one's mother?

Perhaps not.

Perhaps she wasn't going to be ready.

But they had made this little babe together, out of their love, and he or she was coming soon. Soon, she would have her own sweet darling in her arms.

When she had considered it before, having a baby to love, she had just wanted something to love, she thought, something real. But now, she was so encased in love that it practically drowned her. She had never thought she could be quite so happy and pleased and eager.

So, she sat near the window as spring stole over the world and Dash nuzzled the swell of her belly, and she promised her little dog that he and the baby would be fast friends and would play together in the gardens surrounding the estate, and she did something she never thought she would ever do.

She trusted that the future would be bright and safe and good.

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NOTHSHIRE RIPPED THE mask off of his face. They were playing Lords of the Crossroads again, just for a few months now, just to raise enough money to get Champeraigne off their backs. It wouldn't last forever, of course, because they were already seeing a dearth of carriages coming through the crossroads. The nobility would not travel this way for much longer. They would need to devise a new scheme.

“What was that, Arthford?” he demanded.

Arthford was so drunk he was barely standing. “Sorry,” he said, falling down into a chair. They were at Bess's, in their little room there.

“I told you not to come along,” said Nothshire. Arthford had been staggering around, slurring, barely able to aim his pistol, which thankfully hadn't been loaded, because Nothshire thought the man might have shot his own bollocks off or perhaps someone's finger. “I told you to simply stay here, but you insisted.”

“I can't simply sit here alone,” said Arthford, glowering into the fire. It was winter, chilly outside. The fire was blazing. “I can't bear it.”

The marchioness had broken things off with Arthford.

This wasn't actually the first time it had happened, but it seemed to be much more permanent this time, and Arthford was seemingly broken.

“Don't be so hard on him,” said Dunrose, settling down in a chair next to Arthford. “How about a bit of this, mmm, Arthford?” He took a bottle from the floor and uncapped it.

Rutchester stopped him. “Do not get Arthford hooked on the laudanum, if you don’t mind, Dunrose.”

Arthford shook his head. “It’s fine. Really. I think I’m just going to follow in Nothshire’s footsteps and marry some randy widow and get her with child.”

“My wife was never a randy widow,” said Nothshire, rolling his eyes.

“Yes, well, she did spread her legs for you rather easily, didn’t she?” said Rutchester.

Nothshire hit him. Probably harder than he should have, but not in the face, which he wanted to do, just a solid punch to the shoulder.

“Christ!” said Rutchester, baring his teeth at him. “Between the lot of you, you all think with your pricks these days.”

“Mine rarely works anymore,” said Dunrose, tipping the bottle into his mouth.

“I know what I’m going to do,” said Arthford, pointing at Dunrose. “I’m going to take Dunrose back to Bluebelle Grange and get him off this poison.”

Dunrose touched his chest. “I’m the Duke of Dunrose. Who would I even be without laudanum?”

“Yes, I might have said the same thing,” said Arthford. “Who would I be without the marchioness? I know now. I’m no one. You and I can be nonentities together. Come on, for me. It would give me something to do.”

Dunrose snorted.

“What we need to do,” said Nothshire, gazing into the fire, “is seriously consider getting out of this thing we are in with Champeraigne.”

“Well, that would be more easily done if Dunrose wasn’t an opium eater,” said Arthford.

“I mean it,” said Nothshire. “This isn’t just about us anymore. I have a child on the way, an innocent child, and I am bringing this little babe into a world where we’re controlled by some mad Frenchman who thinks all men are brutal animals. This can’t continue.”

“I’m serious, too,” said Arthford.

“I don’t see why Rutchester doesn’t just kill him,” said Dunrose.

They all turned to look at Rutchester, who was still rubbing his shoulder.

Rutchester glared at them. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but he’s very careful around me. I’ve never been able to be alone with him. Don’t think I haven’t tried.”

“Well, we need some sort of plan,” said Nothshire. “We can’t keep playing at being highwaymen for the rest of our damnable lives.”

“I don’t know,” said Dunrose. “I think I look rather dashing in a domino mask and a long, flowing black cape. All of the whores here at Bess’s agree. They’re all quite disappointed that my prick doesn’t stand up anymore.”

“Don’t you wish to be able to fuck women again?” said Arthford. “Don’t you wish to be free of the scourge of the laudanum if that is what it is doing to you?”

“Well,” said Dunrose, with a little shrug, “it makes things nice, you know. Sort of warm and fuzzy. And without it, the world is...”

Nothshire let out a noisy breath. He knew exactly what the world was like, didn’t he?

“We need to make a better world,” said Arthford. “For all of us, not just for Nothshire’s progeny, but for all of us. Four or one?”

“One,” said Nothshire easily.

“If I say one, am I agreeing to being forced off the laudanum?” said Dunrose in a lazy voice.

“One,” said Rutchester.

Dunrose sighed. “One.”

Arthford nodded into the fire. “One, then. We all deserve to have a happy ending, one way or the other.”

* * *