



The Earl's Disguised Governess (Delightful Dukes and Damsels)

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Category: Historical

Description: Claire Gundry thought she had escaped the shadows of her noble lineage. As the daughter of a disgraced marquess, she made a new life for herself as a governess to the young Lady Florence, finding solace in her love for literature and music. However, when she grows dangerously close to Lady Florence's guardian, the enigmatic Lord Bannerdown, her past threatens to unravel the new life she has built.

Can Claire be strong enough to reveal all the secrets she keeps from Lord Bannerdown?

Ernest Barnes, once a humble medic, has been thrust into the unfamiliar world of nobility after inheriting an Earldom following the Battle of Waterloo. Struggling to adapt to his new title and responsibilities, Ernest feels torn between his duties to his estate and his desire to return to a simpler life as a physician. Despite his struggle, his attention keeps being caught by his ward's mesmerizing governess, Miss Claire Gundry, even as pressure mounts...

When all he wishes is to sink into his life of helping others while also honoring his duty, will Claire help him see the way forward?

Together, Claire and Ernest must navigate their differences, haunted by past losses and uncertain futures. Can Ernest reconcile his newfound title with his calling to heal? Can Claire confront the fears of her hidden history? As they bond over the care of Lady Florence, their connection grows—but when society conspires to keep them apart, will their love be strong enough to defy the expectations that surround them?

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Page 1

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Prologue

“It is a hot June day, is it not?”

Ernest gasped as he trudged through tents erected across the battlefield. War was brewing on the horizon, and nobody knew when it would arrive. They were little under two weeks into the summer month, and it seemed every man held his breath on the battlefield, eyes on the horizon, waiting for the cries of war to come for them.

Graham Courtenay, a fellow army surgeon and Ernest’s apprentice, tugged on his high-collared greenish-brown uniform jacket, kept relatively clean, thanks to their aprons they’d left back in the field hospital.

“Indeed,” Graham muttered. “I am tired of the blood, and the war has not even begun.”

Several soldiers had already been injured. Scouts and messengers caught in the crosshairs were sent back with limbs hanging on by a thread and gouges in their muscles and bodies, messages sent in blood on paper. It was unthinkable.

“Do you think the war might even begin?” Ernest could not help asking as they walked through the hard ground in Waterloo. “It has been several days now, and there has been sight nor sound of the French. Perhaps we have been called to war for nothing.”

Graham snorted. “That is wishful thinking.” He frowned. “I am sure the French only wish to keep us waiting. They are a pompous lot; are they not?”

Ernest grunted, not quite agreeing nor disagreeing. He was not there to play politics, only to treat the wounded under the obligation of being called to service. He was following in his father's footsteps—a physician for the king, in what was said to be a great battle and an even greater victory.

Dread and excitement filled the air, anxiety lingering among the fields.

“Still, I suppose Archibald shall be glad to see our mangy faces.”

Ernest could not help laughing. The battlefield was already too grim not to take a light-hearted moment when it was to be found. They made their way to the tent occupied by Viscount Archibald White, who served as a captain for the king's army. It was closed, but a soft candlelight emanated from the large blue tent.

“He is no doubt anxiously poring over those maps,” Graham muttered. “He shall be seeing the lay of the land in his sleep if he is not careful.”

“Perhaps that is what he wishes for.”

Several men walked out as they approached, inclining their heads to Ernest and Graham. Ernest recognized one—the Duke of Colchester, whom he had seen at a spring ball only three months ago. The man had danced a wonderful quadrille with a lady in the scandal sheet the following day. He had been somewhat upset over it, yet to Ernest's knowledge, they had married. Now, the man strode out, stone-faced, a general, ready to lead his troops at the first call of war. He shuddered at the insanity of it. Ernest was a healer, not a fighter, and he was glad for his father's gifts for being a medic.

“Knock, knock, old man,” Graham called out as they entered the viscount's tent.

He is a captain now, Ernest reminded himself. That is all he is now. Until we ...

return.

He cast one more look back out at the empty field, frowning, before he ducked inside.

The tent was indeed lit up by candlelight, and the scent of rum filled the room.

“Good evening,” Archibald said, nodding his head at them. He had a strong face and piercing ice-blue eyes that looked right through a man as if he could immediately assess everything in his field of sight. “How was the hospital?”

“Hard,” Graham muttered, rubbing his eyes.

Archibald glanced at Ernest, who nodded. “Hard. But it is our job, and we are proud to serve in the king’s army in such ways, are we not, Graham?”

“Most proud,” his assistant muttered. “But yes. Indeed, it is an honour.”

“Well, I have just finished up my meeting. We have assessed the land. General Whittingham is moving some of his troops to higher land for a better vantage point. He thinks the French shall strike any moment now.”

As if to prove a point, the air went silent, and they strained to listen for gunfire. None came, and they all visibly relaxed. It was possible, even if it felt foolish.

“It seems God is looking kindly upon us at this moment.” Archibald laughed. “Men, tomorrow, we might go to war good and proper. We might lift our rifles and tend to broken bodies or cover up the dead, and we might serve our country. But tonight, we drink, and we remember.” The captain’s face was bright and optimistic. “But most of all, we shall think of the day we return to our loved ones.”

“Oh, here he goes,” Graham said. “Do not make me listen to one more sonnet about

your beautiful betrothed.”

“Do not mock me, boy.” Archibald laughed. “For I have power back in London and on the battlefield. Perhaps you would like to empty the chamber pots for the soldiers in the trenches?”

“I am content to listen to you talk about your betrothed, General.” He cleared his throat, nodding his faux agreeance. “Do go on.”

Ernest coughed to cover up a snicker as Archibald pulled up three glasses and poured them each a serving of rum. “Lady Samantha is rather beautiful, is she not? Only many weeks ago, she wore a delightful pink gown to the last ball of the season. It was quite a spectacle. I could scarcely pull my gaze from her. She is very generous with her time, and I cannot wait to promenade with her once again. Oh, those eyes. And her dark hair. It spills like night down her back. Her eyes are the beacons upon which I am guided by in my darkest of days.”

Graham groaned as Archibald got louder.

“I am loathe to think I did not have the chance to marry her before we were called to service,” Archibald lamented. “But she will make a fine wife and mother to our future little viscount.”

He spoke so fondly of his betrothed, and Ernest could not help smiling.

“Her smile speaks of mystery as if she is always holding a secret to her chest that she cannot wait to confess. And her skin ... My, every doll maker in the world must be envious, for she is porcelain. A beautiful lady I should not be worthy of, but she makes me feel as though I might just be.”

“Archibald, are you drunk or love drunk?” Graham teased, laughing boisterously.

“You fool.”

As the captain poured more rum into their glasses, some splashed on Graham, who merely wiped at the stain with little care.

“I must say, I would have a thousand glasses of wine spilled on me at one of the marriage-minded mama’s balls back in London than see one more smear of blood on my apron,” Graham muttered as they all lifted their glasses.

“Hear, hear,” Ernest answered.

“A toast, men,” Archibald said. “To winning this battle and returning home so Graham shall be drowned in wine.”

“Hear, hear!” Graham toasted, and they all drank.

After Ernest swallowed, he winced, recalling all those social events. “Although, I must admit, aside from the circumstances in which we are here, I am glad for the reprieve from those mamas.” He shuddered. “They are insufferable, are they not?”

“They parade their daughters around like peacocks!” Graham exclaimed. He had already taken some of the vodka they gave to injured soldiers to ease their pain and was quite boisterous in his volume. “And yes, they are beautiful, but some are just dull. I am sorry that I do not care to hear the fifth woman tell me her skills include three languages and an instrument. That bores me. In the end, they all blend into one unpleasant stretch of a future.”

“Be glad you are not a viscount, then,” Archibald said, laughing. “I promise it would be far worse. They flock and swoon.”

“But you are betrothed,” Ernest pointed out.

“Indeed I am.” Archibald smiled. “And the first thing I shall do upon my return is marry the beautiful Lady Samantha.”

“Another toast?” Ernest suggested.

“Another toast.” Archibald refilled their glasses, and as they prepared to toast and have the tang of rum chase away the day’s fatigue, Ernest couldn’t help thinking of his own future.

“Perhaps we should toast to you finding your own wife, Ernest,” Graham suggested.

“And perhaps I shall toast to you doing most of the cleaning tomorrow, then,” he joked in return, gesturing with his glass.

“I am with Graham on this,” the viscount countered. “This battle cannot deprive you of the chance to find a wife. You are not content alone, nor should you suffer the Ton’s judgement any longer simply because your mother made a decision they did not agree with.”

Ernest nodded distantly.

“What sort of woman would you wish to meet?” Graham’s question came after he had drunk their toast portion before pouring another glass.

Ernest paused, thinking. “Oh,” he said, squinting. “Well. I must admit ... I do not know for sure, but there are some traits I would seek over others. A clever woman. For me, intelligence is key. Now, I would love her to know a couple of languages, something that would really catch me off-guard.”

Archibald nodded, stroking his moustache as if in thought of someone he might know who would match Ernest’s very short list.

“I would like her to be independent,” Ernest admitted and received two laughs in response from his friends. “It is a fine thing to want!”

“Of course, but ... Well, you said yourself, the mamas are rather insufferable. They practically make their girls lack independence and then expect them to run a household. It is rather barbaric! So, we shall have to put that down as a lesser priority.”

Ernest shrugged. “Okay, well ... Perhaps I would like some brave, no-nonsense sort of woman. Someone who would not agree with everything I say with a doe-eyed look in her eyes but would debate with me good and proper. She could possibly have a very unladylike interest. Say, law, for example.”

“Law?” Graham exclaimed. “Ernest, I fear I hope you shall not meet this girl, for I might fall asleep when you host dinner parties.”

“Oh, do not listen to Graham. I do hope you find such a woman. You shall be hard-pressed, but I hope you do find her. A toast: to the Earl of Bannerdown finding his countess.” The two other men cheered as they drank their rum, but Ernest’s thoughts lingered on Archibald using his title.

Earl of Bannerdown.

He much preferred Army surgeon Ernest Barnes, medic in the king’s army. For that was where his passion in life lay: in helping others. Two weeks prior, he had received a visit from a crown barrister, who informed Ernest of his uncle’s death—alongside their heir to the Bannerdown fortune. The title and estate had been passed onto him. Once the war was over, Ernest would not return to his normal life, where the Ton was of little importance to him. He would return to life as an earl.

He glanced at the opening of the tent, half wishing the war would end and half

wishing it would not. For he did not know if he could continue such a title. Besides that, he would need to find a wife, especially now. But romance was the furthest thing from his mind.

The Countess of Bannerdown. Who would she be? How would she feel to inherit such a title? No doubt she would love it, as would her mama. He thought of every marquess and duke above him to whom he would be compared. His title ranked him above even the viscount. Archibald was above him as a captain in this tent, but back in London, it would be him above Archibald.

The thought was sobering, so he poured another glass of rum. He did not wish for responsibility. He wished for freedom and the ability to continue his work as a medic, but he would have to give that up.

“Well, men,” Archibald said when the rum was almost two-thirds gone. “We do not know what shall start—or end—this war. Be it casualties or victory, I shall be honoured to return to London with you both as my friends and comrades.”

“Indeed,” Graham answered. “It is an honour to serve with you both, and I look forward to when we are back in those ballrooms, wishing we were on the battlefield.”

“At least the alcohol shall be better,” Archibald joked, looking at them both. “I shall woo My Lady Samantha with my tales of bravery—”

“—and Ernest shall woo his prospective wife with his tales of heroic dealings.”

He grimaced. “Men, I shall learn the dance of war before I understand the intricacies of marriage as an earl.”

“It is rather easy,” Graham said. “As we said, the ladies will simply flock to you.”

“I am not a tossed piece of bread for birds to peck at,” Ernest grumbled. “Besides, it is not just romance that I must think of. My cousin, Matthew, the deceased heir, had a daughter who survived. She is ten and six years old, and I shall be her guardian.”

“Oh, heavens help her, then,” Graham teased. Ernest just shook his head, but he agreed.

“Two female adjustments, then,” Archibald added. “A wife and a ward. That makes a good family, does it not?”

“Not,” Ernest muttered. “I fear there shall not be enough wine in London to help me through it all. How do I speak to her since all the family she knows is dead, and I shall be her new guardian? And that it will not be her father presenting her to suitors but me. She might despise me.”

“She might.” Graham nodded, and Ernest swatted him over the head with a laugh. Together, the men all pushed through the tent’s entrance, breathing in the thick, earthy smell of the field. “But for now, we are in arms with one another, serving our king.”

“Indeed,” Archibald answered. “One last toast.” He disappeared inside to get the rum.

Ernest made the toast this time as their glasses were refilled. “To returning home as one.”

Their glasses clinked, and they finished their drinks, toasted to the hope—and dread—of new horizons together.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:03 am

Chapter 1

The air was crisp and cold, and Ernest shuddered in the winter wind. January was not kind in Bath that year, and he wished for a warmer coat.

Still, it was a morbid reminder. At least he could stand there, in a coat, trying to find a semblance of warmth.

His eyes tracked over the war memorial, and he knew that many men no longer had the option of standing in the cold even, for their bodies were long put in the ground. He shifted, his hands in his pockets, as he looked at the other lords from the area in Bath. He stood outside Bellott's Hospital, a stranger among war veterans. A stranger yet honoured all the same. There was a dour mood in the air: the knowledge that they were all alive to tell their tales and the tales of the fallen, but their dead comrades were not.

"He fought valiantly, did he not?" the quiet voice next to him asked. Sometimes Ernest thought he had got used to the yelling of Graham Courtenay in the field hospital, the constant sound of his cries to help him, to announce a new patient, to call out to ground a man who lingered close to the precipice of death. So, when the man was quiet and his voice soft in grief and respect, Ernest could only see it as yet another unfair change.

War changes men, land, and lives. For what else would it do? He thought morbidly. He did not feel more accomplished for serving. Perhaps if he had been a soldier, then maybe. But mostly, he felt guilty. That he was not one of the names etched on the monument in front of Bellott's.

“He did,” Ernest finally answered. “He was a good captain.”

Graham held out a flask for Ernest. “Here. He would appreciate it if we drank to him.”

“Indeed, he would,” Ernest sighed as he took a mouthful of whisky and passed it back to his old friend.

Together, they looked at the monument, swallowed their mouthfuls, and nodded when they were done. “To Archibald White,” Ernest murmured. “Brave captain, audacious viscount, and a most wonderful friend. May they honour you in your afterlife.”

“I thought we would make it through together,” Graham admitted. “Is that foolish?”

“War takes good men,” Ernest sighed.

“And leaves all the lesser ones to grieve.” It should have been a joke, but his tone fell too flat for the jest, but Ernest could only agree. Neither of them was the viscount. He had filled and commanded a room effortlessly. He had loved his betrothed with every beat of his heart, and now the only embrace he would feel was that of a shallow grave.

“I heard you funded the memorial,” Graham said, clearing his throat, and when Ernest glanced at his friend, he could see the grief lining his eyes in red. Fatigue settled beneath them. While he was impeccably groomed, the six months since the Battle of Waterloo had taken a large toll on him.

“I did.” Ernest nodded. “There was something utterly unbearable about the fact that his body would be lying in a shallow grave. He ... He deserved more than that, so I funded this.”

The marble monument read: Archibald White, viscount and captain. He served valiantly so others survived and returned home. May his soul rest and his heart know peace. War hero in the Battle of Waterloo.

It had his birth and death dates, and Ernest could not bear to look at how his friend was taken too soon. He shook his head and stepped back. He could visit often, at least, and face his grief in a quiet, personal way.

They looked at the monument for their fallen brother for another moment longer before Graham motioned to a nearby bench. "Shall we sit? It has been quite some time since we were last in one another's company."

Ernest led the way, striding over to the bench. His friend's dark hair was already peppered with grey, despite only being in his thirties, and his green eyes were duller than before the war. They had both seen horrors and weathered them.

"How have you been?" Ernest asked. "It has been many months since we spoke."

"Six months is a rather long time, especially when we knew one another so closely in the field hospital. Sometimes, I cannot get the ringing of patients' screams out of my head. Sometimes, I wake up, swearing I can still see the blood on my hands. It is cruel, is it not, that the time passes and feels like an age for friends not to see one another, but the nightmares persist after such a length of time."

"Very cruel," Ernest agreed, pressing his lips together. "I feel as though my life has been forged by grief as of late. My uncle, my cousin, my friend." He looked longways at Graham. "I am glad to have seen you."

"You are glad I am at least one person still alive, you mean," he said, trying to laugh, but it was too quiet.

“No, I am glad for you. You are my oldest friend, and even if our lives have become shrouded in death, then at least we are there together.”

Graham nodded, taking another mouthful from his flask before handing it to Ernest, who drank as well. The whisky burned, but it was a welcome sensation.

“Are you not suffering nightmares?” Graham asked.

“I have been rather occupied of late,” Ernest confessed. “My sleeping has ... Not been best prioritized.”

“Ah.”

He nodded. “I do not wish to wake up my household with my own shouts of nightmares.”

“How is life as the new Earl of Bannerdown?”

Ernest winced as he burrowed down deeper into his coat. “It is ... everything I thought it would be. Busy, endless paperwork, and I must confess I have been throwing myself wholeheartedly into my work since returning to England to avoid facing Lady Florence. She is young, and I do not know what to say to her. She has a governess, however, so she is not truly alone.”

“You do not think she would be comforted more by family? By you? You knew this fate was coming for you since you received word from the barrister.”

“I know.” He sighed. There was a tune echoing in his head. A voice and a melody he could not quite stop hearing. He even glanced around, wondering if somebody was playing an instrument. A pianoforte coming through an open window, perhaps. But there was nothing, and he knew that despite not being able to place the tune, he could

not stop thinking about it. Ernest tried to ignore it, instead focusing on the landscape ahead.

The field behind them that housed Bellott's hospital faced the old street ahead. On such a winter day, the street looked bleak, and he turned his attention back to his friend.

"Are you yet betrothed?" Graham asked. "I recall many nights of teasing you about your new obligations to find a countess."

Ernest sighed, almost a laugh, a sound of pure resignation. "It should be easy, shouldn't it? I find a lovely woman who suits me—or who doesn't but would make a good countess—and marry her. But ... sometimes the dealings of the Ton feel so frivolous compared to what we faced out there. To what our purpose was."

"That is because you have not always been of the Ton," he pointed out. "To those born and raised among it, it is their game of chess. It is the most terrifying ordeal of their lives. It is exciting, yes, but it is a ruinous thing for both men and women."

"And you haven't been avoiding any duties, my friend?" Ernest teased. But Graham only shrugged.

"No," he said. Ernest almost wished to be back in that tent, even on the battlefield, if only to see the excitement and laughter in his friend once again. "I have become the chairman of this hospital right here. And ... Well, I have been making excellent strides. Like you have funded the monument in honour of our fallen friend, I wish to do something too. I am looking to have a new wing of the hospital opened in honour of him. The White Wing, perhaps. It could be specifically for veterans with complex physical medical care. Perhaps even a place where they can stay and recover long-term."

Ernest liked that idea and smiled tiredly at his friend. "I agree. That would be most wonderful. If you need any assistance, do not hesitate to write to me. I shall drop everything."

"Perhaps I might have you as my assistant this time around." And there was a glimmer of the old, jesting Graham Courtenay back, just for a moment, before that distracted seriousness overtook him as he gazed outward at the street. "But Ernest, I do think you need to finally talk to your ward."

"I do," he insisted. "We talk at mealtimes. Briefly, but it is something."

"She needs proper conversation."

"She has her governess."

"From family." Graham gave him a small smile. "She might need you more than you realize, Ernest. If you are drowning yourself in working to avoid her, then that is all she will know. A deceased family and her other living relative who did not want anything to do with her. Soon, she will debut, and she will need you."

"I know," he admitted. "And I feel wretched."

"Then do something about it, my friend. You have faced worse horrors than a girl who is ten and six."

Ernest scowled, knowing how utterly correct his friend was. "I shall. But first, I would like to honour our fallen friend a moment longer."

Graham nodded as they returned to the monument.

Just outside of Bath, Little Harkwell House stood tall among the rolling fields of the countryside. Surrounded by trees and hedges on the outskirts of the grounds, the manor itself was proud against the darkening afternoon sky.

Windows were closed to keep in the heat, and from his study window, Ernest could see a bird that landed on the manor's back garden, pecking away at the dry, hard soil. It gave up moments later, soaring off. He almost felt envious of the bird. He was trapped within the manor, and while he loved it—preferred it even to Bannerdown House in Mayfair—it reminded him of the title and wealth he should not have inherited.

He set down his pen, pausing his work.

You have faced worse horrors than a girl who is ten and six.

A deceased family and her other living relative who did not want anything to do with her...

His friend's words weighed on his mind, causing him to mull over them as he shuffled his paperwork, briefly thinking about burying himself in yet another ledger. The Bannerdown accounts were impeccably kept, but there was some disarray due to the nature of their deaths. Some accounts still had not been settled, and Ernest continued wading through the intricacies of life as an Earl.

“Which now includes looking after your ward more than just ensuring her financial security,” he muttered to himself. “Comfort, Ernest. You must provide comfort for her. Let her know you are there.”

So, he stood up from his desk, sighed, and ventured into the hallway.

Little Harkwell House was a brightly coloured house, full of pale hues and bold

furnishings. Apparently, the former countess had an eye for beauty and loved collecting statues and artifacts, and her husband had delighted in her every whim. Ernest had definitely seen the accounts from their spending on decor and trinkets, and as he walked past bust after bust of mythological figures and figureheads, he understood why.

Approaching the music room on the floor below, he lingered just next to the doorway, listening in on where Florence was having her music lesson.

“Well done, Lady Florence.” The voice of Florence’s new governess, who had begun her position three weeks prior, rang out musically in the room. Even when she was not singing, her voice had a melodic lull to it. Ernest kept quiet, eavesdropping, hoping that none of his staff caught him in the act.

“Can you continue the scales on the pianoforte while you sing them?” the governess asked.

“I can try, Miss Gundry,” came the voice of Ernest’s ward. Her voice was soft and gentle, both were, but it was clear Florence’s still held that element of naivety and youth. “How is this?”

As the piano keys were pressed, the young girl sang the notes. Only one of them sounded slightly off, and much to Ernest’s delight at recognizing such a thing, the governess corrected her gently.

“We have been working on a song to show the earl, have we not?”

For a moment, Ernest thought he had been caught, but he realized the two were still speaking to one another.

“I shall show you the next few lines of the song. May I?”

Ernest watched as Miss Claire Gundry took a seat on the piano bench. Her hair, the colour of shining wheat right as the harvest was due, was swept back into a low bun and decorated with a white ribbon, with a few strands framing her face. They concealed her eyes as she bent over the instrument, leaning her whole body into the notes as she began to play, but Ernest knew her eyes were brown—a decadent chocolate brown—and that beneath her right eye sat a mole that he had not stopped looking at, endeared by the beauty mark so many women tried to draw on, imitating the French.

Her hands trilled over the keys as she began to sing. Glancing at Florence and nodding, the young girl began to join in the parts of the melody she knew. Together, they sang a hauntingly beautiful duet. And at once, Ernest realized it was the very tune he could not get out of his head all morning when he'd been outside the hospital.

It was Miss Gundry's voice in his mind. He leaned on the wall just out of view, watching his ward's governess smiling. She was patient when she stopped Florence at certain parts to correct a note sung incorrectly and gentle when she instructed a new part of the tune.

The song filled the music room, only on the landing below Ernest's study, and when even the slightest noise drifted through Little Harkwell House, it was no wonder he hadn't stopped hearing their song. It is beautiful, at least, he thought.

"You are a very quick learner, Lady Florence," Miss Gundry praised as their duet came to an end. "With how you pick up music and languages, I am sure you shall have a suitor in no time."

Her voice was tinged with a hint of melancholy as she said it, and Ernest couldn't help wondering what Miss Gundry's full story was. He hadn't pried much, only eager to hire a governess for Florence's last year before debuting.

“We shall continue our lessons tomorrow,” Miss Gundry told her.

“Thank you, Miss Gundry.” Florence’s voice also reflected that melancholy, and Ernest could not help wondering if it was at being alone once again upon her governess’s departure. Or perhaps it was at the music? Ernest should have known these things offered support for the girl, but even now, he could not convince himself to take one step into the room.

But he was too busy focusing on that, and he did not notice when the governess packed up her books and bid his ward goodbye, walking out of the music room. He could not hide quick enough, and the young woman collided with him.

She let out a harsh noise as her books tumbled to the floor.

“My Lord!” she cried out, rushing to pick up her books as he did. “I am sorry. I did not see you there.”

She paused, looking up, and her eyes caught his. A faint blush rose to her cheeks at his attention, but he could not look away until he realized how long he had been gazing at her.

“Oh—of course. Right. No, do forgive me. I should not have been lingering.” He reached for one of her strewn books at the same time as her. Their hands brushed, and he pulled back sharply, clearing his throat. Claire still reached for the book, picking it up herself. Awkwardly, he stood back up.

“I—well—apologies for ... knocking your books to the ground, Miss Gundry.”

“It is my own fault, My Lord. I should have been looking where I was going.”

“No, no, do not trouble yourself with blame.”

Stop going in circles, you fool! he chided himself. Why am I here? Ah, yes, to ask about Florence's progress and to see how I might get involved more.

"I—" As soon as he opened his mouth to ask, a call echoed down the hall, a shrill beckoning that shivered down his spine unpleasantly. Lady Katherine came walking towards him, having taken to her position and place in Little Harkwell House very well. Of course she would, he thought. She was a former lady of the Ton.

And yet her husband, a physician, remained back in London, noticeably without his wife. Lady Katherine's eyes darted between Ernest and Claire, and a slight frown marred her forehead.

"What are you doing?" she barked.

"I was simply checking on Lady Florence's progress. I, unfortunately, was in the way of Miss Gundry's exit and—"

"Well, do not loiter, boy. It is rather unbecoming of you. You are an earl now, Ernest. I require your presence in my solar and make haste."

He met Claire's gaze, humiliated by his mother's speech. She only fought a smile, ducking her head. She curtsied once to him before curtsying to his mother.

"Lord Bannerdown," she said. "Lady Katherine."

Katherine returned a tight smile as Claire turned and fled down the hallway, clutching her books. Ernest could not take his eyes off the sway of her blue skirt around her ankles or how her white blouse puffed at the sleeves but emphasized her slender neck. And the way she had not waited for him to pick up her books but had done it herself ...

He rather liked that. Other women feigned dropping their fans at balls just so a gentleman would pick it up, and while Ernest would be a gentleman and help, Claire's independence had her swooping right down immediately.

A strand of Claire's hair came loose as she hurried away. At the end of the hallway, before she turned out of sight, she glanced back at him. He flushed with warmth at being caught watching yet again. She disappeared around the corner, and Ernest returned to focus on the clearing of his mother's throat.

"I requested you make haste, dear," she said.

"Of course, Mother," he said.

I shall enquire about Lady Florence's progress later, he vowed.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:03 am

Chapter 2

Claire rushed down the hallway as quickly as she could without completely running away from the earl. For three weeks, ever since the housekeeper had hired her, she had kept a respectful distance from the Earl of Bannerdown, as had been instructed.

He was a quiet man, she had noticed, who often kept to himself deep within the confines of his study and did not emerge very often. Claire knew it wasn't her place to question but she was not even sure he asked Lady Florence how her day was at any given dinnertime.

Was it nerves or arrogance?

But as she ducked around the corner of the hallway to catch her breath, she could not deny that she thought it was not arrogance. For there had been a kindness in the earl's eyes. A mysterious look to him, as though they held depths she could not understand. His chestnut-coloured hair was curly, atop his head in thick lengths that was cut neatly around his ears. Word had it her employer had been in the king's army, but Claire heard so much gossip she did not know what rumour was and what was true.

Pressing a hand to her chest, she willed her racing heart to calm itself.

He is only an earl, she berated herself. You have danced with many of those. Do not be foolish now.

And yet her hands remembered the brush of his fingers against hers as they reached for the same book. He had not insisted he pick them up, at least. Claire enjoyed her

independence and did not need a man, even a handsome earl, to tidy up her messes.

Claire went on towards the back staircase leading to the basement, where the rest of the staff chatted and gossiped, far beneath the main house and out of earshot of the nobility. In there, the cellar was cold, far colder now that winter had settled in, and Claire's eyes immediately found Winnie, Lady Katherine's personal lady's maid.

"I have just seen Lady Katherine," Claire said, entering the chatter.

Winnie, only twenty years old, had a mop of red curls and a bright smile, but that smile dimmed now at Claire's words. "She is not looking for me, is she? I only had to wash the old hag earlier! She insisted on bathing twice in one hour. I am sure she just wanted to put me through the torment of scrubbing her back. It makes my arms tire so."

"I believe her attention is directed at Lord Bannerdown this afternoon and rather irately so. She seemed rather impatient."

"That woman eats impatience for her meals," Winnie muttered. "It is why she has so much of it. If I am not at her side within a minute of her screeching my name, then I am to be scolded." She shook her head. "Sometimes I wish I could give that woman a piece of my mind!"

"The rest of the Ton do," one of the other maids training to be a cook said, sniggering. Daisy cupped her mouth, whispering, "I heard the gossip when I worked in Garnington Hall in Mayfair. They have quite a lot to say about the Little Harkwell and those who now claim it."

Is the earl a bad man? Claire couldn't help wondering. It was not unheard of to fake an inheritance or lie one's way into a title, but the earl seemed so kind, so gentle, from what she had seen. A little distant but not cold.

“Yes, I know the tales well,” Winnie said. “As Lady Katherine’s maid, I hear her never-ending boasting about her rise in ranks. The wealth she has inherited, the way she always knew her son was destined to be the earl.” The last part was said with great pronunciation, mimicking Lady Katherine’s voice, causing the other maids to snicker. Claire cleared her throat, trying to stifle her own laughter. “It is strange, though, is it not, that she left her husband behind? I heard that Lord Bannerdown was always closer to his father and took after him in his profession yet was hurried along to take the title of Earl of Bannerdown following his uncle’s death.”

“Well, Lady Katherine is the late earl’s sister,” Daisy said. “It makes sense that she should have her son inherit the title.”

“I do wonder why her husband did not move with her.” Winnie frowned. “If I am honest, she doesn’t seem to miss him despite giving up her family for him. But she is happy to have returned to her childhood home. That part must be nice, at least.”

“I wonder if she is happy marrying a commoner,” Daisy said.

Claire turned away, laughing. The maids were just as bad as their mistresses when they attended their social functions.

“She seems to be. She talks endlessly about him but never mentions missing him,” Winnie answered.

“Perhaps she is too overrun by riches to miss him.”

“Hush now.” Claire laughed. “We should not speculate on the Barnes’ rise back to their inheritance. I am sure it is lovely for Lady Katherine to be back in her home despite the sadness of losing her brother. And no doubt the earl is happy, too.”

“He does not seem to be,” Winnie pointed out. “Lady Katherine dislikes how

reserved he is.”

“Oh,” Claire said. “I had noticed, but I did not think it out of the ordinary. I knew that the late Earl of Bannerdown fell gravely ill with consumption last winter. Following his son and daughter rushing to his side, here at Little Harkwell House, they soon caught the same illness. It took them all some months later.” She glanced towards the stairs, thinking of Lady Florence, her young charge, who was much more succumbed to sorrow deeper than Claire thought was possible. It weighed on the young girl’s shoulders like a shroud.

“That is all true,” Winnie said. “It just seems ... odd. Lady Katherine did not seem to grieve for very long. It was as though she simply wanted her home and importance back.”

“We should not speculate,” Claire insisted gently. “It shall be our pay at risk if we are caught.”

“That’s a good point,” Winnie said. “I should see if her ladyship wishes to have her feet rubbed while she meets with Lord Bannerdown.” She rolled her eyes sarcastically and set off for the stairs, muttering under her breath.

It left Daisy to start talking about dinner preparations, and Claire soon left with her thoughts on the earl and Lady Florence, whose development she was worried about due to her grief. She hadn’t known the young girl for long, but what she did know seemed so hindered by grief that Claire could only hope that sharing music and arts with her would help. It was an expression, and she wished to share it with Lady Florence. Perhaps grief might come out in a song for her. After all, music had always helped Claire.

That evening, in Florence's room, Claire slid her fingers through the girl's dark hair. As she unwound the delicate braids, replacing the intricate style with a simple plait to maintain the waves Florence liked, Claire asked something she thought she should not but risked regardless.

"Lady Florence, if you do not mind me asking, how is your relationship with the earl?"

The girl stiffened only for a moment. Claire began to help her change into her nightdress, a simple white cotton shift.

"I ... Well, I do not really feel as though I know him," Florence admitted. "He does not speak to me. At dinnertimes, he gives me an awkward smile, and I fear I am the child he feels he has to take care of but, of course, was never asked. I think he thinks I may just leave if he does not speak to me. No doubt he is hoping for the day I am married off."

"I am sure he does not," Claire tried to assure her. "He was outside the music room today. Perhaps he wishes to get to know you better."

"Then he has had six months, which is two element seasons, to get to know me." There was a sad note to her voice, a bitterness with which Claire knew well. She withdrew from Florence to go to the cupboard down the hallway to fetch an extra blanket. The night was already chilly.

When she returned, Florence was on her bed, candlelight flickering over her face as she gazed down at her bed coverings. She grazed her fingers over the textured bedding, sighing.

"I do wish for a relationship with him," Florence said. "But I feel as though he should approach me. Lord Bannerdown and Lady Katherine are my only remaining family

now, and I do not wish to lose more people.” Her chest hitched as she fought back emotion. She shook her head. “It is why I find solace in books, Miss Gundry. They remind me that I am not alone, and that people have weathered worse situations and come out feeling rather positive. It is something I hope for myself.”

“I am sure that will happen,” Claire assured her. “And perhaps I can ... facilitate some connection between the two of you. After all, you are his legal ward. He and Lady Katherine should have a hand in your debut next year. He shall have to get to know you then.” She gave her a soft smile, almost teasing about the situation, but met Florence’s sad smile as she tucked herself beneath the sheets.

“Sometimes, Miss Gundry,” she whispered, her eyes fixed on the ceiling, “I wish I had not been a survivor of the illness that took my family away. Sometimes it hurts to be the one left behind in such ways, knowing the only family I now have did not choose me in their lives.”

Claire’s heart broke hearing those words, even as she resonated deeply with them. She wished to hold the girl comfortingly and take away those aches. She was far too young to feel them so terribly. But she could only brush back her hair, smile, and reach for her candle holder.

“Things shall turn out better, Lady Florence,” she said. “I shall make sure of it for you.”

Florence hesitated, and Claire thought she had fallen asleep, so she retreated, leaving her in darkness, until her quiet voice came through the shadows of her room.

“Miss Gundry?”

“Yes, Lady Florence?”

“I am ever so grateful for you. I wish you could stay forever.”

A pang of sadness speared Claire. “Me too, Lady Florence. Now, get some sleep, for tomorrow we will duet and read some more books. What do you think? Maybe a stroll in the gardens in our thickest cloaks.”

“I would like that.”

But as she passed by the girl’s *escritoire*, she could smell something sweet. Knowing she would not be caught, she arched the candle discreetly past the sweet, perfumed smell, finding a letter that had yet to be addressed to anyone, but bold strokes of writing littered the parchment. Claire paused, only for a moment, so she wasn’t noticed snooping.

Was it for a friend?

Perhaps... Perhaps a *tendresse*?

No doubt he is hoping for the day I am married off. Was that situation closer than Claire realized? Why would Florence keep such a secret from her? She had told her many things that she did not wish to be public knowledge, such as her fear of debuting and worry over being too awkward to speak to suitors.

Maybe it is merely for a friend. Perhaps I interrupted her writing, and she has yet to address it.

Claire closed the door after bidding her goodnight and retreated to her room further down the hall, slipping quietly in. She could not fault Florence for keeping secrets, for she had plenty of her own.

She set the candle down on the dresser in her room, decorated in pale blues and soft

creams. She eyed herself in the mirror, letting herself, for just a moment, remember the bright-eyed Lady Claire Garner that she had once been, the daughter of the wealthy Baron Flogsend, with whom she had lived in Bristol, as high members of society.

“And now you are a governess,” she whispered to herself. “Miss Claire Gundry and nothing else. Nobody else. Lady Claire has gone, written off, just like the debts you settled for your father. That life is gone.”

She steeled herself but was interrupted by the sound of footsteps in the hallway outside her door. Claire blew out the candles quickly and hurried into bed, ducking beneath the covers. It was still early, but she could not understand who would be at her door so late, so she feigned sleep, and eventually, it came for her.

Page 4

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Chapter 3

Ernest's fist was held aloft at the white, wooden door to Miss Gundry's bedroom.

It was strange; he was sure he had seen candlelight flickering down the hallway beneath her door for a moment. Was it possible she had heard him and wished not to talk? Had he imagined the light? If she truly was asleep, he should not disturb her simply to discuss Florence's progress.

Then he hesitated. Did he really want to be caught around her twice in one day? What would the staff think if they saw him loitering outside her door? He grimaced and moved back. His footsteps sounded too loud to his ears, and he cringed, hoping she hadn't heard him.

He should not disturb her with questions about Florence so late.

Still, Ernest almost resented the distance he put between himself and Claire's bedroom door.

Instead, he went downstairs and found his mother in the drawing room, wrapped in a burgundy robe, with her hair plaited back from her face.

"Ah, Ernest," she said, beaming at him. "I had some wine brought up. Would you care to join me for a nightcap?"

Ernest was not one to shy away from indulging himself, but he sometimes disliked how a nightcap or toasting reminded him of his fallen friend, Archibald. They had

done it many times during their service, and now he only thought of the man's jovial smile as it disappeared into the ground with the brave man himself. Were his fiancée's eyes now forever saddened by the loss of a marriage that they had not even begun? He thought of Archibald's promise to wed Lady Samantha upon their return to England.

Now he never shall have that, Ernest thought sombrely and accepted the glass his mother passed to him. He finished it quickly and asked for another to nurse much slower as he took up the armchair adjacent to hers.

"We indulge in fine things rather well, Ernest," Katherine said, lifting the glass to her lips. "This wine is more than one hundred years old. Do you think your uncle would have appreciated it for its vintage nature? No, he would have sought only the effects of the drink. We are far more deserving of this rank than he ever was." She smiled at him, leaning across to pat Ernest's hand. "Thank heavens for you, my son."

He gave her a withering smile, feeling rather like a puppet on a string.

"Mother, do you not miss my father?" he asked.

"Drink your wine, Ernest," she scolded. "You do not indulge enough."

She is avoiding my question. Why? he thought.

"I do," he said, "but I can hardly do my work as a physician when I am shaky-handed from a night of wine. Some of us cannot sit around preening in our drawing rooms."

"Then what is it you are doing now?" she challenged softly, smiling at him as if she were proud of herself. "Ernest, if I were not worthy of my rank, then I would not have been born in this very house. I am simply stepping back into an old pair of shoes, only to find they fit better than they ever did before."

She shook her head. “You must reconsider my request to leave that job,” she muttered. “Bellott Hospital does not need one more physician. I am proud of you for the work you did in the king’s army, and I know the hardships you have faced, but it is time you realize your place in society. You are an earl now, Ernest. It is a fine title, and you do not need this career of yours you idealize. It is ... unbecoming. You are living both a commoner’s life and a noble one, and the two have never gone hand-in-hand.”

You would know after marrying my father, he thought bitterly. He took a sip of his wine, letting the rich flavour burst over his tongue.

“Mother, I know you regret leaving the Ton behind when you married my father, but I do

not wish to give up work I feel passionately about—good, hard work—just because I have a new title. I have barely settled into it. I need time to adjust.” It was an excuse, and he knew it. He loathed how this new title took him away from his career much more. He wished life was as simple as it used to be: when he was just a medic, and his mother only talked of life back as a lady of the Ton. He almost resented how she swanned around this house.

“Besides,” he muttered, “it is hard to find joy in the new title when it was only gained due to your brother’s unfortunate death. My uncle and cousin’s deaths brought us these titles again. It does not feel right to celebrate it.”

“We are celebrating fortune, not death,” she said, her voice snappish. “That is what we applaud and recognize for ourselves. That we are now secure.”

“We already were,” he countered. “You are happy to have lost your brother but gained a title?”

“You are far more the Earl of Bannerdown than he ever was, and you ought to be grateful.”

Perhaps it is you who ought to be grateful for me, as without me taking the inheritance, you would not have been allowed back here as a lady.

Instead, he said, “Thank you, Mother. I am grateful. I just have been around far too much death.”

“Which is another reason why you could sacrifice your career, my dear boy. Give yourself a break from tragedy. It is concerning how much you enjoy being around it.”

“I enjoy helping people, Mother,” he countered. “That is all.” He sighed. “I am like my father in such ways. Have you heard from him? I am assuming that is why you do not miss him.”

“I did not say I do not miss him,” she said entirely too quickly. “I believe that tomorrow, I shall attend the modiste and find out some upcoming fashions so we can start to look towards Lady Florence’s future. She shall need a good, upstanding husband.”

More title talk, he thought sourly. More dodging questions.

“Of course,” he said. “I shall be at the hospital.”

Katherine simply rolled her eyes and finished her wine. Ernest drained the rest of his glass and stood, bidding his mother a good night.

The following morning, he walked past the breakfast room and heard soft-spoken voices coming from inside.

He paused just out of sight, finding himself in such a position far too many times for comfort. Sunlight streamed through the tall French windows, the curtains all pulled open. He briefly remembered how this manor had been shrouded in complete darkness, but he loved the sunlight that now came through.

I should go inside, he thought. I should eat with them and make conversation. At the very least, I should ask Florence how she slept. I should compliment her musical progress. I should thank Miss Gundry.

And yet ...

He could not.

His grief, awkwardness, and lack of how to talk to his young, orphaned cousin held him back. He would look like a fool. Sometimes he had dined with Florence and spent the whole time eating in a tense silence, but he could not endure that today.

I shall finally ask Miss Gundry later, once I have returned from the hospital.

His mother was out at the modiste, as she had mentioned she would be, so he knew he was safe not to be subjected to her further complaints. It was strange how she enjoyed berating him for his career choices but answered none of his questions.

Ernest walked past quietly, ducking his head, heading upstairs, and calling for his valet to get ready.

Just as he was about to duck into the second carriage—thankfully, he had brought his own from their old home and now had use of the previous earl’s carriage—he heard a shout.

“Driver!” He turned around to find Claire rushing out, holding her skirt above her feet not to trip as she hurried down the house’s main steps. Her cloak’s hood slipped off, showing her wayward waves that had been held back loosely, as if she had been in a rush. “Oh—Lord Bannerdown. I apologize; I did not see you.”

She speaks formally for a governess, he thought. While they are often well-educated, they do not have the silver tongue the pompous crowd of the Ton has.

“It is quite all right,” he said. “What is it that has you in a rush?”

“I was wondering if your driver might be troubled to go into town and pick up a package for Lady Florence. It is at the Haberdash Bookshop.”

He knew the place well, and he thought he could pick it up, but ... He hesitated. I cannot talk to my cousin, but I believe I can talk to Miss Gundry.

“Miss Gundry, if you are not otherwise busy, you are very welcome to pick it up yourself. As my cousin’s governess, you are not confined to the house.”

Claire stumbled back, her eyes wide as she gaped at him. “I—I couldn’t possibly—” She glanced at the carriage. She worries like a lady of the Ton might, he noted. But she is a working woman. She should not worry about such things.

He was about to retract his offer when she nodded timidly. “That would be most generous, Lord Bannerdown.”

I served in the king’s army as Ernest, he wished to say. Call me Ernest.

But he could not, and he kept his mouth closed and only stepped back to allow Claire to enter the carriage first. She awkwardly moved past him. He moved his hand on the carriage door handle a moment too late, and her fingers found his hand as she stepped in. Her hand pulled back sharply, and she stuttered an apology.

“Forgive me, Miss Gundry,” he said, meeting her gaze for a moment. Claire’s lips parted, and he found his eyes drawn to the movement before they strayed to that mole beneath her right eye, finding it a pretty addition to her face.

“It is not your fault, My Lord,” she whispered.

“Regardless, I should have moved my hand to allow you entry into the carriage.” Her words prompted him to break his gaze.

Before she could answer, the driver motioned them along. “Lord Bannerdown, are we to get moving?”

“We are,” he said, climbing in after Claire. “Let us go into town.”

They settled, and the carriage pulled away from Little Harkwell House. As much as he liked the manor, he felt much lighter and better whenever he left for work. It was as if distance from the house took the weight of the unwanted responsibility from his shoulders. He was indeed grateful for the security for both him and his mother, but why did she dodge his questions about his father?

He wondered if something had happened between them while he was away at war.

Claire cleared her throat, prompting him out of his thoughts. Right, he remembered. I am not alone.

But he could not think of what to say, so he also cleared his throat to buy some time.

Claire did it again moments later, and Ernest could not help an awkward laugh as he looked out the window, avoiding meeting her gaze again head on.

“I was wondering—”

“I wanted to—”

They both spoke simultaneously, having spent far too long in silence waiting for the other to talk. Ernest laughed and hesitated while Claire looked wide-eyed at him for a moment as if wondering if it was okay to have interrupted him.

“Please, My Lord, you speak first,” she said hurriedly.

“I was merely wondering what Florence’s package is,” he commented, still laughing through his awkwardness.

“Ah,” she said. “It is a book. Specifically, a special edition of Romeo and Juliet. It is the first edition, apparently. It was bought in especially for her. The bookkeeper at the Haberdash Bookshop is most generous.”

“Shakespeare?” Ernest asked, nodding. “That is quite impressive.”

“Oh, Lady Florence is very fascinated with him!” Claire said, her excitement palpable. “She has read every Shakespearian play at least twice. I believe her favourite is Macbeth, but she does have a special place for Romeo and Juliet. I think she is a romantic at heart but—”

Claire cut herself off, snapping her mouth closed.

“What is it?”

“I do not wish to speak out of turn.”

“I assure you, Miss Gundry, nothing is out of turn.”

“But... If you do not mind me saying, My Lord, you have not asked of her progress. I do not want to assume you want to be told.”

“I would very much enjoy it,” he said, nodding encouragingly. “Do go on.”

“I was only going to mention that I believe Lady Florence to be a romantic at heart, but I think her grief stifles her, so she turns to Shakespeare’s books with woeful tragedy. The fated lovers theme seems understandable.”

“It does indeed,” he said. “Although I do hope she does not wish for her own Romeo in those circumstances.”

He found the conversation going in an easier direction than anticipated and began to relax.

“Lord Bannerdown,” Claire spoke up after a moment, “if you do not mind me asking, why do you not speak with Lady Florence directly? She is your cousin, is she not? And she is very young. Of course, she has me, but I can see she craves a connection with you.”

He hesitated, feeling rather embarrassed of himself when he admitted, “Miss Gundry, the real reason I do not speak with her is because I find myself rather awkward around her. She is young and grieving, and I am older and do not know how to navigate my own grief to best be there for her. I do not know how to communicate with her in a way that won’t leave her feeling rather negative.”

“I can tell she wishes to speak with you, no matter what,” Claire said gently. “She is a

lover of books, as I mentioned. If you have a favourite Shakespearean tale, perhaps you could bring it up over dinner. If you feel awkward, then you can keep the communication to a confined time. Break your fast with us one time, or you are welcome to step into the music room and watch us duet.” Her voice went higher with her teasing, joking about catching him lingering in the doorway. He laughed lightly, allowing her such a tease.

“You are quite right,” he said. “I am merely aware of my own ... poor skills in talking. I am used to being clinical and observant. That has not equipped me to cater to a grieving young ward whom I did not know I would have guardianship over.”

“She worries about that,” Claire told him. “That she is the ward you are stuck with and never chose and cannot get rid of until she is married.”

The fact that his cousin carried such a burden ... Oh, it jaded his heart. He truly did need to talk to her.

“I shall find myself taking your advice, then, Miss Gundry. And it is quite ample timing as well, for it appears we have arrived at our destination.” He smiled as they entered the town. “I believe the Haberdash Bookshop is a little way down the road.”

“Thank you, My Lord.”

He opened the carriage door to her and stepped out before offering his hand to help her out. Claire blinked at his open palm for a moment before sliding her hand into his. He jolted at the touch but closed his fingers around hers to steady her as she stepped out of the carriage and onto the cobbled streets.

She bumped into him, her eyes wide as she gazed up at him. He looked down at her and was only brought out of his reverie by the closing of the carriage door by one of the footmen. Ernest startled and stepped back.

“I shall... I shall leave the carriage here so you may have a way to return to Little Harkwell Park,” Ernest said. “I do not know when I shall be home.”

“Thank you, Lord Bannerdown.”

He lingered awkwardly, unsure how to part ways, so he simply nodded jerkily before he turned and walked away towards Bellott’s Hospital.

Chapter 4

Claire made her way down the main road through Bath proper, keeping her cloak tucked around her face. She could not stop fussing with it while her gaze flickered left and right, trying to notice anybody looking too long or hard at her.

She had grown up in Bristol, in Flogsend House, a beautiful townhouse that was scarcely half an hour away. Her father had taken her to Bath many times. She had been known in society; it was not a foolish fear to worry she might be recognized.

But she hurried along the cold, frosty cobbles, keeping her head down. The one thing about being a governess was the freedom. A fine lady of the Ton was noticed walking alone, but a governess was not, and Claire always made sure to dress simply but prettily, enjoying the freedom that came with her role. A lady wore fine things like she was born for it and would never dream of wearing even a plain night dress. Claire let herself blend into the background with that as an advantage.

She had attended the Haberdash Bookshop several times in the last three weeks to acquire new reading material for Lady Florence when the use of a carriage was permitted. Lady Florence was not confident enough to request the books from anybody else, and she was afraid of judgement or words getting back to Lady Katherine about her reading material.

Claire did not know Lady Katherine well enough, but she could guess that a woman of her rank did not want her great niece to be reading about lovers who fall to taking their own lives out of a desperate love for one another.

“Miss Gundry!” came the call of Mr Lawrence Kent, the store owner. He wore a jaunty hat tucked down at an angle and a fine, red sash along the length of the hat. True to his name and appearance, he had been a haberdasher before retiring to open a bookstore when the war had happened, and a need for hats lessened while the need for escapism through books heightened. Everybody wanted to buy the latest account of the Battle of Waterloo only six months prior, and every bookshop wanted to be the one selling out copies and bringing in the profits.

Mr Kent nodded his head at her.

“Good morning, Mr Kent,” she greeted, nodding and resisting the urge to curtsy.

“And a cold, blustering one it is, my dear,” he said. Age lined his face, but his smile was friendly, and she felt comforted around him. “I might assume you are here to pick up a certain edition of a book for Lady Florence?”

“I am indeed.” She smiled broadly as he produced a book wrapped in brown paper and slid it into a fine velvet box. “You are ever so kind as to have helped us acquire this edition. It must not have been easy.”

“Indeed, it was not, but I have my connections.” He winked and tapped his nose as Claire handed the payment over. She had bought the book from her own wages and did not mind, for it must have been some time since Lady Florence had received a gift. “Miss Gundry, if I may suggest, do have a look around and find something you like for yourself. If you are interested in the new biographies of any of the fallen captains or generals in the Battle of Waterloo, we have those. The writers worked quickly to ensure we had the latest material prepared.”

“Thank you.” She bowed her head in gratitude before moving deeper into the shop. He was right: she did deserve such a gift for herself. She bypassed the biographies he mentioned. Perhaps it was uneducated of her, but she did not care for the war heroes.

Claire thought they were valiant but did not need to read a book on them.

She much preferred the classical literature near the front of the shop and went over to bury her afternoon in those stacks. Emma, one of the most recent Jane Austen novels, had come out in the last year. Claire had heard a few things about it from the other maids who could read, and she was interested. Emma, the main heroine, sounded an independently witty woman who could hold her own while being a hopeless romantic.

I would like to read such a book, Claire thought.

The bookshop reminded her of her father's old library in Bristol. It was small and quaint, well-stocked and loved, and where there was no room, books were stacked artfully. It was cosy, with armchairs dotted about, as Lawrence had no problem with customers trying before buying. In fact, he often encouraged it.

Just as she had found Austen's name on the shelf, she overheard Lawrence greeting another customer. "Ah, Lady Granting, how lovely to see your smiling face this morning. I dare suggest you are here for your order of the poetry books your husband is fond of?"

"Indeed, I am, Mr Kent. You are ever so observant when it comes to your customers!"

Claire tuned out the rest of their conversation as she hid her face, suddenly interested in those war biographies, just to hide from Lady Granting, a Ton lady she had once known. A lady whose house she had frequented several times in one summer for afternoon tea as they gossiped over suitors with other women.

Her heart raced. I cannot be recognized! Ton ladies are always catching people out.

But as she whimpered in panic, trying to think about the unladylike action of outright crouching to the floor, Lady Granting walked past without sparing her a glance. The bell above the door tinkled, signalling that the woman had left, and Claire remained anonymous.

Oh, she thought. Lawrence Kent gave her a funny look, and she realized she had hunched in panic. She straightened her back, giving him a nervous smile.

It was ... disheartening, she thought, to have not been recognized. While it secured her identity and kept her safe from gossip or stares, and she had buried her past self for a reason, it was saddening to realize just how truly invisible she was. How easily forgotten. If Claire had overheard anyone asking if a lady recalled Lady Claire Garner, would people know her? Would they remember her name?

With her heart sinking, Claire thought she had buried herself too well. It was her intention, of course, but it hurt to feel so insignificant to those she once surrounded herself with. Was she really so forgettable?

“Viscount Archibald White. Interesting choice.” A male voice behind her had Claire spinning around; her lips parted in surprise. People rarely talked to her while she shopped. A man with grey-streaked hair and dim green eyes looked at her almost nervously. It was a man who looked like he had seen a few terrible things, which had taken a toll on him. Despite the gray in his hair, he was still young, perhaps only a few years older than her, in his early thirties. He nodded at the book she had pretended to look at to hide. “I knew him well.”

“Oh,” she said, blinking. “I wasn’t—I’m not ...” She sighed helplessly.

“Will you be buying it? No doubt it shall be half fabricated. I do not think the book mentions how White couldn’t hold his liquor but pretended he could or was a terrible sap at heart. A full romantic, that one was. Or that, no matter what, he fought for his

men to his last breath.”

Claire was wide-eyed, nodding. “I was looking for Emma,” she whispered, as if she had done something wrong.

“Oh,” he said, laughing, and although he spoke of clear grief, he still had an easy smile. “Is she your friend?”

“Rather a book,” Claire answered, smiling. “It is one of Austen’s latest.”

“Emma, the book! Of course, how foolish of me.” He gave her a quizzical look. “Do you recognize me at all?”

She shook her head, and perhaps she would have, but her mind was scrambled, still on Lady Granting. Only as she thought about it did her panic rear its head again. Do I know him from my former life, too?

The man saved her the honour of giving herself away with a guess when he said, “I am Graham Courtenay. I worked alongside your employer, Ernest Barnes, in the army. He is a terrific medic.”

So, the rumours are true, she thought, as she held out her hand.

“I have not visited Little Harkwell for a while, but I do believe I saw you in passing during your first few days there.”

“Ah, your memory is vast, then,” she said.

“Either that or I do not see enough people to easily remember faces. I work in Bellott’s Hospital. I’m the chairman there.”

“Very impressive,” she answered, nodding. “I—Well, you know my occupation, of course. I am Lady Florence’s governess.”

“I have heard it is quite the job.”

“It can have its challenges.”

“Have you done it before?” Graham asked.

Claire shook her head. “I ... I have not. But Lady Florence is a bright young girl. She causes nobody any problems whatsoever and is a very keen learner. I saw the acquisition advertisement in a news sheet. I was hired by the housekeeper the very next day.”

“You must have impressed them,” Graham noted, folding his arms over his chest, nodding at her. “Mrs Sanford is not one to be easily pleased.”

Claire found herself smiling brightly. “That is true, but I heard rumours that she was awfully fond of the French language, which I happen to speak exceedingly well. I greeted her in French and had her rather impressed.”

“That shall do it,” he said with a laugh.

“Although, I cannot help that while the housekeeper is impressed, her employer—and mine, I suppose—remains a mystery. You say you worked alongside him as a medic?”

Graham’s expression flattened, and she couldn’t figure out why, but he spoke as brightly as ever if not even more than before. “Yes. Indeed. We met during our time in the service.”

“You must have saved countless lives,” Claire said, awed.

“I hope so,” he said. “I am not one to boast. I take pride in my work, which is why I agreed to step down as a physician and be the chairman. I wanted to continue making a difference in larger ways. There is a certain beauty in patching men up while others are wounding them. We all fight for the same side, of course, soldiers and medics, but are we not just patching up the gun wounds they are causing the other side? I do not know if that makes sense at all. You know, they are firing at us, and we patch up our men, hoping we do not lose them. But we are firing at them while their medics are hoping for the same. But war is war, I do suppose.”

“Yes.” She shifted, unsure of what to say. She did not really know this man or how to offer him comfort, but she felt deeply and respected every man who had fought in the king’s army. “Your service has—”

“Ah, I have been thanked many times for my service.” He winced but laughed it off.

“I was going to say your service has been hard, I am sure, but it is a joyous thing you have returned to those who care about you.” She gave him a small smile, and he looked at her strangely as if she was a puzzle to figure out.

“Indeed,” he said. “I must allow you to get on with your shopping and finding this Emma lady.”

Claire laughed softly. “And I hope you buy your friend’s biography. You can tell me all the things that have been missed, should you ever wish to talk about them. Grief can take its toll.” I would know, was what she didn’t add onto that. I have lost enough people in my life.

“Thank you, Miss Gundry. Enjoy the rest of your day.”

He tipped his head at her before she continued to browse, but she noticed how Graham Courtenay cast one last glance at Viscount Archibald White's biography before ducking out of the bookshop.

Finally, she found Emma, still laughing at the man for thinking she was looking for a person.

"Your manners are utterly abhorrent, girl."

Claire startled as she heard the shout echo down the hall. It came from the music room and sounded much like Lady Katherine. Claire was rather afraid of the woman—she reminded her of the stern mamas who were only interested in the richest, highest ranked husbands and pushed their daughters onto them, only ever interested in that, rather than what their daughters wanted.

She thought back to when Winnie and Daisy chatted in the cellar, to discussing the Barnes' return to a high rank.

Claire hurried down the hall to the music room, where she found Lady Katherine pacing back and forth, and a hunched-over Lady Florence sat at her piano, sadly plunking away at a few of the lighter keys.

"Heavens, Florence! You are giving me a headache!" Lady Katherine shouted.

"Perhaps if you left, then you would not hear it," Lady Florence countered, frustration in her voice. "I must continue to play if I am to be good and be successful in my debut! Should I not focus on impressing a husband?"

"Right now, your focus should be on not causing me any grief, yet here you are. Your

lack of manners is outrageous. Did your mother teach you nothing?"

"Do not speak of my mother, please, Lady Katherine," Florence sniffed, her head hung.

"Lady Katherine, what is happening?" Claire asked, interrupting the two women. Lady Katherine whirled around, her long ringlet of a ponytail flying to her other shoulder. "I do not think Lady Florence deserves such harsh words. She is only practicing what I have taught her and instructed her to do. Her cousin, his lordship, is happy with her progress—"

"He is?" Lady Florence asked.

"And I have invited him to watch Lady Florence play soon. She wishes to impress the man who is her legal guardian. Surely you understand that."

Lady Katherine gaped, her painted lips in a pout. She wore a fanciful day gown in a green colour that complemented her chestnut-brown hair, the same as her son's. A few elegant strands of grey streaked through it. Her cheekbones were high and prominent, but her features made her look cruel and shocked as she stood in the midday light.

"Surely I understand that?" she gasped as if she could not dare to believe someone would ask her such a thing. Claire worried that she had overstepped and went to apologize, but before she could, Katherine shook her head, throwing an arm out towards the door.

"Leave," she ordered, and Claire clutched her chest.

"I am sorry—"

“Not you,” Lady Katherine sighed. “Her. This insolent child! Grief does not excuse pitiful manners, girl, and you shall do good to remember that.”

Lady Florence stood up, her face twisted in silent anger, as she balled her fists. She spared a glance at Claire, who nodded gently, her face apologetic, before she fled the room, the sound of her tears trailing after her.

“Lady Katherine, I think that—”

“I am the lady of this household,” Lady Katherine hissed. “I run this household. I was born in this house and have reclaimed it with everything I have. I have fought for my title once again, and I shall not have an insolent little child question where I may go in my own house!”

“Please, Lady Katherine, she was merely practicing her pianoforte. The earl had suggested it be one of the instruments she learns, and Lady Florence is already very proficient. I am very proud to be her governess.”

“If you are so proud, then you shall have no problem hearing that Lady Florence is in a very vulnerable state. She is malleable, and if you are her governess, as good as you say you are, then you must be firm with her. She cannot be coddled and excused over grief or childish indulgence. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Lady Katherine,” she said, bowing her head, wondering if this was how mamas spoke to their debutantes when instructing them how to behave at the seasonal balls. I would not know, she thought. She did not agree with the instruction, for Lady Florence had done nothing wrong at all.

“There is to be a dinner party next week,” Lady Katherine said, lifting her chin as if once again haughty and in charge. She marched over to the doorway, leaving despite having already ordered Florence out. “Ensure the child’s attitude is fixed before

then.”

“She is your niece,” Claire whispered, but Lady Katherine had already left, showing no sympathy or care for her own family.

Perhaps the rumours were true. Perhaps Lady Katherine had done some cruel things to regain her title, but who was Claire to judge when it came to doing what one must?

Chapter 6

A week passed, and Claire spent her days tutoring Lady Florence in their duet and testing her on European poetry. Ernest had promised he would come by to watch her performance, but as of yet, he hadn't.

Claire didn't mind, as Lady Florence still wished to perfect her notes before Lord Bannerdown joined them.

But by the end of the week, Lady Florence's mind was decidedly not on her pianoforte or the singing notes but on the play. It was all she talked about that morning when she broke her fast. Claire had a hard time getting the excited young girl to complete her lessons for the day, but she was still incredibly endeared by the display of passion Lady Florence had for the arts.

By the time they made it to the Bath playhouse, Claire was rather excited herself and dressed in a modest but pretty navy-blue dress with frills on the sleeve cuffs and the neckline. The skirt fanned around her hips and fell to the floor in layered ruffles, and while her long sleeves kept her conservatively covered up as a working woman, she felt beautiful. Her hair was done up into a bun, prettier than she would usually style it, while the lower half of her hair was left to trail down her back.

They made their way to their box, curtained off from the rest of the audience, with a gilded gold railing to stop them from toppling over the edge and plush red seats. Below, the stage was lit atmospherically with low candles encased in glass, and the curtains were open, depicting the backdrop of two households in Verona.

An orchestra was in the pit before the stage, and Ernest nodded towards the box on the other side of the theatre to them.

“You see the box with the blue curtains? Although it is empty now, that is for the Duke and Duchess of Colchester,” he told her. “They are patrons of the playhouse and pour a large sum of funds into it. His Grace served in the king’s war as a general. He and White were friendly and worked together brilliantly. I imagine many men owe their life to His Grace.”

Claire was surprised as she nodded. It was strange how all the men in their finery had once bloodied their military uniform in the name of war. She could not quite get her head around the tragedy of which men had lost friends and family and which women now had remarried since losing husbands in the battle.

She turned her attention from there as she noticed Florence sat just in front of them, eagerly awaiting the play to begin.

“It is most exciting, Lord Bannerdown,” Lady Florence said. “Thank you for inviting us!”

“It is not a problem,” Ernest told her. His gaze flickered to Claire, and he looked at her in that way that said he hid secrets and fun mysteries, but as though he knew she did, too. She felt heat rise to her cheeks. “You look beautiful tonight, Miss Gundry.” As if realizing the outright compliment, and how improper it might be to speak of his ward’s governess in such a way, he stuttered and continued, “As do you, Lady Florence. I am very fortunate for my company tonight.”

“Do you come to the theatre often, Lord Bannerdown?” Florence asked, her fingers curling around the railing at the box.

He shook his head. “Between the hospital and taking over Little Harkwell—” He

paused when Florence's forehead creased. "Well—I find myself with little time for theatrical leisure."

Claire gave Florence an encouraging smile as the girl turned back to the stage. Ernest was saved from his blunder by the stage lights going up, and a woman, a narrator, entered the stage.

"Two households, both alike in dignity ..." she began, and then Claire watched Florence's rapture and knew any attention the girl might have had for anything else around her was gone. A fire could begin in the rafters, but as long as the play continued, Florence would be oblivious. She truly loved *Romeo and Juliet* so much, perhaps finding solace in tragedy.

Ernest leaned closer to Claire. "*Romeo and Juliet* was not my first beloved play, but it did quickly become one of my top reads. How about you?"

"Oh, I found I was rather lured in from the start," Claire said. "I find *Romeo* to be woefully dashing and heartfelt, and *Juliet* is most understandable. I have always loved literature. My father had a beautiful library—"

She halted her own words, worried about how to describe her father's library without revealing her noble background.

"That he ... that he showed me," she finished, for it left it to interpretation. He might have owned it; he might have worked in one. "And I often buried myself in there for hours."

"You visited during the day?"

"Mostly when he worked," she answered, not quite a lie. "I could not find it in myself to live through a day without reading."

“You are very well-educated, then,” Ernest said, and it wasn’t entirely a question, but she nodded all the same. She could say that she had a governess for many years, for a commoner would not have had one and would not have the same access to education as a noble girl. “How did you come to learn so much? You must have found some way to access material, surely.”

“I ...” She truly did not want to outright lie, but she could not reveal the truth about her past. “I found my ways.” She made sure to give him a mischievous smile, to let him fill in the blanks any way he pleased. “I craved knowledge, so I made sure I had it.”

“Admirable,” he praised. He paused to look at the play, and Claire was glad for the moment’s reprieve.

On the stage below, Juliet and Romeo danced together, their palms held an inch apart. Palm to palm is holy palmer’s kiss ...

Claire looked down at where Ernest held the arms of his seat, and Claire moved her own clasped hands closer to his. She held her breath, their own hands merely an inch apart, before she chided herself on being too forward and pulled them back.

He was unaware as he leaned back in, talking before he looked at her.

“I did very similar things,” he said to her, a smile quirking at his lips a moment before he regarded her, and her stomach dropped at the weight of his gaze on her. That smile undid something in Claire that she had ... not felt in a long, long time. She swallowed and glanced away. “In order to fit into society, I did what I could. I hoped for the best with what I did not have and fought for what I did have and possessed. I want to be a medic but ... I also have a duty to my inheritance.” He winced. “And my mother, of course.”

“She is a beautiful countess,” Claire said, thinking of the maids’ gossip about Lady Katherine.

“Indeed.” He grimaced. “But I sometimes wish I did not have to descend such a path with her.” He shifted in his seat, turning away from the play. With their voices pitched low, they did not have to worry about disturbing Florence’s viewing experience. “May I be very honest, Miss Gundry?”

“Of course, My Lord.”

“Sometimes, I find myself missing the battlefield. But other times, I find myself missing the life I had before both the war and this inheritance came to fruition.” His attention was on her as if trying to decide if she would be his confidante or not. But Claire only smiled, even as her chest tightened in tender sympathy.

“I know the feeling rather well, My Lord,” she said. “And I understand the pain of having no choice.”

His forehead pinched in empathy. “I am sorry that you do.”

She mustered a smile. “For what is it worth, if you survived the war and helped many men do the same, then you must be a fine medic. And you make a very considerate, admirable Earl of Bannerdown.”

“And you are a fine, intelligent governess.”

“So, however we achieved our fates, at least we know that we are good at what we have in life.”

If I were still Lady Claire, what would we do? Would you ask me to dance? Ask me to the theatre while we courted, perhaps? Or am I only here because I am your ward’s

governess, and you pitied me for being alone for one night?

The thoughts threatened to bring her mood down, so she turned her focus back to the stage, where Romeo and Juliet were sharing a tender kiss. She watched them embrace passionately and felt a curl of jealousy for love that was acquired through hardship yet burned so brightly.

I wish for that, too, she thought quietly. When she felt the burn of the earl's gaze on her, she did her best to avoid meeting it. The play continued in such a way. Florence was almost hanging over the rail in rapt attention and excitement, and Claire was utterly aware of how close the earl was to her, while he himself seemed to go through the motions of watching the play but paid little mind. Instead, he kept glancing at Claire, and she felt it every time he did so.

The play concluded, bringing with it tears of sorrow and applause for the actors. Ernest laughed when the 'dead' Romeo and Juliet actors simply picked themselves up off the stage floor and curtsied and bowed with their fellow castmates.

Florence's tears shone in the dim light as she joined the audience in tossing a single rose onto the stage. But her cries of applause were full of happiness. As tragic as the play was, Claire realized she was happy to have watched it.

Claire smiled as the young girl turned and dipped herself before Lord Bannerdown. "Thank you for such a lovely evening, My Lord," she murmured, her voice high and soft.

"Anything for my cousin," he said. "Perhaps this is something we can do once a month, perhaps even twice a month, if it is something you shall enjoy."

Florence smiled, nodding eagerly, and the three went outside. Ernest called for their carriage, and as they milled about the theatre, Claire noticed Florence's gaze go beyond her, and she could not help turning around to glance down the length of the playhouse. The evening was dark and cold, but Claire could make out a young man whose eyes were shadowed by the lamplight above him.

The illumination showed his eyes on Florence, who had grown quieter and had a smile lingering on her lips that she couldn't seem to quell.

She wished to press Florence but knew she should not do it before the earl, so she kept her mouth closed and tried to focus on where she knew the young man from. He was oddly familiar, but Claire could not place his face. His head of blond waves was distinctly familiar, but after seeing Lady Granting in the bookshop, Claire found herself on edge, questioning if anybody recognized her.

She turned her attention away before the man could look from Florence to her and let the young lady have her moment in privacy. Perhaps their acquaintance had something to do with the perfumed letter that was on Florence's escritoire.

Let her be, Claire thought. You can tutor and guide her, but you cannot tell her what to do. If anything untoward happens, you can inform Lord Bannerdown. For now, let Florence have whatever semblance of happiness this fleeting look and correspondence might bring her.

Their carriage pulled up shortly, and Florence launched into a spiel of her favourite moments from the play, and Claire found that she no longer had to guide every conversation between the cousins. Lord Bannerdown answered in kind, and before long, the carriage pulled them towards Little Harkwell, and their conversation filled the quiet winter night.

At the manor, Lord Bannerdown bid them both goodnight and retreated, but not

before he glanced at Claire for a moment longer and offered her a soft look, which she returned. Florence skipped off down the length of the hallway, giddy with the excitement of the playhouse, and left Claire to utter her own quiet goodnight to the earl.

He turned away and walked to his chambers while Claire found herself moving towards her own. But before she could even get to the second-floor landing, she heard stifled sniffles coming down the hallway, and moments later, Winnie hurried towards her with red-ringed eyes. She swiped her eyes with the back of her hand as soon as she saw Claire and straightened up. But the moment she tried to compose herself, Winnie's face crumpled, and her tears began afresh.

Alarmed, Claire went to her. "Winnie?" she cried. "Winnie, whatever is the matter? Come, we must make you some tea down in the basement."

"I—I cannot," Winnie sniffled. "Lady Katherine already thinks I am lazy and incompetent. I cannot have her catch me shirking my duties."

"What has she instructed you to do now?" Claire asked.

"Nothing," Winnie answered sadly. "She simply ordered me out of her rooms."

"Then she will not notice if you have a cup of tea with me." Claire ushered her along towards the stairs leading down to the basement, where she lit the fire and began to heat water. She found some ceramic mugs that the maids often used, prepared two mugs of tea, and brought them over to Winnie, sitting down together at the wooden table.

The bench was hard beneath her, nothing at all like the luxurious velvet of the playhouse chairs or that of the music room, and she knew she was fortunate to have such privileges of sitting down in comfort.

She offered her friend a small smile. "What has happened?"

Winnie shook her head. "It is only the same every time," she sighed. "Lady Katherine wishes for her third bath of the day. Heaven knows why she puts me through it every time! She accuses me of scrubbing too hard, and then before I know it, she is hurling her bar of soap at me, or splashing the hot water all over me, or just criticizing everything I do. She is cruel, telling me how I could do with such a bath, but she knows I do not have the same means she does. She makes me feel ever so small."

Claire's brow pinched. She knew many mistresses who treated their lady's maid like a friend, but many others who abused them, such as Lady Katherine. Whether their weapon was a harsh word or blow, it was abuse all the same.

"You should cast her into one of your writings as a villain," Claire suggested. "I know I cannot do anything to change your situation, and I know employment is hard to come by, so I will not disrespect you by encouraging you to leave and find another job, but you could perhaps resolve any conflict by writing in the heroine who is brave and able to speak more freely than you can." She reached across to hold Winnie's hand. "What do you say?"

"I actually have been writing a few scenes out," Winnie said. "I could do that."

"You must show me them!" Claire encouraged. "If you are comfortable."

Winnie's teary eyes turned brighter as she nodded. "I would like that very much. And Claire? You look beautiful. The playhouse must have been grand."

"Perhaps Lady Katherine might attend with his lordship, and we shall go together."

Winnie gave her a smile before she hurried over to a loose brick in the wall by the fireplace, where she pulled the brick free, and from within the gap, she produced a

few rolled-up pieces of parchment. Winnie had flirted a little with the butler and had him take a few sheets every now and then before the supplies were delivered to Lord Bannerdown.

Thinking of the earl, she considered how sharp the candlelight had turned his features to be. He was a man with strong brows and sharp cheekbones, but his smile softened the harsh planes of his face, and she had liked watching him out of the corner of her eye during the play.

“My writing this time,” Winnie said, sitting down and jolting Claire out of her thoughts, “is a dashing prince who sweeps a poor servant off her feet and marries her, bringing a whole life of riches and wealth.

“Prince Patrick is a man who has never quite wanted to be a prince. The eldest of three, he far wishes that he was not the heir. He is mysterious and stoic to many, but it is a quiet sort of reservation. He is not an ignorant man but one who thinks very deeply indeed, and he does not know how to exist in the world that he is in. He often thinks of how he did not ask to have such a role ...”

As Winnie talked, Claire found herself thinking, It is almost like Lord Bannerdown. He does not want this inheritance, much preferring medicine and hospitals to manor houses and balls, but his role in society demands that he take up the title.

“One day, he is ordered to throw a banquet to celebrate the town’s independence from a cruel governing hand—this is where I am thinking of writing Lady Katherine into my tale—and in honour, Prince Patrick invites both nobles and commoners to the ball, for he thinks, should they not have a chance at fun, too?”

Claire bit back a smile. Just like Lord Bannerdown inviting me to the theatre.

“He is ever so handsome, dark-haired, and has a secretive look in his eyes. He is

broadly built, of course, for he is a hunter and a rider, a swordsman, as well as a well-read prince.” Claire pretended to prop her face up on her palm, so her fist covered her smile. Winnie was getting so lost in her story that she did not notice.

“So, when he meets the heroine, a certain Miss Winona—”

“I like what you have done with the name,” Claire interjected.

“Thank you.” She giggled. “When the two meet, both agree they cannot let anything happen, for Patrick cannot even ask Winona for a dance in front of many eyes. But Winona is brave and asks why he thought of inviting the commoners if they cannot dance with anybody they please. It is as though they are there for the glory of Patrick to say how considerate he was in thinking of them. Their argument gets rather heated behind closed doors and ...”

She stopped herself, her eyes bright. “Well, the two share a beautiful kiss. And the story of love begins where Patrick fights to have Winona’s status elevated, but at the same time, he wishes to have better behaviour towards commoners. It sets an example for the town to see a princess who was once a commoner.”

Winnie was breathless by the time she finished. “What do you think?”

Claire grinned, having loved the tale so far. “I think it is lovely. And I would like to read it when it is done. I think even Lady Florence would. She enjoys reading, and I know she likes a happy ending or two. The intrigue of their social status would definitely raise some eyebrows.”

“And I shall be all the more happier for it.” Winnie paused, a wicked smile gracing her face. All traces of her tears were gone. “Speaking of falling for someone with a different status ... I see you are growing softer with the earl. I have seen how you look at him.”

“I do not!” Claire protested, laughing. “That is unbecoming of a governess!”

But a blush warmed her face. She scooped her tea into her hands for something to do as she sipped.

“Do you have feelings for the earl?” Winnie said. “Because for my heroine, it worked out rather well.”

“Winnie!” Claire cried, her voice high with incredulity, even as she couldn’t resist smiling. “I do not have feelings for Lord Bannerdown. That would be preposterous.”

“I’m just saying. It wouldn’t do any harm, and he is very easy on the eyes.” The lady’s maid wiggled her brows at Claire, a grin on her face. “I do hope you two can attend the theatre together again.”

“I was chaperoning,” Claire protested, but it was a weak one at best, for she knew the earl had explicitly told her to enjoy herself for the night.

“I am sure you were,” Winnie teased.

But Claire paid her no mind as the maid put her story away and finished her tea. She knew better than to fall for her employer ... Even if several moments had passed between them. And even if, when he held the dinner party last week, she had kept catching his gaze on her. And she swore she’d felt his hand brush hers at the theatre that night ...

But no. She knew better. Too many secrets weighed in her heart for her to ever think about opening it or hope for the heart of another. She mustered a smile, finished her tea, and the two women stood up, ready to retire for the night.

“Ah,” Winnie said on the stairs. “Before I forget, a letter arrived for you earlier today.

It was forwarded from a different address in London. I was awfully curious, so you must let me indulge my curiosity once you have read it! I left it on your dresser in your room lest anybody see your mail. Goodnight, Claire.”

Claire’s heart thudded as she mumbled a goodnight back, her thoughts drifting to who could have sent her a letter and how close she had been to getting caught if the letter showed her previous address. It was not unknown for it to happen, but only twice before had it happened. Only her butler from Flogsend had her address in this new location and knowledge of her new life, so Claire’s worry began as she went to her room and closed the door, immediately snatching up the letter.

It was not handwriting she was familiar with, but as soon as she opened it, her worry turned to white-hot anger. For the letter was from her mother. The very woman who had abandoned Claire at the age of six.

A woman who had turned her back on Claire and her father. A woman who had caused Claire’s life to go the way it had and forced her into a life as a governess, and while she cared for Florence deeply, she could not help feeling very resentful that, after nearly two decades, she thought it okay to simply reach out.

My dearest Claire,

I hope this letter finds you healthy and well, a grown woman, with perhaps even your own life and marriage in full, beautiful swing. I am reaching out to you in the hopes of reuniting. I have made many mistakes in the past, and I hope you will allow me to right those wrongs of mine and grant me a reconciliation. You may write to me at the return address on my letter. I eagerly await your response, for a letter cannot convey everything that is in my heart.

Ever your mama,

Magdalene.

Claire read the letter once, and only once, before throwing it into the nearest drawer, banishing it from her sight. Her stomach turned sour in a sickly way, and anger coursed through her. How dare she write to her, asking for a second chance, as though Claire owed her any grace!

Claire clutched her sick stomach, shaking from both fury and anxiety, as she tore her beautiful theatre gown off and dressed in her nightdress.

Intent to ignore the letter completely and refusing to answer it, Claire climbed into bed, banished all thoughts of her mother from her mind, and hoped sleep would come to her quickly.

Chapter 7

However we achieved our fates, at least we know that we are good at what we have in life.

Miss Gundry's words from the theatre resonated with Ernest all week. In the days that followed their attendance of *Romeo and Juliet*, he had not stopped thinking about her. The way her eyes had fixed on the stage during their quieter moments and the way she had clutched her ticket after the show in the carriage ride home as if she was excited to hold it—to keep a memento of attending.

It seemed very sentimental. He liked to envision her putting the ticket away in a box and keeping it somewhere safe.

I would like to make sure that she has many tickets to keep, he resolved.

He worked through the rest of the week, putting in tireless hours to keep avoiding his mama—something he had been doing ever since her party lest she speak with him about his behaviour—and because he felt expectant of something.

Now, since inviting his cousin to the play, he thought there might be an expectation that he should do something more, but he was stumped about what else to do. He would attend one of her pianoforte lessons, but that did not seem enough.

Perhaps another play, he thought as he packed up for the day.

He put patient files back into the locked cabinet in his office and slipped off his

examination coat, hanging it up on the hook next to the door.

“We did good work today, Mr Stevens,” he said to the man who had come to oversee the work of one of the best medics in Bellott’s Hospital. He was on the board with Graham. Together, the two of them had been assessing Ernest’s work. Secretly, he wondered if his mother had a hand in the extra watching. Perhaps they were seeing if being an earl and having to dedicate time to that life and the estate was interfering with his professional career.

It would be just like her to upend me in such ways, he thought. Ignoring his doubts, he gave Mr Stevens, a balding man with a long moustache, a weak smile.

“Indeed, you did,” Mr Stevens told him, nodding. “Your patient was rather complicated.”

“It was an amputation,” Ernest answered. “As hard as it is for my patient, it is no difficult matter for me.” He gave him a knowing look. “After all, I have been doing this job for many, many years now.”

“I understand.”

“And I would never let anything jeopardize it.”

“I assure you that I understand, Lord Bannerdown.”

He winced. “Please, Mr Stevens. In this hospital, I am Doctor Barnes. Or Ernest. I like to think I leave my status as Earl of Bannerdown at the door and simply become a medic among other medics.” He gave a confident smile that faltered when he saw Mr Stevens’s nervous one in return. “Is that not correct?”

“Of course,” the chairman said. “It is simply ... Unheard of.”

“I understand that,” Ernest said. “But I had a life before I became the Earl of Bannerdown following my late uncle’s and cousin’s unfortunate death to consumption, and I intend to enjoy that and my life’s work to the full, regardless.”

“It is only that ... noblemen do not work, My Lord.”

Ernest paused as he slid his notes into a satchel. “I do know what you mean,” he said slowly, “but as I said, I was a medic before I was an earl. Am I to be expected to stop saving lives to sit around Little Harkwell until I am old and dying myself?”

His annoyance should not have been aimed at Stevens, but he couldn’t tamper it down. Miss Gundry had filled his thoughts, distracting him, and then there was the issue of his mother’s ire at this very topic of discussion. He truly did wonder if she had put Stevens up to this.

“There have been no complaints as of yet,” Mr Stevens said and hesitated. “Although if we do find that your ... medic duties and noble ones begin to clash or slacken, then we will be forced to take further action.”

Ernest’s temper rose; it very rarely flared, but he could not believe it! “I have been the Earl of Bannerdown for all of seven months, Mr Stevens. I have been a medic for more than a decade. Please do not insult me by insinuating I cannot do both. I must contribute in such ways.”

“And I am not asking you to step down,” Mr Stevens said. “Merely that we shall be on guard for if you find yourself with too much to handle. Your title is not one you can give up.”

Ernest glared at him. “And neither is my profession.”

The tense silence filled the room and was only broken by the opening of the door. In

walked Graham, and Ernest, despite his strange jealousy towards his friend, was glad to see him.

Mr Stevens stood up straighter. "Regardless of our discussion, Doctor Barnes, thank you for your dedication to the hospital."

"You can thank me for more if you do not threaten my position," he all but snarled as the board member left awkwardly. Graham looked between the closing door and Ernest, cocking his head.

"Trouble?" he asked.

"I suspect my mother is meddling and whispering in the ears of your board," Ernest muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose. "It tires me."

"Ah," he said. "Lady Katherine would not be herself if she was not meddling."

"I fear that she might have meddled a touch too far this time." Ernest slumped down against his desk, bracing himself on the edge.

Graham was quiet for a moment. "Do you ever think of it, Ernest? The war?"

"Yes," he answered quietly. "All the time."

"Do you ever feel as though ... it is unfair that many men died, but so many of us lived?"

"All the time," he repeated, his voice a whisper. "Every time a man comes in with battle wounds, I am pushed right back to that field hospital. Or every time they say they have continued to sustain injuries from the war that have not got any better, I think of the unfairness of it all. War buries some men and permanently scars others."

He paused. “Forgive me if this is disrespectful, but I have many feelings about wondering which is better. To die a hero but not live to the end of a long life or walk away from the war with the mental wounds.”

“I know what Archibald would have said,” Graham muttered.

Ernest nodded. “That battle changed us, Graham. Even if we did not fight as soldiers, we fought. We fought for lives and medicine and proper burials for those who died in our care.”

Graham swallowed, glancing out the window to compose himself for a moment. He nodded. “Indeed, we did.”

“I am proud of my service even if I am loathe to realize that I walked away to a noble title and inheritance while other men did not get to return to their betrothed.”

“That is precisely one of the reasons I am still trying to build the wing for the viscount.” Graham gave him a softer smile, one of encouragement and support. “Men like him deserve the grand honour for what they gave their lives to.”

“And yet if we built a wing for every man fallen by their sword, we should have tens of thousands of hospitals.”

Graham laughed quietly. “It is a regret that I cannot honour every man as he deserves. But we get to live on and continue our work, Ernest. That is an honour. So do fight to stay as a medic here. Be both an earl and a medic if it is possible, and when it is not, I trust you will make the right decision.”

“The right decision for whom?” Ernest muttered. “Because there is right for society and my mother, and then there is right for me.”

A small voice in his head rose up: If you were not the earl, then you might be able to court Miss Gundry without fear of judgement or being cast out.

But that was a foolish notion. He was the earl due to there being no other heirs. He did what he had to do. Duty was paramount.

“I am sure you will figure it out,” Graham said, giving him a teasing smile of which he had not seen in a long, long time. The battlefield had stolen not only lives but the brightness of his friend’s smile. “Speaking of finding things out, it has been some time since I visited Bannerdown. How about I visit the manor soon for some drinks? I hear your mother has redone the drawing room.”

“She has,” he acknowledged, but the thought of Graham—his closest friend, his assistant in the field hospital months ago—being near Miss Gundry, especially since they had both sung each other’s praises, sat uncomfortably in his stomach. “But it is not yet finished.”

Guilt simmered within him. He felt as though the real reason Graham wished to visit Bannerdown was not for drinks but for his cousin’s governess. After the two had got along well, Ernest could not prevent himself from thinking about the pair laughing together, bonding over ...

He frowned. What had they talked about except one another?

Instead of comforting him, the thought only pierced him further.

“I would be delighted for you to call upon the manor,” he told Graham. “But I would love you to see the redecoration of the drawing room. My mother is going for a very sophisticated look, and you would very much appreciate it, I believe.”

Graham smiled at him, none the wiser of Ernest’s attempt to delay his visit lest there

be any sort of romance between him and Miss Gundry. He would not be able to bear that.

“Very well,” Graham said, nodding. “Thank you for thinking of me, Ernest. And I look forward to that drink.”

“As do I,” Ernest answered quietly as he watched his friend leave the practice room where he was stationed, feeling guilt eating away at him. He concentrated only on packing his work belongings away for the day and heading out as well.

Little Harkwell was a dark sentinel in the late afternoon by the time Ernest returned home. Usually, he worked late to avoid his mother and retired to his study before sharing a drink with her in the parlour when he knew she would be mellowed and in better spirits.

But today, he did not go to the parlour. He went straight towards the music room, where notes were tinkling their way from the room and into the hallway as if beckoning Ernest to come closer.

He knew it was not the practiced way Miss Gundry played, nor the searching notes that his cousin played. He was proficient in the pianoforte but did not always know the melodies presented. He questioned who, in fact, played despite hearing both his cousin and Miss Gundry talking.

The governess’s voice was soft and soothing, and Ernest found himself gravitating towards it.

“Lady Florence, I understand you are tired after a day of lessons, but please listen to your instructor.”

“But it is so difficult,” he heard his cousin respond.

Ernest poked his head around the doorway, curious. What instructor?

In the room, the piano had been set back, and a woman he did not recognize sat at it, looking stern. She had her hair pulled back into a tight bun, and a flowing skirt hugged her legs, while a white blouse complemented her without a bodice, he noticed.

A harsh clap of the instructor’s hands had even him jumping to attention. “Lady Florence, we shall try again.”

“But I am struggling, Mademoiselle Trevoux,” Lady Florence said, wincing. She stood in the centre of the room, awkwardly holding out her arms.

It finally hit Ernest: his cousin was learning to dance.

She had performed a country reel well enough, but it appeared that she was being prepared even more than he realized for the marriage market.

“And one will always struggle if one does not practice often enough,” Mademoiselle Trevoux chided. “Come now. Once again, from the beginning. Miss Gundry, if you shall, continue playing the pianoforte while I tutor.”

“Of course.”

The two women switched places, and Ernest watched, raptured, as the governess swept her skirts around her as she sat at the piano bench, her fingers settling on the keys. But it was no use. Even as she played and the dance instructor barked her commands, his cousin merely looked confused and kept stepping on the woman’s toes.

“Perhaps we should take a break?” Miss Gundry suggested, and Ernest smoothed out his amused smile as the three women showed signs of distress, nodding eagerly.

“The waltz is a romance novel within a book!” Mademoiselle Trevoux exclaimed as they broke away. “You must perfect it before you meet with any suitors, Lady Florence.”

“I am trying,” she said calmly. “But there are so many counts.”

“Merely four! That is all you need. Four counts and the ability to move around the room gracefully.”

As the two parted, Mademoiselle Trevoux caught sight of Ernest lingering in the doorway. She gasped, excitement etching across her face.

“Lord Bannerdown!” she said happily. “You must join us!”

“Me?” he asked, blinking. “Oh, no, I could not possibly—”

“Yes! For this is exactly what Lady Florence is missing! A male partner.”

“I am her cousin,” he answered. “It would be improper.”

“It is merely a dance lesson,” Mademoiselle Trevoux countered. “And you shall be helping her prospects for marriage.” The woman, whose ringleted hair was done up in a beautiful fashion to expose her long, elegant neck, looked at him with such hope.

His eyes flicked to Miss Gundry, who bit her lip against a smile. Her hair was loosened today, curling down her back in those waves that she often had to keep pinned back for her work. The tendrils were tied up with a bow, pulling parts of her hair back from her face. As always, a few strands framed her features. The errant

locks caused her eyes to twinkle a bit further.

He gave her a smile, hoping it was convincing and did not speak of his guilt at putting his friend off visiting.

Miss Gundry approached him. “Come and join us, Lord Bannerdown.” Her eyes lit up in mischief. “It shall be my repayment for attending the play with you, and I am sure Lady Florence will be ever so grateful to see the waltz performed as intended.”

She glanced back at his cousin, who nodded. “Ever so grateful, Cousin.”

Ernest did not know a lot about women, but he knew when they were outnumbering him. The three of them all looked at him expectantly. He glanced both left and right down the hallway to check that his mother’s voice was nowhere near the room before nodding.

“If you all insist, then I shall be of service,” he said, laughing nervously as he strode into the room. “But I will warn you all that I am a terrible dancer.”

“I am sure you are not,” Miss Gundry teased.

Oh, you will find out soon enough, Miss Gundry, he thought as Mademoiselle Trevoux gestured for them to come together with a wave of her hands. Awkwardly, Ernest approached his cousin’s governess.

“You shall show Lady Florence how the waltz is performed,” she instructed. “Come now. You both know the steps, yes?”

Ernest nodded despite not being a good dancer. His mother had taught him a great deal as a boy allowed to languish away from the societal propriety of noblemen. She taught him in the garden of their home in London while his father was at work, and

her smiles had been content and wide, and Ernest longed for those days.

He was snapped back to the present when Miss Gundry's hand sought his, and her other one rested on his shoulder.

"Lord Bannerdown, your hand should seek Miss Gundry's waist," Mademoiselle Trevoux hinted, her eyebrows lifting. She looked excited to pair them together. Even Lady Florence, who stood near the pianoforte, watched in excitement.

"Of course," he said. "I apologize, Miss Gundry, for I am a most clumsy dancer."

She merely waved him off. Mademoiselle Trevoux strolled towards the pianoforte, sat down, and began to play. Ernest dipped Miss Gundry into the start of the waltz and tried to lead despite his own nervousness.

"You have not danced with a lady before?" the governess asked, arching a brow at him in question as they crossed the length of the room.

"Not a lot," he admitted. "My mother, mostly. She is the one who taught me these dances. I have not had the chance to embarrass myself formally in public yet."

Miss Gundry laughed. She twirled as he guided her, and just his hand on her waist made Ernest feel as though he was doing something wrong, even as he convinced himself that this was what the dance demanded.

Her hand on his shoulder burned an imprint that he swore he would still feel later.

"Where did you learn such dances?" he couldn't help asking her. She was a beautiful dancer, elegant and graceful, her limbs extending perfectly every time he spun her out and away from him, only to spin deftly right back into his side.

Her face was blank for a moment, confusing him, but she quickly answered, “I taught myself.” Did he fabricate a tremble in her voice? “I knew that if I were to be a governess, then I might need to tutor any ward. And see, that time has come.”

She laughed, and the sound was shaky as she struggled to meet his gaze. Still, they danced and danced, and Ernest slowly felt himself melting into the steps. The eyes of Mademoiselle Trevoux and his cousin faded away, and he became quite unaware of anything but Miss Gundry as they spun around the room.

Her gaze did not break from his.

“You are very adept,” he murmured. She blushed, and he found that he wished to thumb over the spread of pink on her cheeks. He tightened his hold on her waist and her other hand.

“What is the meaning of this?”

His mother’s shrilly voice had Ernest startling, breaking away from Miss Gundry with a sense of urgency. His panicked gaze sought out his mother, who stood in the doorway to the music room, her face twisted in disgust at him and the governess.

“You are dancing with—with a commoner?” Her screech made him wince. Mademoiselle Trevoux rushed to her feet.

“Lady Bannerdown, please forgive me, for it is my fault. I encouraged his lordship to dance with Miss Gundry to better show Lady Florence how the waltz is conducted. It is entirely my responsibility.”

“I hired you to teach my niece how to dance so she may have a better chance at finding a suitor.” Lady Katherine’s voice was sharp and venomous. “Not to enable my son to dance with Lady Florence’s governess!”

Behind his mother were her usual gaggle of ladies who watched on in horror as if Ernest had been caught in a scandalous act. He did not think he had been.

“My apologies, Lady Katherine,” Mademoiselle Trevoux murmured, curtsying.

But Ernest’s mother’s eyes were on him.

It was clear where the blame was directed.

Awkwardly, he smiled at Miss Gundry, bowed to Mademoiselle Trevoux and his cousin, and departed.

Chapter 8

Once Claire received the letter from her mother, then danced with Lord Bannerdown, and fled the music room shortly after he had vacated it, the following week elapsed quickly.

If Lady Katherine was angry and suspicious of them dancing together, even if it was in the interest of tutoring Lady Florence, then Claire had to be careful. While Lord Bannerdown might receive scrutiny, Claire's employment was on the line. She could not lose this opportunity.

However, no further incidents occurred that week, allowing Claire to feel more relaxed in her position as Lady Florence's governess. And where she expected Lord Bannerdown to keep his distance after his mother's outburst, he did not. He took every opportunity to smile at her, ask her how she was, and about her day.

Claire ventured through the halls now, a week on from the waltz lesson. She knew that Lord Bannerdown had many books in his study that Lady Florence would adore. He had a whole special collection of Shakespeare and many poetry and classical novels that Claire knew the young lady would be interested in perusing.

"You may acquire them at any moment," he had told Claire one evening in passing when he had enquired about his cousin's progress. "My study is always unlocked. Please help yourself to the books. I understand that is rather unheard of, but I have nothing to hide, and that study does not entirely feel like mine. If my cousin can make use of the books in there—books that I myself have loved—then they should be used, yes?"

So, Claire slipped down the hallway to Lord Bannerdown's study, feeling as though she should not be anywhere near the heavy wooden door as she pushed it open. She had her thoughts set on an Austen book she knew was in there.

But when she pushed open the door, she blinked, her brows lifting in surprise, when she saw Lord Bannerdown still at his writing desk.

"L-Lord Bannerdown," she stammered. "I am terribly sorry. I will take my leave. I did not realize you would still be in here working."

He looked up at her, his face pale but eyes bright. "Miss Gundry." His voice was low and soft, his smile gentle in the candlelight illuminating the otherwise dark room. Outside, night had fallen. "Please come in. Are you here to speak with me?"

"I—I was coming to look for a book for Lady Florence. Forgive me, My Lord. I did not realize you would still be working so late."

"It is not often," he admitted. "But tonight is a night where ... Ah, well, let us say my thoughts are quite loud." He gave her a wince of a smile. "The work helps. Writing helps."

Claire still hovered on the threshold, but he beckoned her inside. A flit of his eyes to the hallway beyond her made her move faster, mindful that eyes could be on them. They were doing nothing wrong. After all, it was not as though she was a lady of the Ton, at the risk of societal ruin if caught alone with him.

No, you have already suffered that due to a man. Although he was not improper with you but your own family. Your own family caused you societal ruin. What more do you have to lose by entering this man's study for a book?

She stepped inside, ensuring to leave the door open unless he instructed otherwise.

Claire did not feel any fear as she moved into his study, sitting in the chair that he beckoned for her to take up. Should she have felt fear? Being alone with a man would have once put some worry into her. But now she found herself completely comfortable. Despite the late hour, despite the intimacy of his study, and the glowing illumination of candlelight, Claire felt calm and at peace.

“What is it you are working on?” she asked politely. Sat at his desk with his shirt undone at the collar, his cravat loosened, and his jacket slung over the back of his chair, he looked like a relaxed scholar, burning the candlelight as he worked late into the day. There was a tired but pleasant smile on his face, his dark hair rumpled. He messed it up further as he sighed and leaned back in his chair.

“Graham—my Courtenay—has drawn up plans for a new ward in the hospital, and I am reviewing them. It is in honour of our fallen friend whom we both mentioned.”

“The viscount,” Claire finished, wanting him to know she had listened.

Despite his fatigue, he looked happy that she had. “Yes.” He rubbed his eyes. “I am intending to fundraise for it to help with the costs. I want to be a part of the project without being the direct investor.”

It did strike Claire odd that Lord Bannerdown wouldn’t simply pour money into the endeavour, but it was clear those questions were written on her face, for he laughed quietly.

“I assure you it is not greed that stops me from funding it myself,” he said. “I have offered Graham heaps of funds, told him he has land at his disposal, even, to sell, but he claims it will only make him feel indebted to me. He wants this project funded without my direct help. Ideally, he wants it funded by the public, a way for them to honour Captain White.”

“That is very honourable.” Claire nodded. “I would like to help.”

Although her governess’s wage paid her way in life, she wanted to do what she could.

“I am sure Graham would be most appreciative.” She felt the heavy pause. “He ... He mentioned you several days ago, in fact.” His eyes flicked from her and back to the plans. Was he aware that he frowned? Claire watched the troublesome look on his face for a second before he composed it into something more placid. “He seemed very fond of asking how you were. He mentioned that perhaps he would visit.”

“Oh,” Claire said, her own brow pinching as she folded her hands in her lap. “That is kind of him. However, he should not concern himself. I am not a woman who cares for ... visitors of that sort.”

“Of what sort?” he asked, and she heard the curling tease in his voice.

“A male caller,” Claire said, blushing. “That is what you meant, yes?”

He looked as though he had tasted something sour. “Yes. I believe that was his intention.”

“Then please advise him not to waste his efforts, for I am not interested in either courtship or marriage. I have a grand life as a governess and intend to keep it that way.”

Ernest’s face, at once, both fell in what she thought was disappointment and loosened in relief. Claire panicked. Had she disappointed him by insulting his friend?

It is strange, she thought. He is disappointed with that, but he looked at me so softly when we danced together the other day.

“My Lord, I wish to quickly assure you that it has nothing to do with the quality of your friend,” she hurried to say. “It is only that—”

A knock interrupted Claire, and she cut herself off. What was she about to tell him?

It is only that I am a liar and could not ever trick a man into a courtship under a false identity. It is only that being saddled to a husband means I would have to rely on him and hope he does not leave me destitute like ... like in my past with my father ...

A man would ask me to give up being a governess, and I would find myself unable to do so. I find myself loving my employment.

The thoughts rolled through her mind as Lord Bannerdown thanked the maid for tea, shuffling his papers so a saucer and teacup could be set down for them. The maid excused herself and left, carrying the empty tray. Lord Bannerdown took two sugar cubes in his tea, and Claire laughed softly, forgetting all about her original reason for seeking out his study.

“Two sugar cubes at such an hour, Lord Bannerdown?” she teased.

“Ah.” He winced, sipping the hot tea. “It is a habit from my profession.”

“It is surprising that a man in your position still works at the hospital,” she commented.

“I know,” he sighed. “It has become a bothersome point in my life as of late. However, I cannot bring myself to give it up for the sake of societal norms.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” Claire resonated quietly. “They say a title makes a man noble, but I believe your choice to continue your work at the hospital is what makes you noble.”

“It is tiring,” he admitted, “but it makes me happy. It is why I try to balance both aspects of my life. My duty and my passion.”

“This new ward ...” Claire pressed. “Will it be for any specific conditions?”

He nodded. “The captain did not die immediately. He was not struck and fell in battle, like most. His injury was not an amputation gone wrong or a bullet wound to the heart. He did not fall by a sword. All those things were common things to see in the field tent, but Viscount White ... he was struck in the back of the head by flying shrapnel. He was not where he ought to have been because he wanted to help a flagging battalion. He buckled, fell, and was unconscious for many hours before they found him, thinking he was one of the fatalities.

“When they ...” He inhaled sharply, his eyes vacant. “When they brought the captain to Graham and me, we did everything we could to save him. We argued with one another, yelled orders and accusations that were unkind, all in our desperation to have some sort of answer. But the captain had an internal wound even when we patched up the external damage. He was in our hospital for a long time before he died.”

Tears shone in his eyes as he gazed off. His fingers picked at a corner of the plans. Claire wished to reach out and offer the earl some comfort, but she couldn’t. Lord Bannerdown sipped his tea and gave her a wince of a smile as if to tell her he was okay.

“It is still rather fresh,” he said quietly. “I erected a memorial for him and envy Graham’s ability to do far greater things with his position. The ward shall be specifically for those with head injuries. Brain, nerves, eyes. Anything that we can treat to do with that, we shall. We did not have the resources to save my friend, but I wish to see that Bellott’s does.”

Claire gave him a comforting smile. “I did not know the viscount, but I am sure that

he would love this plan. You and Mr Courtenay do him a great service.”

“To tell you the truth, Miss Gundry, there are nights I have nightmares about my time in the king’s army, only to spend the entire day wishing I was back there, despite everything. I have felt more at home in those conditions, rushing to save a man’s life, holding his hand in his last moments, than I have in this very fine, opulent house.”

“I understand that,” Claire said. “My father used to say opulence is only beautiful because it hides a lie beneath.” The words spoke too close to home, and she managed a laugh. “Only in that riches and inheritances are not always the most meaningful, are they?”

“No,” he muttered. “They are not. And to admit that is quite blasphemous, I imagine.”

She reached out as if to comfort him once again by touching his hand. “No, not to me, it is not.”

“Miss Gundry, two weeks before the Battle of Waterloo began, I was informed of my uncle and cousin’s death,” he told her, sitting up once again. “It arrived in a letter from a royal barrister, informing me very bluntly of their lost fight to consumption, their deaths, and how I was not only an earl now but the guardian for a sixteen-year-old lady who was grieving her father and grandfather. She had no other relatives to take her in except from me and my mother.”

His hand trembled as he lifted his teacup.

“Although my world was turned upside down, I imagine hers was, too. Suddenly, her family was deceased, and a new man entered the house with the title her own father should have had. Not only did I enter in such a manner, but my mother, of course, came with me. I came from the battlefield to Bannerdown, expected to take care of

my new, young ward. She understood what had happened, and I do not wish to insult her by telling her it word for word, but I did not know how to offer her comfort. I have grieved, I am grieving, and yet I feel as though we sail on the same ship of that grief but reside on different ends of the boat. That boat is sinking, and we ought to be there for one another, perhaps talk of our grief, but I simply do not know how.”

Guilt etched over his face as he shook his head. “That is why I avoid my cousin. I appear uncaring, but it saves me from her resentment that, no matter what I do, I cannot be her father or grandfather. Only her cousin.”

“Lord Bannerdown,” Claire murmured, “if I may speak so boldly, I believe she has more resentment for the quiet than any amount of effort you could give. She would appreciate an attempt more than the cold silence.”

“It appears cold?”

“It appears uncaring,” Claire admitted. “She thinks you are no more than burdened with her.”

“Heavens,” he muttered. “It is a joy to have this title if only so it brings me closer to her as my family. It is only that I do not know how to comfort her.”

“What if she does not need only comfort? What if she simply needs some normalcy? Some conversation? Comfort can come after that, Lord Bannerdown.”

He nodded, silently musing about her words. Once again, he nodded as he finished his cup of tea. And Claire, with the evening heavy with his own confessions, felt closer to him. Close enough that she even leaned forward in her chair, set down her saucer, and went to tell him about her own secret past.

She wished to speak of her life as Lady Claire, the disgraced marquess’s daughter,

and running away from London to make a new name for herself to survive destitution.

But as she opened her mouth to speak, Lord Bannerdown put his cup down with a clink and stood up. “Miss Gundry, thank you for your company this evening, but I am afraid it is time for me to retire for the night. Thank you,” he hesitated, “for everything. For your dedication to my cousin but also your kindness and consideration towards me.”

Her secrets melted on her tongue, retreating into her heart, where she knew she should not speak of them lest she risk her position. She only nodded, stood, and left with Lord Bannerdown before they parted ways.

“Good night, My Lord,” she said. “I hope you sleep well.”

“I believe I shall tonight.” His face was soft and open as he nodded.

Claire was halfway to her own room when she realized that she had not retrieved the book she wanted in the end.

Claire wasn't sure if Lord Bannerdown would take her advice yet again about Lady Florence, but she was surprised when she entered the breakfast hall the next morning to find Lady Florence talking happily, chattering away with Lord Bannerdown.

She paused in the doorway.

“Miss Gundry!” Lady Florence called. “My cousin has come to dine with me. You must join us as well!”

It was common practice for Claire to join her but ... well, she had not anticipated Lord Bannerdown attending breakfast too. She had hoped, for both her sake and Lady Florence's, and now he was here, poised and composed as ever; her heart gave a small flutter.

Attempting to tamp down such a reaction, Claire entered the room, her dress swishing around her ankles with the movement.

"Good morning, Lord Bannerdown," she said, curtsying to him. She turned to her young ward. "Lady Florence."

"We have been discussing the next performance at the playhouse!" Florence exclaimed excitedly as Claire took her seat at the table and was quickly served a plate of breakfast. Eggs and toast piled on top of one another. She snuck a glance at Lord Bannerdown's plate to see how he liked his cooked. Scrambled, with several streaks of bacon on the side. He had jam smeared over a darkly cooked piece of toast, and Claire found herself reaching for one of a similarly cooked level. He looked appreciative of her choice.

"What play is that?" she asked.

"Twelfth Night," Florence told her, grinning. "It is to be showing in two weeks. I would love to attend. Shall we all go again together?"

Claire glanced at Lord Bannerdown, unsure if the invitation the other week was merely a one-off, but the man looked calm and happy as he said, "Once again, it shall be an honour for me to accompany you both."

"Then I should love to attend as well," Claire told Florence, who looked overjoyed. While she remembered Twelfth Night wasn't one of Florence's favourite plays, she knew the young girl would be looking for any opportunity to bond with her cousin. It

seemed Shakespeare was at least one way to go.

They all ate and discussed Florence's favourite character—Viola, of course—and if Lord Bannerdown had any connections with actors in this one—he did not. It was a perfect moment until a cleared throat broke the joyous atmosphere.

Lady Florence crunched into her toast, the sound loud in the silence.

“What is the meaning of this?” Lady Katherine's voice boomed across the room. “I enter the breakfast hall to hear you talking of highly improper plays! Ernest, what are you encouraging for your cousin?”

“Mother, I—”

“Regardless,” she dismissed. Her hand waved him away. “There shall be no further talk of that. I would like you to be reintroduced to somebody, Ernest. It is someone I believe you should recognize very well, although it has been quite some time.”

Claire did not know for sure, but she thought that Lady Katherine's smile was almost calculating as she stepped into the breakfast hall, revealing two women behind her. One was young but perhaps one or two years older than Lady Florence, with a pile of dark hair pinned back from her pretty heart-shaped face, and the other was a woman of Lady Katherine's age, her own dark hair streaked with gray, emphasized by the sharp way it was pulled back to expose a rounded face.

The silence was so loud that Claire heard the intake of breath from Lord Bannerdown as he appeared to recognize their company.

“Lady Samantha,” he murmured, standing. “Mrs Elizabeth Brooks.”

Chapter 9

Shock settled in Ernest when he saw the raven-haired young lady, only one year older than his cousin, standing in the breakfast hall doorway. Her face was pale and drawn, and her smile pulled up when he stood to his feet.

“Lord Bannerdown,” she said, her voice soft, her smile demure. “It has been some time.”

“Indeed,” he answered, confused. He looked at his mother and then at the older woman behind Lady Samantha, her aunt. “Although I have enjoyed your letters since I returned—returned ...”

He could not finish his sentence, not as a deep sadness entered Lady Samantha’s crystal blue eyes. Her eyebrows pinched, and she nodded, her mouth tightening.

We returned without her fiancé, he thought.

And then he could not help himself, not as the viscount’s face entered his mind. “Lady Samantha, he did nothing but talk of you,” he said quietly. “I apologize for saying this, but it is true.”

He blinked, but his friend’s face would not leave his mind. He thought of Graham joking about how Archibald never stopped talking of her.

And the first thing I shall do upon my return is marry the beautiful Lady Samantha.

He could hear his friend's declaration as clear as day, and it choked him.

"Excuse me," he said quietly, clearing his throat and glancing away so he could blink back tears. "I seem to have lost myself for a moment."

He sat down, aware of both his mother's narrowed gaze on him as well as Miss Gundry watching him. He glanced at her for a moment. She knew of his heartache, and her brow was pinched in concern, even as she looked sideways at Lady Samantha.

Ernest breathed deeply, reaching for his glass of water. He drank and wished it was stronger. He could see the blood on his hands—he could hear Graham's scream in his ears.

Save him! Save him! Ernest, do what you must.

He remembered stitching up the wound, wondering why his friend wasn't improving. The desperation that hung in the air as they all rushed to save their captain.

It had been hopeless.

But beyond the blood, he remembered his friend's eyes, bright with mirth, and his love of toasts. He remembered his powerful voice booming across the tent as he commanded his men. But no. Archibald White had been more than a captain who had marched to his death. He had been a gracious host during the social season, the very first to reach for a slice of cake at parties, and a man who had always sought to lighten the moods of others.

Ernest's chest tightened. He closed his eyes. Breathe in, breathe out. A hand closed over his, and he half expected to look down and find Miss Gundry's hand over his, but it was Lady Florence. She patted his fingertips, all while fixing him with a look of

deep sympathy.

She understood the overwhelming sense of drowning that accompanied grief.

But as he struggled to maintain his composure, it was Miss Gundry who then stood up, clapping her hands. “It is a fine day, is it not? Lady Florence, how about we take a turn around the gardens? Lady Samantha, Mrs Brooks, would you care to join us?”

“That would be lovely, thank you.” Lady Samantha’s voice was quiet. Nobody mentioned how it was a fine day but not warm. Still, they all agreed. Ernest still kept his face averted and his eyes downcast until he was sure they had all gone. Quickly, his grief turned to anger as he faced the one woman who had not gone.

“Mother, what are you doing?” he asked, his voice calm in anger. “Why would you invite Lady Samantha here? She is still grieving her fiancé! I am still grieving the loss of my friend!”

He lifted his gaze to her, and she did not compose her features fast enough. She wore a smug expression right before she smoothed it into something that didn’t really appear sympathetic.

“Of course,” she purred. “Viscount White. Yes, it was incredibly tragic that he fell in battle before Lady Samantha found herself married to him.” His mother’s face was pulled downward in her façade of empathy. “How unfortunate. She is only seventeen and back on the marriage market.” It was said with enough sarcasm that Ernest knew she did not find it unfortunate at all, for Lady Samantha was practically a debutante in age, still. Her engagement to Archibald had been a happy one, advantageously planned.

And now she would face down new prospects who were not him.

“Mother, your mock sympathy insults the viscount’s memory,” Ernest spat. “It insults my grief.”

“Oh, grief.” She dismissed. “Ernest, if the world halted for grief, then we would all cease to exist. You have not been a field medic for many months now. It is time you let the past go.”

“Is that an order, Mother?” he asked, deathly serious. “I will remind you again that I have a long stretch of patience, but you would not be back in Little Harkwell without me.”

“Yes, you hold that over my head enough, Ernest. So, let us stop with these games. I merely heard of Lady Samantha arriving in Bath to visit friends. She is all abuzz on the gossip tree, what with being the betrothed of our fallen captain.”

“Do not speak to her of Viscount White,” Ernest warned. “You shall upset her.”

“And you practically stood like presenting the viscount’s ghost to her.”

Ernest’s temper rose. “You have deliberately gone behind my back to invite her! Stop your meddling at once, Mother, for it shall not end well. You should have warned me of her spontaneous arrival. She has been friendly with Graham and me since the viscount’s death, and I wish to keep it that way.”

She lifted her chin at him. “As do I.” Her smile was positively cunning. “After all, a little correspondence can be broken up with a visit from time to time, do you not agree? And as I said, it was perchance that she was in the neighbourhood. I merely invited her, knowing how close you were to her late fiancé.”

And yet her words dripped with such ingenuity that Ernest could not bear it.

“Would you like to know what I think?” he asked quietly, his fury simmering away as he abandoned the remainder of his breakfast, storming towards his mother.

“Do tell,” she cooed as if proud of herself.

“I think you have orchestrated this. For Lady Samantha and me to meet in person all these months later. I think you believe you can create a match between her and me.” His words were growled and clipped, his anger flaring. “And I will not hear of it, Mother. I will be polite because Lady Samantha is a good friend, and I wish to be there for her through her grief, but it shall not be anything near to what you envision. Am I understood?”

Even his mother blinked at that, surprised at his rage. But it was both his shock and grief combined. He could not believe she would do such a thing. He stormed out of the breakfast hall and flagged down the nearest footman.

“Send for Mr Graham Courtenay at once,” he tasked him. “Have him come to the house with no time to waste.”

Although Ernest would have liked to venture outside into the garden, it was getting colder as the day drew on. Lady Samantha’s cheeks and nose had turned red from her previous stroll, and Ernest could not bring himself to ask her to go out once again.

So, he sat alongside Graham while Lady Samantha perched on the guest settee before them in the drawing room. He did not often receive guests, and he felt peculiar, as if waiting for something to happen until he realized that they were in his house, and he was waiting for somebody else to lead.

And still Graham did. “Archibald would have cracked a joke to diffuse the tension in

this room,” he muttered, his voice still loud in the quiet room. “And although I can imagine what sort of joke he would’ve made, I cannot bring myself to make it.”

“Do not trouble yourself, Mr Courtenay,” Lady Samantha said, smiling at him. She wore a dress of pale butter yellow, and a necklace of topaz adorned her throat. Her finger and thumb kept reaching for the largest jewel in the centre. “I can imagine it myself. He always did that: entered a room and told a joke. He always got everybody laughing.”

“Did he make you laugh, Lady Samantha?” Ernest asked, unable to help himself. Some engagements were not always as happy as they seemed, but Lady Samantha’s face darkened with grief as she nodded. Still, she mustered another smile.

“Every moment we were together,” she told him. “He never failed to brighten my day.”

“That is exactly how we both see him.” Graham nodded. “However, I do not mean to change the topic, but I am curious as to how you ended up in Little Harkwell, Lady Samantha. Lord Bannerdown is not one for guests.”

“I am as surprised as he is,” she answered, sharing a glance at Ernest. “I am very grateful for the invitation from Lady Katherine, but I do not really understand why now.”

Because she believes your mourning period should be over, and I should court you, Ernest thought bitterly. But he did not say it. He would not distress her more than she already was.

“I am sorry that I did not reach out sooner,” Graham said, linking his fingers together and clasping his hand on his knee. “When we returned from battle, I mean.”

“Please do not be,” she said, shaking her head, but there was still a heavy sadness to her that a mere shake would not take away. “I admit that life has been ... difficult since the viscount’s death, but I am surrounded by good friends and my aunt. It is good to have that when one’s security suddenly falls away. The viscount, however, was not just security for me. Despite our age difference, I truly believe I was falling in love with him. I was ...” Her breath hitched. “I was looking forward to our life together.”

Ernest wanted to move to her and comfort her, but he kept his distance. Grief was an unpassable berth. But when he had talked to Miss Gundry the night before in his study, trying not to take too much notice of how her face softened considerably in the candlelight, he had wished for closeness. However, he wished for closeness always from Miss Gundry, for she had consumed his thoughts.

I can only hope my mother’s poison does not find its way into Miss Gundry’s ears. It would be like her to talk of false stories to distance Miss Gundry from me.

But would his mother be so callous?

“I have enjoyed reading your letters, Mr Courtenay,” she said, ever so politely. “And yours too, Lord Bannerdown. Your correspondence has been a bright light for me in these months. You both share fantastic stories of the viscount. Through them, you have painted a picture of a man I never got a chance to know. A man I should have known. And despite my grief, they have made me happy.”

“We are always but a letter away,” Graham said, meeting her gaze. “And whether it is here at Little Harkwell or a visit to my townhouse, with your aunt, of course, you are always welcome.”

“I wish I lived a little closer,” Lady Samantha admitted. “For it would be nice to have comfort closer to home.”

A stab of guilt hit Ernest. Archibald lived on the same street as Lady Samantha. They were almost neighbours, which was how she had been matched with him at the start, anyway. Things should have been so different. Ernest should have done more. He should have saved his friend, should have tried harder, should have known back then what he did now.

Ernest had thrown himself into his research since returning and had discovered new ways of surgery and medical care. There was no guarantee it would have saved Archibald, but there was always that doubt that haunted him before he fell asleep.

Lady Samantha should have been planning her wedding to Archibald. Instead, she sat with her despair around her shoulders like a cape, and Lady Katherine no doubt lurked somewhere nearby, ready to pounce on her to be rematched.

“He always said you were very quiet,” Ernest commented. “But that whenever you spoke, you shone with kindness.”

She laughed softly. “That was the first thing he told me, actually.” She pitched her voice deep to imitate the great captain. “Why, Lady Samantha! You are very quiet, I have noticed. But when I hear your voice, it is only when you are speaking kindly.”

Graham and Ernest laughed with her. Even Graham puffed up his chest and took on Archibald’s voice as well. “Why, Graham, do you not know the beauty of my fiancée? She is radiant! I would write a library’s worth of books on her rosy cheeks alone!”

And although their light-hearted play brought tears to all their eyes, remembering the man who ought to have been there with them, there was laughter ringing through the air, and Ernest felt a sense of comfort settle in alongside his sorrow.

“Lady Samantha,” he said once their laughter died down. “Would you care to spend

some time in Little Harkwell? A night or two, perhaps. We have guest quarters set up. I do not wish for you and your aunt to depart so late in the day when dusk is near. You may return to your hosts in Bath whenever you are ready, of course, but please feel free to stay.”

She blinked in surprise, and even Graham glanced sideways at him, raising his brow. It seemed that remembering Archibald tonight and Lady Samantha’s presence was bringing him out of his shell once more. But he did not want to get his hopes up.

“That would be very lovely of you, My Lord,” Lady Samantha said, inclining her head. “Thank you.”

“Of course,” he said. “I shall have my housekeeper show you and your aunt to your room.”

“I believe she is drinking a glass of wine in the parlour with Lady Katherine. I would like to leave her undisturbed and retire quietly if that is okay.”

“Very well.” Ernest stood up, wishing that he could end his day with Miss Gundry as he had the morning before, but fatigue came for him, spurred by the emotions of the day. He bid farewell to Graham, who gave him a sad, tight smile, and the three of them departed the drawing room to go in different directions. Lady Samantha chattered with the housekeeper about how lovely she was and how her own housekeeper in London was not a very kind woman.

Ernest sighed before retreating to his own room. He did not know how to proceed with Lady Samantha, but he was glad to have met her properly in person and become acquainted with her. Still, there was much to learn and much to unravel about his mother’s plans.

Soon, he thought. All that mess can be figured out soon.

And underneath the worries there was the thought that he had not finalized his plans for his next visit to the playhouse. He needed to remember to go into town and purchase the tickets. Miss Gundry had enjoyed sitting in the box, and he would have her settle for nothing less when he next took her.

It is about Lady Florence, he reminded himself sternly. Chiding himself, he shut the door to his bedroom without bidding his mother a good night. Usually, he would, but he was far too angry with her.

Readying himself for bed, he paused a moment before getting beneath the bed sheets.

He really felt in a predicament with his mother's intentions.

But what of his own feelings?

He could not deny how perfect it had felt that morning at breakfast. Ernest couldn't imagine it happening with anybody else: that brief feeling of right.

What was he to do?

Chapter 10

“I suppose her hair blends very well with the snow,” Claire muttered to herself. “And the way the flowers have been woven into her hair, do make her look rather beautiful.”

Her words were as bitterly cold as the winter snow outside and lacked assurance to herself as she watched Lord Bannerdown and Lady Samantha take a turn around the garden. Further down, Mrs Elizabeth Brooks followed. They left footprints in the snow, the side-by-side prints matching one another: one strong, booted, and the other dainty and small. What would Claire’s look like alongside Lord Bannerdown’s?

Lady Samantha had her delicate hands—hands of a lady, hands that Claire herself had once had: soft and unmarred by the hardship of working life—tucked away into a cosy sheath that enveloped both hands in a fur-lined muff that covered the length of her wrists. She would clasp her hands together inside the tube, keeping them warm.

Envy burned Claire’s throat as she watched them until they passed on, out of sight. She even craned her neck to watch them better. And then she berated herself for doing that, wishing she did not feel this way. She had no claim on Lord Bannerdown. She was not even truly the woman he believed her to be! She needed to calm down. She needed to be realistic.

I need to get away from Lady Florence’s window and return to my duties before somebody sees me watching them. Embarrassment flooded her as she withdrew from the window and returned to the closet, where she had prepared Lady Florence’s gown for the evening dinner. But she needed to pair it with jewellery and perhaps pick a

matching bow to adorn the young woman's hair.

Moving to the vanity, she looked for a pair of onyx earrings. But beneath Lady Florence's pearl-encased jewellery box was a creamy corner of a letter, embossed with a flourishing signature. Claire bit her lip, glancing at the open door.

There were no footsteps that she could hear, and so Claire reached for the corner of the letter. She felt wrong in doing so, but this was the second letter she had noticed in Lady Florence's room, and then there had been that familiar man outside the playhouse ...

I am merely ensuring that she is not causing herself any ruin, Claire told herself. And that she is corresponding with honourable men who are not saying improper things to her.

Gently tugging the letter free, she noticed a name written in cursive: Victor—

But before she could read anything else, footsteps rushed into the room, and Claire startled, caught red-handed.

Lady Florence stood in the doorway, her hands balled into fists and her face tight with outrage.

"Miss Gundry!" she cried. Her eyes dropped, appalled, to where Claire snatched her hands away from the letter.

"Lady Florence, I did not see anything!" she protested. "I swear, I—"

"You have no right! You may be my governess, but that does not permit you to go through my belongings!"

And she was right. Florence was younger than Claire, but her higher rank meant that she could have Claire's employment taken away from her at a moment's notice.

"Please, Lady Florence, calm down," she said quietly, raising her hands and stepping away from the vanity. "I merely only saw a name. I did not read any of the letter's content."

"As you should not have! That is private."

"I understand," Claire answered. "But I wanted to look out for you. At the playhouse there was a man who was watching you. I know your cousin would want to know you are keeping the right company—"

"My cousin has not cared about me for six months," Lady Florence cried. "He does now, but only since you have encouraged his effort. He would not know if I had already wed!"

"Lady Florence!" Claire admonished. "Do not say such things. Of course, Lord Bannerdown would notice. He cares for you!"

"He only cares about his work and the war that haunts him," she spat, shaking her head. "And you care only to speak to him. Ever since you have grown close to Lord Bannerdown, you have barely spent time with me."

Her accusation struck Claire as childish, even as she felt wretched for thinking that.

"That is not true," she whispered. "I care for you, Lady Florence. You are more than my ward but a friend. I wish to see you grow into a wonderful young lady of the Ton, and I see that you are excited for your future in society. You are well-skilled and will make a fine wife to a wonderful man, but I would like to make sure that he will be as wonderful as you deserve. This—this Victor ... does he treat you well? Does he

“speak to you as you deserve?”

“Miss Gundry,” Lady Florence hissed, her cheeks flushing with humiliation. “Do not ask such things.”

“Are you risking your reputation?”

“No!” she shouted, averting her gaze. “Miss Gundry, you are a lovely governess, but you do not need to concern yourself with such things about my life.” She paused. “Unless you wish to report back to Lord Bannerdown.”

“I am no storyteller,” Claire assured her. “We all have things we wish to keep close to our hearts. I only want to know you are safe. Are you entertaining a romance with this Victor?”

Lady Florence’s gaze bore into the floor as she paused, and Claire half feared the young woman would retreat and ignore her. But she didn’t. She only moved further into the room and sat on the edge of the bed.

Her face was a picture of tenderness, her smile demur and her eyes widening in excitement for whatever she was about to say. It was a large change from the angry girl who had given her an outburst, flying into the room earlier.

“The truth is, Miss Gundry,” she began, “is that Lord Victor, the man who writes me those letters, is a gentleman. I met him a year ago at the assembly halls in town. Of course, my parents were still alive, and they knew that I had danced with him after my father introduced me to him. But it was only once that we got to dance. Yet it was enough for me to know my affections.” She looked at her vanity, at the letter. “Ever since, we have traded letters. He is the second son and lives very happily so for that fact. We have enjoyed one another’s company. He went to Oxford for a year, and after he did not find what he was after, he returned to Bath.”

“Which was why he was at the playhouse,” Claire guessed. But the question lingered. What had Lord Victor gone in search of out in Oxford? She could only hope it was something honourable. “Do you know what it is he searched for?”

“I do not know,” she answered. “He spoke little about it, but I imagine it was his sense of purpose, perhaps. He was very keen on proving himself to his family, so I can only think it was in relation to that.” Her cheeks were brushed with a pretty blush. “The playhouse was the first time I have seen him in a long time.”

Claire stepped back, nodding. She hummed in thought. She wasn’t sure if she should let Lord Bannerdown know. After all, if Lady Florence was not yet on the marriage market, and he had not had a chance to scope out her potential suitors, then he should know there was a man already involved in Florence’s affections.

“His letters are very kind,” Lady Florence said quietly as if hopeful of swaying Claire’s thoughts. She only shook her head in response as she gathered her thoughts. She could not betray Florence’s confidence or even give somebody else’s secrets away, for she had her own, and she did not want Lord Bannerdown to know.

“Lady Florence, you are too young for romance,” she said gently, carefully.

The young lady went to open her mouth, but Claire held up a hand to stop her. “Merely because you are not yet out in society. You will have more prospects once Lord Bannerdown presents you upon your debut. Lord Victor. I understand the circumstances under which you have met him, but there will be other men when you properly enter society.”

Her voice was kind, and she expected—perhaps hoped—for understanding since Lady Florence had confessed her secrets but a deep-seated anger settled in Florence’s face, and she stood to her feet, rounding on Claire, pushing her back.

“Leave!” she ordered. “I respect you, Miss Gundry, but I am rather angry with you at the moment, and I would like you to leave.”

“Lady Florence—”

“Leave!” Her cry came out torn and desperate, furious, and delicate hands pushed Claire’s shoulders, forcing her backwards hard enough that she had to grip the doorframe to steady herself. She had only moments before the door came swinging closed, and she pulled her fingers away from being caught.

As her feet faltered and she fell back, only just righting herself on the railing behind her, Claire sensed someone approaching. She stiffened, only to turn around and find Lord Bannerdown getting nearer. He glanced at Lady Florence’s closed door.

Claire momentarily forgot about the argument and could only think about how his hair was dusted with a fine layer of snow with the dark strands speckled through. Her chest tightened and she had to look away from the redness of his nose from the cold.

“What has happened?” Lord Bannerdown asked, cocking his head. “Is my cousin all right?”

“Quite,” Claire said. “Merely... aggravated. Women things, of course.”

She did not want to betray her charge’s trust and wished to keep her secrets for now. Until at least I know the full story. I cannot go to Lord Bannerdown with no knowledge of the full story and go quiet when he asks questions. At least that was what she told herself. The truth was she hoped confidence would be kept should she ever think about spilling her secrets. But she also cared for Lady Florence, and she wished to see her happy, so she said nothing further.

“Ah,” he said, his smile awkward. “It sounds like something I should not wish to

trouble myself with.”

“Indeed,” she assured him. “How was your walk with Lady Samantha?”

“Dastardly cold,” he told her. “But it was pleasant enough. Lady Samantha is lovely both in looks and person, as the viscount always said, but I must admit that I do not know how to help her. That is how I see her, somebody to help. I feel responsible for her grief, but I do not know how to aid her.”

Claire met his eyes, which looked wistful as he hoped. There was a desperate tilt to his mouth as if saddened by his helplessness. Claire paused. Was he ... waiting for her advice? She had once given him advice about Lady Florence, and he had appreciated her counsel.

But how could Claire possibly advise him on how to better be there for Lady Samantha?

She bit her lip, idly toying with a frill on her skirt. Claire had to admit that she had grown rather fond of the earl, and to encourage him further into Lady Samantha’s arms did not feel comfortable. She was biased, she realized.

How can I do this when it could push them closer together in marriage? Society does not wait for grieving, unmarried women, whether betrothed or not.

Claire had a sneaking suspicion that Lady Katherine had done something regarding the other girl’s presence. But ... Lady Samantha looked barely older than Lady Florence, and the thought of Lord Bannerdown courting her for his mother’s sake ...

Perhaps he might like her himself.

He did say she was lovely in looks and person, she reminded herself bitterly.

Silence filled the corridor, and Lord Bannerdown cleared his throat before straightening up, his hands clasped behind his back.

“Yes—ah, well,” he said, unsure of how to respond to her silence, so he continued talking as if it was a mere continuation of his previous words. “It is not my responsibility, I suppose. I am merely feeling guilty.”

Counsel him! Claire told herself but she could truly not bring herself to.

Claire gave him an uncomfortable nod. “Of course, My Lord. I should—I should take my leave.”

“Miss Gundry—”

“Good day, Lord Bannerdown.”

She curtsied and left quickly, hurrying down without looking back at him. How could she meet his gaze when she thought such terrible thoughts? She was selfish, choosing her own affections for the earl over the ability to help him be a better friend.

But they might not only be friends eventually, Claire thought as she pressed herself to her door, quickly opening it, and trapping herself inside. I could not live with myself watching them wed.

She gasped for breath and pushed her back against the door as she entered her bedroom, trying to calm down her racing heart. Guilt gnawed through her stomach.

I am terrible, she thought. I am keeping so many secrets.

Even the soft comforts of her bedroom could not bring her any relief. And especially not as she moved further into the room, dismissed by Florence for the time being, and

not wanting to see Lord Bannerdown lest he see her crimes written on her face.

She went to her writing desk, thinking of writing an order for a new book in town. Fiction always cheered her up.

But as she got closer, Claire's breath caught. She gripped the back of her writing chair and steadied herself as panic choked her. With wide eyes, she took in the mess of her *escritoire*. Paper was scattered across the wood surface, ink pots were in disarray, and her quill was torn. Somebody had rifled through her belongings.

But even more worrying was that her mother's letter that Claire had ignored, had put away in the *escritoire* drawer, was right on top, the letter open, revealing Claire's own heritage.

Her secrets were bared, and somebody had read them.

Chapter 11

The following morning, the bitter February air nipped Ernest's cheeks as he stood with his hands clasped behind his back respectfully, looking at Lady Samantha. Her own cheeks were red with the cold, and she huddled deeper into the fur collar around her cloak.

"Farewell, Lady Samantha," he said, inclining his head. "I hope your journey back to your hosts is pleasant. And please know that Little Harkwell will welcome you anytime."

"Thank you, Lord Bannerdown, for both your kindness and hospitality." She curtsied, and beside her, her aunt did the same. Behind Ernest, he was aware of eyes on him. Lady Florence stood a further distance from her governess, and Miss Gundry herself watched the farewell exchange with a purposefully blank look that he could not make sense of.

"It is the least I can do," he told her gently. He had sought Miss Gundry's counsel last night, finding her strangely averted to giving it. Had he asked too much? Perhaps he had been selfish. He should have pressed harder on whatever had happened between Lady Florence and Miss Gundry. Perhaps then she may not have fled from him.

He could not stop thinking of the lingering silence that had settled around them in the empty hallway.

But now he focused his attention on Lady Samantha. "Do write to me, still," he told her. "I would like us to see one another again, for our time in Bath is concluded, and

we return to London for the season.”

The season, he thought. Where Lady Samantha shall be pushed right back into the marriage mart.

He saw a similar thought cross her mind, and her face flickered before she pushed a smile onto her face.

“I would like that, Lord Bannerdown.”

She nodded once more at him in farewell before she turned to where a footman held open her carriage door and assisted her inside. Lady Samantha disappeared in a skirt of powder blue and a full cloak before her aunt followed, and the door was closed. Then the carriage pulled away with a shout from the driver, and Lord Bannerdown turned on his heel, walking back inside.

Inside, he walked down the hallway, unsure of whether he ought to return to his study or find Miss Gundry and find out what had ailed her the night before. But he did not get far when he heard a happy humming coming from the parlour. He paused, glancing in to find his mother at a writing desk, a smile on her face.

He lingered for too long, and she caught him, her face shifting into a wide smile. “Ah! Ernest. How was Lady Samantha upon her leaving?”

“Very well,” he answered tersely. He still had not forgiven her for the argument they’d had the other night. “I would think that, as the one who invited Lady Samantha here, you would have wished to see her off.”

“And interfere with your conversations with her? Do not be foolish.” She gave him a light smile as if he was merely being chided for something small. “Do tell me, Ernest, what do you think of her now you have met her?”

“Mother,” he warned quietly. “It seems you do not remember my thoughts from when Lady Samantha first arrived.”

“Oh, that nonsense!” Lady Katherine laughed. “I do not pay it much mind, no. For I am your mother, and I must orchestrate the things you refuse to.”

“Do not involve yourself in my personal life,” he warned. “I told you once before, Mother, not to do so, and I meant it.”

Her face blanched in shock and insult, her lashes blinking and her mouth working as she processed the insult of his words.

“Ernest,” she said sharply, standing up from the desk. “I do not think you understand the situation. I truly do what I must because you refuse to. You are neglectful of your duties. We have a new life now, and I will not see you squander it with your ineptitude.”

“My ineptitude!” he laughed, outraged. “Mother, you are a meddlesome woman, and we both know what this game is about. But Lady Samantha is still grieving her betrothed and—”

“They were never married,” she hissed. “She lost a friend, is all. Her heart and hand are still available, Ernest, grief or not. Do you not think it dutiful to your friend to honour him in such a way that you would not see his former betrothed ruined by the grief? You would do him honour to court her so she would not suffer the consequences of almost being widowed at such a young age.”

“Mother,” he hissed.

“Heed me,” she spat. “You do not take your earldom seriously, and it is about time that you do. For that, you will need a wife and an heir.”

“You cannot possibly think Lady Sam—”

“That is precisely what I think!” Lady Katherine argued. “For what other option do you have? You refuse to mingle with anybody at social events, and you spend all your other time either in the hospital or with your cousin’s governess.” She moaned in distress, pressing her hand to her head. “You are causing me alarm, Ernest. People are already gossiping.”

“Only because you invite them to watch me try to manage this earldom like a performing animal at a circus!”

“They pity you.”

“And I pity the young girl who lost her family only to watch relatives she did not know parade in here and take over her home!” Ernest shouted. “I will not accept this title with the seriousness you wish me to do so because I had my own life before tragedy struck the Bannerdowns. I will not give that life up.”

“But you must!” she raged. “And if you do not step up to be the guardian of Bannerdown and take your title seriously, then I will.”

Ernest’s mouth parted in surprise. Another side of his mother was rearing its head, and he could not believe her bold proclamation. Then again, was that not what she wanted? To be the centre of attention, to have decisions put down solely for her to make.

“Mother, what truly happened?” he asked quietly. She reared back, surprised by his question.

“What—what do you mean?”

“Why did my father remain in London? What happened between the two of you? Do not evade me this time.”

Lady Katherine paused. He rarely saw his mother nervous and to see it now was quite an image. But she was, and his mother was good at turning every inch of vulnerability into something with an edge, a sharpness that could be cruel. It was her way of enduring.

She lifted her chin, sniffing. “Your father,” she said, her voice dropping into a sneer that he did not understand, “did not wish to ascend into the Ton, even at the cost of our marriage. That is how much I mean to him.”

“And how much the Ton means to you,” Ernest murmured under his breath, shaking his head. For his father did not want the Ton, but his mother had so easily walked away from the marriage, too. “I hope this lavish house comforts your upset over that, Mother.”

“Ernest!” she admonished, but he did not care. He turned on his heel and was already walking out of the parlour by the time she called his name for the second time. He could only think of his father, a hard-working medic, a man who had inspired Ernest all his life, being alone back home in a London townhouse far less grand than anything anyone of the Ton owned. A man who had been gracious and giving—a man who was comfortable earning his own way with something practical and helpful.

A man who did not seem very suited to Lady Katherine at all, now that Ernest thought about it. Perhaps their marriage truly had come to blows over the difference in satisfaction in society.

Sitting in his study, Ernest could not help shaking his head as he leafed through

paperwork. Ledgers after ledgers, letters of promises and business proposals, deeds, and written affairs of the estate. Employment records, dowry reports for Lady Florence, and endless information swam before Ernest's eyes.

The former earl and Matthew, Ernest's cousin and Lady Florence's father, had left him many remnants of Bannerdown to sort through. For a moment, Ernest had a terrible thought that, even in the time before their deaths, they could have had some organization. And then he chided himself for such a selfish thought.

Matthew had been his best friend and the former heir. Despite his father—Ernest's uncle—disapproving of Ernest's own parents, the two cousins had got along and became fast friends. They had been more like siblings than even the former earl and Lady Katherine. And they were true siblings, although it was clear they had both wished otherwise.

Now Ernest sat where his uncle should have been, and then Matthew, and he should have come and gone to Bannerdown as a guest, visiting, attending parties. Instead, he was the man of the house, the guardian, and the host of those parties.

He despised it, and the guilt ate away at him as time slipped away from him the more he read the figures and drowned himself in this work so he would not have to think of his mother's threats. For he believed her. He knew that he had a duty to the title and house. He knew that the nobility came with certain requirements, and one of those was to produce an heir to pass everything onto.

"Lest it go to another commoner," he muttered to himself, laughing humourlessly. Despite his mother growing up in the Ton, she had absconded it and left it to marry Ernest's father, a commoner, and it was clear she regretted such a decision. It was only this luck that brought them back to her childhood home, taking the place that her brother and his wife should have had.

But Ernest had been a commoner with his father, and he had been happy with his life, really. He had been in awe of Matthew's life as they grew up, but he had been comfortable, too, wanting to follow in his father's footsteps of becoming a medic.

"Well, Matthew," he muttered, thinking of his late cousin. "I do not understand what I am to do in such a situation. It should be you here. I wish we were boys again, climbing the apple tree in the orchard."

The ghosts in Ernest's life lingered long enough. He did not need to encourage them.

And he was prevented from doing so by a knock on the door. A footman opened the study door, and Ernest finally let himself look up from the ledgers.

"Mr Graham Courtenay, Lord Bannerdown," he announced. Ernest nodded his acceptance to see his friend.

In strode Graham, his grey-streaked hair pushed back from his forehead, and Ernest swore he looked less fatigued than he had last month when they had stood before the memorial. He looked less ... old. For Graham was not old in the slightest, but Ernest thought the battle had aged him.

"Good afternoon," he said, inclining his head. "I hope you do not mind me intruding—"

"Graham, you are my best friend," he said. "We have been through too much together for you to still think of yourself as an intruder."

"Yes, well, we are not the same men who signed up for the king's army together, are we?" Graham pointedly looked around at the study, polished and graceful.

"No," Ernest said slowly. "We are not."

“I have come to speak with you about Lady Samantha,” his friend said, settling down in the chair opposite Ernest’s desk. “I am ... worried for her. I am worried for what she might endure come the social season.”

“As am I,” Ernest sighed. “She is still young, yet grief has aged her. It will likely serve her well, but it could make her a target for the ... older gentlemen who think only of needing an heir.”

“They will not treasure her,” Graham said, his voice quiet, resigned. He shook his head. “She must meet a respectable man. I trust that her aunt will present her only to the best men suited for her.”

“Mrs Brooks is an older woman herself,” Ernest worried. “It is more likely that she is ready to see Lady Samantha married off to the first suitor who glances her way, no matter his age. She will ensure she is taken care of, I am sure, but only financially. She might not give the extra time to think about the man himself.” He shuddered, thinking of the young, soft-handed Lady Samantha, in the throes of her grief, married off to a man old enough to be her grandfather.

It happened, but he did not wish it to happen to her. Archibald had been older but still only in his thirties.

“I wish I could attend these social events,” Graham muttered. “I have no rank to speak of, but I have enough prestige that should allow me entry. But alas. You shall have to watch over her from afar, Ernest.”

“Come the social season, Graham, I shall have my own young ward to watch over.” He gave his friend a stern look. “Lady Florence shall be ready to enter the marriage mart come the spring. I shall not have the time to take care of two ladies who should not be my responsibility.” He cringed at the harshness of his words.

“Of course,” Graham muttered. “How could I forget? Lady Florence is glued so permanently to the side of her governess that I almost forget she is ready to find a suitor. But I do not mind, for her governess is rather beautiful, is she not? And very well-read, according to Lawrence Kent.”

Ernest drew up sharply. “Who is that?”

“He owns the Haberdash Bookshop.” The chairman lifted a brow. “Why are you so upset over it?”

“I am not upset.”

“It sounds like you are. I make one mention of Miss Gundry’s beauty and—”

“Do not pursue her, Graham,” Ernest said, his words half a sigh and half a growl. It was not quite a warning but not quite a tired resignation, either. His emotions mingled and tangled in his mind, and he did not know how to make sense of them.

“I—I only mean that she must remain focused on Lady Florence,” he quickly amended when Graham looked mildly offended and shocked. “Especially if Lady Florence is to find her own way without a governess in the coming months, Miss Gundry shall need all her focus on those last preparations.”

Graham stepped back, and his mouth pulled into a tight line. “Ah.” He nodded slowly. “I see.”

“What?” Ernest snapped.

“I shall not pursue Miss Gundry,” Graham conceded. “But I also did not say that I would. I merely complimented her, and you jumped to a conclusion based on nothing but ... perhaps your own jealousy?”

“That is preposterous,” Ernest muttered. “What possessed you to say that?”

“I am merely reading you.” Graham lifted his chin as if knowing he was right. “You wish to keep the governess and me apart, but are your intentions so pure, Ernest? I do not believe so. I do not believe it is only for Lady Florence’s benefit, for she is a bright young lady, brighter than most, and Miss Gundry is excellent in her role. She makes a fine governess, and I believe you insult her by insinuating her focus from her employment would be swayed by me.”

“Graham, do not speak such nonsense. Of course, my intentions are pure.”

Graham did not look convinced, but Ernest still convinced himself of his own words.

Miss Gundry was wonderful, and he found that he had grown fond of her and always searched for her in every room he thought she would be in. But he cherished and liked her too much to put her in his mother’s line of fire. If his mother were already threatening Ernest, then she would know no boundaries when it came to threatening Miss Gundry.

“How about we call upon refreshments?” Graham suggested. “It seems your day has taken a toll on you.”

“That is a good idea,” Ernest muttered, but his mind was still on Miss Gundry and how he might protect her from his mother’s vicious gossip.

Chapter 12

“Florence, you must study,” Claire stressed, sighing when Florence only crossed her arms over her chest and sneered at her. The history book in front of them lay unopened.

“Perhaps I will,” she said. “Then again, I have studied recently. I have read a very impressive book on maintaining the privacy of others. Perhaps you might benefit from it, Miss Gundry.”

Ever since the week before, when she had caught Claire sneaking a glance at her letter, the quiet girl had become somewhat outspoken and more sarcastic, and she had refused to cooperate in their lessons.

Claire was getting anxious about it, unsure how to resolve the issue. If Lady Florence showed no progress continuously, then Claire herself would come into question, and she desperately wanted to protect Florence’s secret without lying to cover herself.

“Florence, please,” she muttered. “I will have no more of this nonsense. You are about to enter society. This is no time for immature games.”

“No, it is not. Because apparently, society will teach me how to snoop around other people’s belongings.”

“Lady Florence.” Claire’s voice was sharper now, and the young girl stood up straighter. But the truth was she had hit close to home, for her own father had done that to her belongings, finding anything of value, and Lady Florence did not know

Claire had been in the same society she was preparing for. She needed to pretend she was speaking from a governess's point of view. "Your lessons must continue. Now."

The girl blinked at her as if playing foolish. "I shall not."

And then Claire thought of something rather clever. She knew Lady Florence had a penchant for historic buildings, and she had met this Lord Victor at the assembly hall, which Claire knew from her own love of history, was opened several decades ago. It would be a perfect segue into getting Lady Florence to talk to her again.

Claire looked askance at Lady Florence. "How about we study somewhere else today?"

The question was enough to pique Lady Florence's interest, and within the hour, the two of them were ready to leave for town and had their carriage take them to the centre of Bath. For there was the vastly impressive sight of the Roman baths, and that was exactly where Claire intended to conduct her history lesson that day.

Lady Florence's eyes flicked over the ancient building with disinterest as they exited their carriage. She let out a great sigh as Claire led them into the main area where the bath itself was, overlooked by balconies above and old stone platforms, with stairs descending into the water.

"I am bored, Miss Gundry," Lady Florence said in a flat tone, attracting the stares of some men walking by. They glanced at the young woman, likely thinking her another spoiled debutante-to-be, unappreciative of the beauty of history.

"Then we shall participate in something," Claire said cheerfully. "Look, there is a guided tour. How about that? You can hear—"

“I do not wish to.”

Claire stiffened before she forced a smile. “Very well.”

She looked around herself at the beauty of the scene in front of her, attempting to imagine the Romans in here, readying themselves for their baths.

“It is a strange notion to think of the users of this bath not having their own baths in their homes,” Claire said, attempting yet again to get Lady Florence to talk to her. But she still eyed Claire with discontent, still stubbornly awkward around her, as though they were strangers forced to be reluctant friends.

“We have our own baths now,” Claire muttered. “I wonder what advancements we are yet to discover. Perhaps to the Romans, personal baths were a strange notion.”

“Hmm,” Lady Florence said, not listening. The girl from even just two weeks ago would have been overjoyed at these sights; Claire was sure of it. She would have discussed the advancements, would have made her own guesses and asked what families attended the baths and how it worked. She would have shown an interest.

But the angry Lady Florence Claire guarded now was hurt and stubborn, and Claire knew she could not continue ignorantly. She’d had quite enough of the stubborn tantrums. Her employment was at risk, and—well, she missed the bubbly, quietly intelligent girl.

“Come with me,” Claire said insistently. She walked over to a bench that was tucked further back from the pool, relatively sheltered by the floor above them. Expecting Lady Florence to be stubborn about that, too, Claire was happily surprised when her young charge did actually follow her and sat alongside on the bench.

“What is it?”

“I must explain to you my concerns,” Claire said. “About your ... letter. And before you speak over me once again, I know that you are angry, but you shall listen to me. I am your governess, and you are to be tutored by me. Well, here is my lesson today, and it is not on the Roman baths or French or the pianoforte. It is in men, Lady Florence.”

Lady Florence looked taken aback at her speech, and it was perhaps that surprise that finally got Lady Florence’s attention. It was incredibly hard-won, but she had it.

Claire’s expression schooled into something serious. “Lady Florence, you must listen good and carefully now. You are indeed approaching your debutante. Lord Bannerdown would not tell you this, for he is likely unaware, as are many men. And Lady Katherine ... well, I believe she is of the mind that any male attention is good, but that is not always the case.”

She sighed and continued, “When I was younger—around seven years ago—I met a man and was positively taken by him. We danced together at my very first ba—” She paused, trying to reframe her experience as a late debutante. “We danced together when I was attending a dinner party.”

Lady Florence frowned.

“Not unlike the one Lady Katherine hosted,” Claire said, hoping Lady Florence would fill in gaps she couldn’t bear to fill with more lies. So, she gave veiled truths instead. Lady Florence nodded slowly. “And he was dashing, scholarly. He enjoyed culture, much like me. We bonded over a love of arts and history, and we corresponded with lengthy letters where we quoted plays to one another. It was very romantic and lovely. However, I sometimes would receive his letters every day for a week, and other days, he would leave me without for two weeks. His interest was very ... inconsistent, and it wounded me terribly. I ached to hear from him; I would not eat nor sleep well during the weeks he left me waiting, and my mood would be

elated when I did finally receive word.”

“He was busy?” Lady Florence asked, finally engaging with Claire.

Claire shook her head. “No. I truly believe he was playing a game where he expressed interest in me for his own gain in one moment, only to almost neglect what we had built the next.”

“Were you courting?”

Claire nodded. She and Lord Simon, him only one year her senior, even when she had entered society quite late at the age of twenty, had been positively in love ... Or so she had thought. Looking back, she realized her foolishness and his very unpredictable interest that had altered her moods from day to day. She had spent her days hoping that that day would be one that he thought of her and took an interest in her.

“He played with my emotions, Lady Florence,” she said gently. Lord Tuberville was quite skilled at the games, she thought. Only to leave me behind completely the moment ... the moment that ...

Her chest ached, and her lip trembled. She cut off her own thoughts of her father and his actions that had pushed her into the life of a governess, forced to hide.

“I know you do not wish to listen to me,” Claire said, taking her young charge’s hand. “And I know you think that the man you correspond with is your moon and stars, lighting up your dark nights, but I wish to warn you. More often than not, young men in society will play with young women. They very often receive no consequences for frivolous, careless actions, and not every man has honour as they should. They can ruin a lady with no thought for the woman’s future. They can dally and play as they please and hush away their shadowed secrets. We are not so

fortunate.” She gave a small smile. “They can use young women like yourself for their own satisfaction. They can play with hearts and leave you wanting more because they can. And they know that we wait for them.”

“That is your belief, Miss Gundry.” Lady Florence’s voice was softer than the snarky version it had been, but it was still stubbornly toned. “And your experience. Lord Victor is very different. He loves me, Miss Gundry, and would not wish to hurt me.”

I thought the same years ago, Claire thought mournfully.

“All I ask is that you think of it and you do as you wish, but keep my warning in mind,” Claire told her, squeezing her hand. “I do not wish to see you hurt.”

Lady Florence’s eyes held that faraway sparkle as she sighed dreamily. “Lord Victor and I are like Romeo and Juliet.” She faced Claire. “I yearn for him as Juliet yearns. I wait for his letters as Juliet awaited on her balcony, night after night, calling for her Romeo. And every night, I believe that he shall return to me, and we shall make our future together.”

Claire withered beneath the proclamation. “Lady Florence, I shall remind you that the play ends in tragedy. They both die at the end.”

“And it is romantic, is it not?” Lady Florence sighed, giggling. She clasped her hands to her chest, standing up. “We shall have the greatest love of the season! You shall see, Miss Gundry.”

Claire hoped that she and Lady Florence came to a tentative agreement following their visit to the baths, but she knew it was mostly her hope that wanted it. Lady Florence would have her own daydream that she perhaps needed.

Claire didn't want to be so cynical, but Florence had been through enough without adding heartbreak to the mix of her grief. But it was because of her grief that Lady Florence likely needed the light that this man provided in his letters. In a world that had made Lady Florence lonely and orphaned, forced only to call her governess and distant cousin her only companions, the letters would have made her feel wanted and bright again.

And Claire could only hope the man who wrote to her did not prey on that.

A footman entered the music room where Lady Florence had agreed to keep practicing the pianoforte if only to play a tune from the play of Romeo and Juliet, as Lord Bannerdown had procured the sheet music for her to try out.

"Excuse me, Miss Gundry, but Lady Katherine is calling upon you," he said. Claire's chest immediately tightened. She forced herself not to look at Lady Florence, not to question if she had said anything. Had she understood more about the full story than Claire let on? Had she somehow uncovered her secret?

Claire's heart thudded when she thought of her rifled-through desk and her belongings in disarray.

Surely that had not been Lady Florence, Claire told herself. She would not do such a thing. But she had been so hurt over Claire doing that very same thing to her. With one last glance at her young charge, who seemed confused herself, Claire left the music room and followed the footman to Lady Katherine's bedroom.

Little Harkwell's bright décor helped calm her as she walked up staircases and down hallways until the moment she heard the woman's voice. It drifted from the open doorway up ahead, and Claire's heart rose when she heard Winnie's voice as well.

"Yes, Lady Katherine," Winnie answered to something Claire had not heard.

“And make sure—”

She was interrupted by the knock of the footman to announce Claire’s arrival. Claire watched as the older woman paused, flicking her gaze to the doorway with disinterest until she saw her standing there.

“Ah. Miss Gundry. You came much slower than I anticipated.”

Her heart thudded harder. “Apologies, My Lady. I came as soon as I was alerted.”

“Then next time, do not dawdle.”

Behind Lady Katherine, Winnie’s eyes rolled. Claire gave her a small smile before she lifted her chin.

“What can I do for you, Lady Katherine?”

“I wish for an update on Lady Florence’s progress. The dolt follows you around and attends silly plays, but I wish to know how she is truly doing. Can she hold a conversation in French yet? Is she proficient with an instrument to my satisfaction?”

It was not the questions Claire expected, so she branched but schooled herself properly. “I ... Yes, Lady Katherine. Just today, Lady Florence has been playing a score from Romeo—”

“That is foolishness,” Lady Katherine interrupted sharply. “I want her playing scores that her future husband will not laugh at her for knowing by heart.”

“Lady Katherine?” she asked, confused. “I do not understand.”

“I want her to play the great classical tunes. I would like her to be impressive. Do not

indulge her whims.”

“It is part of her education and also her passion, My Lady.”

“Do you contest my desires for my own niece?”

“Not at all,” Claire whispered. “Forgive me.”

“Hmm.” As Winnie styled the lady’s hair back from her face, letting some curls hang down around her shoulders, Claire hovered, waiting for her next question. “By the week’s end, have her know, from memory, a Mozart piece.”

“By the week’s end?” Claire gasped.

Lady Katherine’s glare was pure ice. “By the week’s end, Miss Gundry.”

“Yes, Lady Katherine,” she murmured, her jaw tightening as she fought not to speak back. Any risk to her employment was detrimental. Lady Florence might be upset with her and argue, but Lady Katherine would have her right out the door within seconds.

Silence settled in the room, the only sound being Winnie’s hands tending to Lady Katherine’s hair and the shift of the length of curls against the woman’s robe. Outside, horses whinnied as they were walked and tended to, and voices of servants drifted from other hallways. But the silence in the room itself was stifling.

“Miss Gundry, did Lord Bannerdown ever divulge his opinion of Lady Samantha to you?” Lady Katherine suddenly asked, causing Claire’s temper to rise once again. She swallowed it right back down.

“I ...No, Your Ladyship.”

“You stutter,” she noted. “I assume he has told you something.”

“I am merely surprised by your question, Lady Katherine.”

Once again, that contemplative “Hmm” came as a response as Lady Katherine met her own reflection in her vanity. “Winnie, do not tug on my hair. Your hands are as rough as a winter’s storm wind.” To Claire, she said, “I would think Lord Bannerdown has confided in you.”

The implication of their closeness and her disapproval of it was clear. Claire swallowed.

“I have no idea of his opinion, Lady Katherine,” she lied.

Lady Samantha is lovely both in looks and person, as the viscount always said, she recalled him saying, sharing the thought of the girl’s former betrothed. Claire was glad Lady Katherine did not look directly at her, for she was sure that her lies would have been written across her face.

“I see.” Lady Katherine nodded. She stood up from her vanity and rounded on Claire. “Winnie, leave us.”

As the lady’s maid ran out, she spared a glance at Claire, who had to pretend not to see her and kept her focus on Lady Katherine, but as Winnie passed, Claire let her hand brush the maid’s in a silent show of solidarity.

But then the door was closed, and Lady Katherine was getting closer, and Claire forced herself not to be insulting to the woman and back up a step.

“Miss Gundry, you are my niece’s governess, and it seems you need to be reminded of what your role entails.” Her voice was all-knowing and condescending, sharp and

hurtful. “Your employment requires you to attend Lady Florence. To tutor her, to guide her, to be there for her no matter what. You must tend to her. Your employment does not require you to talk with Lord Bannerdown, or dine with him, nor spend evenings at the playhouse as if you were courting.” Her lip curled at the thought. “It is improper. You are not a woman of the Ton. Are you, Miss Gundry?”

The question was supposed to be patronizing, reminding Claire of her place, but it held an undertone to it. It held ... knowledge. Or was that Claire’s own guilt talking?

“If you are to spend all your time with Lord Bannerdown, it is no wonder that Lady Florence’s progress is lacking. I do expect the Mozart recital by the week’s end, Miss Gundry, so you may prove to me that you do value your position here. You shall not bring shame on my son, my house, nor the Bannerdown name.”

Her head lifted so she could glare at Claire down the length of her nose. “After all, you are fortunate to be employed by me, are you not? It would be a shame if you were to be left destitute ...” Her mouth pulled into a cruel smile. “Again.” She feigned confusion. “Tell me, what would you do this time to begin a new life? Will you forever run because you do not know how to be in a role properly, Miss Gundry?”

Claire gasped. She knows.

“You ...” She whispered. “You went through my belongings.”

“I do not know what you mean,” Lady Katherine sniffed. “And I shall not be the victim of accusation. Count your blessings, Governess, for you are on very thin ground. One step out of line, and you shall be out on the snow-covered streets in a moment, and the winter in Bath is not a kind one, Miss Gundry.”

Claire bowed her head, nodding.

“However, I can be persuaded to forget about anything I may not have read.”

Oh, she is a devious snake! Claire thought.

“As you said, Lady Katherine, you do not know what you have read, so why should there be any persuasion necessary?”

Her backchat was a mistake, and Claire bit her tongue too late as anger flooded Lady Katherine’s features. Her mouth twisted, and her eyes turned hard and cruel as she walked closer.

“Listen to me, Miss Gundry,” she hissed. “I am playing a very fortunate game for my son, and he does not seem to realize the good that I am doing for him. Seeing as you and Lord Bannerdown are ever so close, you shall assist me. In return, I shall assist you by keeping your secrets and not sending you out onto the streets. Heaven forbid, I should have already done that. But I shall not, for you can prove your use.”

“I shall prove it with Lady Florence’s tutoring.” Claire nodded eagerly, feigning innocence about what exactly the bribe was.

“I am not talking about that foolhardy, insolent child,” she snapped. “You are close to Lord Bannerdown. I have seen you together, and while it displeases me to see such wrongness, especially with a lady of your standing—” She paused, waiting for Claire to correct her that she had once been a lady of the ton, similar to Lady Katherine herself, but Claire remained stubborn in her resolution. “—I can make use of this connection. You will convince his lordship that Lady Samantha is an excellent match for him. You will convince him that he should honour his late friend and marry Lady Samantha.”

Claire inhaled deeply, her chest aching as she considered the threat. Her heart pounded as her thoughts began to go into a tailspin of panic.

“Or I shall reveal your secrets to both Lord Bannerdown and the rest of the Ton, Lady Claire Garner.”

A sinking feeling dropped in Claire’s stomach, and she gasped. The room faded around her, her heartbeat pounding in her ears. Lady Claire Garner. All she could see was the woman’s cruel smile, knowing she had won.

Before Claire could answer, Lady Katherine flicked her hand at her. “You are dismissed.”

Chapter 13

The days passed, work at the hospital was mounting, and Ernest found himself struggling to keep on top of everything.

He worked late hours, barely spoke with his fellow medics, and had completely neglected to finish his review of Graham's plans for the Archibald Wing. There was some tension between Lady Florence and Miss Gundry—with neither of them explaining what had happened—and his mother's anger and control and then Lady Samantha's visit. On top of that, Miss Gundry had kept her distance from him ever since he had enquired about advice with Lady Samantha. Ernest felt pulled from all angles and as though he was doing wrong with all those angles.

He groaned, standing up from his desk in his office at the hospital and putting on his coat.

Outside, night had fallen, a black, inky sky framing the white snowy ground. He treaded carefully, fighting fatigue and the needs of his own body. When had he last had a bite to eat? He'd had surgery scheduled to be performed early that morning and had been gone before breakfast, and he did not recall lunch or dinner.

I need to prepare myself properly, he thought, hurrying to his carriage. The thought of returning to Little Harkwell after an exhausting day was both a relieving comfort and dreadful. Lately, it felt as though his mother was waiting around every corner. He could not add her meddling and arguments to his plate as well.

Thumping his head against the carriage window, Ernest watched thoughtlessly out at

the late winter night, letting his mind go blank.

Back in the house, he ventured immediately to his study.

I shall just file these papers away and then retire, he told himself, sitting down in his chair at his desk, opening the top drawers to find the order the papers needed to go in. But as soon as he sat down, he felt his body sagging, and he sighed in relief.

His eyes drooped closed, unable to fight the allure of sleep, and before he knew it, he was slumped over his desk, asleep.

Ernest was awoken sometime later—as soon as his eyes flew open, he noticed the clock read just after midnight—and candlelight burned his tired eyes. He groaned, sitting up, looking for the gentle touch of hands on his shoulders.

Miss Gundry stood over his desk, holding a candle that trembled in her grip.

“Lord Bannerdown,” she said, her voice hushed but panicked. “I am sorry to wake you but there is a problem.”

He drew himself up at once, partially embarrassed at being caught falling asleep at his desk. “What is the matter?”

Why have you been ignoring me?

Her eyes were wide as she fumbled for words. Her hair, plaited down her back, was loosened and wild, as if she had been sleeping as well but woke frantically.

“It is Lady Florence,” she whispered, her voice rising. “She has snuck out, Lord Bannerdown.”

“What?” he called, but Miss Gundry waved her free hand, panicked. Ernest’s heart pounded, and he swore he could taste his own pulse. It was dark outside! What was his cousin thinking? “Has she done anything of this sort before?” He should have known that, but big houses could keep big secrets.

Miss Gundry shook her head. “Never, My Lord.”

“Then we must find her at once. I shall call—”

“Please!” she called, an immediate cry to stop him. “Do not alert the staff. For Lady Florence’s sake. I know that she will have her reasons, but I do not wish to alarm the others. I only want to bring her home safely, which is why I have come straight to you. I recalled a book that I wanted her to read at breakfast with me, for we have needed to double our tutoring efforts—”

“Miss Gundry,” Ernest said pleadingly. “We must make haste.”

“Of course,” she whispered, her panic making her ramble. The two of them hurried from the study. Miss Gundry lifted her nightgown skirts that were just visible beneath a heavy winter’s cloak.

“You must tell me what you know,” he demanded as they made for a back exit from the house, thinking of heading to the stables. But he quickly decided against that. Lady Florence was not a fan of horses, and he could not envision her going far enough to need to use one, especially unattended, at night, in the snow. He could only hope she had not gone far on foot. “For I assume this might have something to do with why I have noticed tension between you two.”

The candlelight’s flame shook in her hands as she nodded. “I ... I do not wish to alert the staff because I suspect Lady Florence has snuck out to meet a young man.”

That sentence alone was almost enough for Ernest to stop in his tracks. But he pushed on and quietly processed what that could mean.

“Please do not tell me she has ruined herself,” he said to Miss Gundry. It was the last thing he needed to deal with: a scandal for a ruined ward. The Ton would never accept her, would shun her, as they had done him and his mother. The difference would be that Lady Florence’s prospects would dwindle, and it would be up to Ernest to rectify everything. He thought of Lady Samantha and her risk of being wed to an older gentleman. He could not bear the thought of it happening to his cousin, too, when all her other options had dried up.

“I do not think so,” Miss Gundry told him as they broke through the door and entered the snowy blanket outside that covered the field. “I believe she thinks herself in love, a romantic sort, and not thinking of ... anything else.” He saw her visibly cringe at the implication, and he, too, swallowed, nodding sharply. However, if word got out, the people of the Ton would easily think of anything they pleased, whether it was true or not.

“Lord Bannerdown, I found letters in Lady Florence’s room during Lady Samantha’s stay. They were exchanged between herself and a gentleman whom she met last year in the assembly rooms in Bath. Ever since, she has been upset with me. I have tried to console her, advise her, but also to warn her of how young men can be.” She paused. “I believe this act of rebellion might be her proving to me that I am wrong. Or that she thinks I am wrong. The letters showed her correspondence with a certain young man, and she expressed her love for him. She ... She thinks of them as Romeo and Juliet, which is why I believe she has snuck out, just as they both did, defying orders and society’s rules.”

Ernest drew back, pausing in the bitter cold night. It was dark outside, and he could only hope Miss Gundry’s candlelight persisted against the wintery chill. He was glad to see her at least wrapped up in a cloak. But upset pierced through him.

“I am ... surprised, Miss Gundry, that you did not come right to me with this knowledge. I have confided in you a lot regarding my own concerns for both Lady Florence and other things. If you had concerns about her well-being or actions, I should have been alerted.”

“Lord Bannerdown, I was merely trying to protect the young, grieving girl I am to guide. I wished to counsel her while keeping her confidence. While I disapprove as much as you, I could not run right to you with this knowledge.”

“And why not?” he demanded.

Something flickered over her face, something she held back, and he wished to press her, but he watched as she closed up again. It was something she did often, as though she came close to one answer but chose a different one at the last moment possible.

“I—she is grieving, and you are a man. It did not seem right, as part of my counsel was to warn her about men. I did not wish to offend.” The words seemed heavy from her mouth, as though it was not as honest as she thought it was.

Ernest hesitated. But he could not answer more, for he saw footprints in the snow and pointed them out.

“Look—there,” he told her. “We should follow her tracks.”

“Part of me wishes to see Lady Florence home safe, but another part despises that I am taking such a moment from her, even if we are correct in doing so.”

“This is my cousin’s reputation, Miss Gundry!” Ernest chided, raising his voice, hard with exhaustion, worry, and upset at being lied to. Or perhaps it wasn’t lied to, but Miss Gundry had kept pivotal knowledge from him about his own ward. He felt suddenly blindsided.

“I believe in my decision, Lord Bannerdown,” Miss Gundry admitted, her voice firm. “I can only apologize that I let it come between us.”

“You have kept your distance lately,” he murmured. And then he snapped back into action, alarmed to let himself be so distracted. “Come, we must follow this trail. We shall find my cousin before she does something utterly insane.”

He paused, meeting Miss Gundry’s gaze by the candlelight. “I do hope you counselled her well, Miss Gundry. I do hope you warned her against what will happen to her prospects if she thinks to sully herself.”

The governess swallowed and nodded. “I hope I did enough.”

Despite his anger at her secrecy, Ernest could not help himself looking out for Claire as they traversed through the snow, tracking the small footprints that showed, at least, Florence was not on horseback. It meant they had a better chance of finding her. He kept glancing between the tracks and Claire. The darkness pressed around them. An owl hooted in the distance, and the snap of twigs in the night put him on edge, wanting to protect her.

Claire was absolute in her silence, even if she did keep stumbling in the snow, and immediately reached out for him as if not aware she was doing it. The snow came down harder, and although Ernest could barely see a foot ahead of him, what he could see worried him.

The tracks they followed were starting to be covered by more snow.

“Where shall we go now?” Claire asked, her voice tight with exasperation. “We’re losing the tracks!”

Under his breath, Ernest grumbled, “Perhaps if you had not wasted so much time

starting an argument, then we would have been faster. Or perhaps if you had come to me sooner with your concerns, Florence would have never run in the first place.”

“Perhaps if you had not been so busy with Lady Samantha, you would have noticed her emotional distress,” Claire snapped. Ernest stopped. Her eyes were wide as if she feared her outburst, but her mouth was tight, clinging to that stubborn nature he had come to like.

“We shall go right,” he sighed. “She enjoys a particular part of the grounds that leads out by a canal. If we’re lucky, she may not have gone that far.” They trudged onwards, searching for the sign of more tracks or Florence herself. A noise, a sniffle from the cold, the swish of a cloak. Just anything to know Florence was nearby.

“Miss Gundry, you are her governess,” he said tightly. “It is your job to guide her, to tutor her, to alert her guardian of anything amiss. You failed in that duty. You have grown lax, and I beg to ask what has caused this.”

“I have grown lax?” she repeated. “Lord Bannerdown, forgive me, but I believe it is you who has. You have been an avoidant guardian, and she has felt that loss. You have worked tirelessly at the hospital, and I understand you have had responsibilities there, but you have them to Lady Florence as well. She has felt abandoned by you, and while you took her to play, and dined with us, you did not always ask her how her day was. You did not always speak with her, and she lacks genuine company. Yes, I am her governess, and I have a duty of care to her, but you are her legal guardian. You agreed to take on that mantle.”

Ernest whirled on her. “Do not accuse me, Miss Gundry. I have been trying to put out many fires, so to speak. The romantic worries of a six- and ten-year-old have been the least of my concerns.”

“And now?” she demanded. “Now, will you finally see your cousin? She grieves

deeply, My Lord, and she seeks any attachment she can. That is why she is being rebellious and sneaking out in such a way. She needs you.”

Before Ernest could say anything, the winter wind finally caught up to their candlelight and extinguished it. Darkness sank around them, a heavy blanket that would not be removed. Ernest checked his pockets in a futile effort for matches. Of course he would not have any. But he noticed Claire did the same.

In her cloak pocket, she had some. Steadily, she lit the candle, and Ernest was caught by the way the flame heightened the colour of her eyes, setting them burnished.

Then he blinked, and her anger was back as she pocketed the matches. “I think we ought to go left. Her lover might not know the canal route, but if I am correct, he will know the property boundaries. Left leads right to the far gate, furthest from the house. If she desires secrecy without venturing too far, I think that is where she will go.”

“You presume to know my cousin better than me?”

“I know that I spend time with her and listen to her,” Claire answered sharply. “I believe I know what would drive a young girl’s actions in such a situation.”

“And if we are wrong?”

Her answering silence confirmed enough. They could be too late, and he would have a bigger task of presenting Florence to Society than he realized.

But the sound of a horse cut through the night, coming from the left side of the estate, and Ernest’s head whipped around to the sound.

“There’s a rider.” Through the distance, not too far off, a lantern became more visible through the darkness, highlighting the form of a girl in a cloak who stood before the

horse.

Florence.

“Make haste!” he called to Claire, and they both tore off in the direction of the lantern and his cousin, who waited for her lover.

Chapter 14

Claire was still reeling from everything Lord Bannerdown had told her and accused her of, but all those thoughts flew from her mind the moment they spotted Lady Florence, hooded and cloaked, staring at the lantern attached to a horse as her rider got closer and closer.

“Lady Florence!” Ernest shouted, and the rider immediately stopped. Florence whirled around to face them, her feet sinking into the snow. The moonlight lit her up, and Claire saw the devastation on her face at being caught. Her mouth parted. She looked back at her lover, cloaked by darkness, and then at them before bursting into tears.

“Go!” she shouted. “Leave me!”

But Claire and Ernest only sped up their approach.

As they reached her, the rider dismounted, his face a picture of shock. He had not seen them approach. He said nothing, and with Ernest holding the candle, Claire could barely see his face. But this was Victor, surely. Lady Florence’s lover, through letters, coming to meet her at midnight beneath the cover of night.

It was a coward’s move.

“Who are you?” Ernest demanded, moving the candle closer, but the rider was clever, dodging the light. All Claire could see was a scar across his lip. She filed the knowledge away, trying to see beyond the shadows to find more of his face. “Who

are you, and what are you doing with Lady Florence?"

"Cousin, please!" Lady Florence cried, going to him. "Please do not shout at him."

But Ernest paid her no mind and strode towards the rider. The young man shied away, clambering back onto his horse.

"You will not say anything to her?" Claire called out. "You shall leave her out here in the snow rather than admit your identity and be honourable?"

"Miss Gundry, please do not start such a thing," Lady Florence sobbed. "He means no harm. I only wished—"

"If you are on my estate, you will show your face," Lord Bannerdown warned. But the young man was already back on his horse.

"Lady Florence, I am sorry," he said, his voice low and cracking as if nervous from being caught.

"Do not leave me!" she cried. "Please—you promised."

But her pleas fell on unhearing ears as Victor urged his horse on. He vanished into the darkness, sparing no backward glance for the young woman he left behind, crying for him. Lady Florence let out a hard sob before she sank to her knees in the snow, her nightgown billowing around her.

Ernest glanced down at her, visibly alarmed. "Are you ill, Lady Florence? If not, I suggest you get to your feet, and you shall come back with me before my mother hears any of this commotion."

At the threat of Lady Katherine, Lady Florence allowed Claire to help her to her feet.

She shivered, but when Claire tried to hold onto her, to wrap some warmth into her, she pulled away, ignoring her. Only the sounds of Lady Florence's sobs filled the air as they began the slow, hard walk back to the manor.

At least this time, they had light to guide them.

The snow sank deeply into Claire's bones, and she ached, that stinging bite from the winter snow. She wished for fire. She wished for her bed, and she yearned for a long, deep sleep. But there was a heaviness in the air, words unspoken, anger-fuelled, and she knew the night was far from over despite the late hour.

Still, the anger made Ernest's face passionate, and she could not stop glancing in his direction, no matter how much she disliked his accusations.

"You shall wait for me in here," Ernest instructed Lady Florence, opening the door to the drawing room. "I will send for tea."

"Allow me to, Lord Bannerdown," Claire said.

He shook his head firmly. "No, Miss Gundry. You have made it clear enough that I have not done enough to take care of my ward. So, I shall do this."

Guilt pierced her as she lifted her chin, nodding.

"Find a blanket for Lady Florence," he told her. Then he paused. "And yourself. I do not want either of you catching a chill because of my cousin's foolish actions."

"It was not foolish," Lady Florence sniffed. Her eyes were hard with her own anger, but it was her upset that won over. "I am in love, Lord Bannerdown."

He gave her a scathing look. “Wait here, and do not speak to me of more nonsense.”

As he disappeared, Claire hunted for some blankets, which were kept in a chest beneath the window during the winter.

Lady Florence’s whisper came moments after she draped a blanket around her shoulders. “Do you think he is truly very angry with me?”

Claire hesitated before nodding. “Yes, but it is only from his concern for you.”

“If he denies my love, then how am I to explain my actions?”

“We shall wait for him to return.” It was all Claire felt able to say. Lady Florence pulled away from her when Claire tried to put a comforting hand over hers. The young girl’s eyes went to the window as if still looking for her lover. As if she truly did not want to accept that he may have given up and left for good.

Claire thought that after tonight, she would be surprised if Victor did not return or write to Lady Florence again. She could only hope the young man was stronger than that and proved his affections more honourably.

Lord Bannerdown returned, a maid trailing behind him with tea. She set it down on the table before them. Silence shrouded the three of them.

“Firstly,” Lord Bannerdown said, “if it can be helped, Lady Katherine shall not know of this.” His eyes angrily went to Claire herself and then Lady Florence. They both nodded. Ernest tried to sit down but shook his head, then remained on his feet.

“I am—I am simply disappointed with you, Lady Florence! It has been a long, hard, and tiring day, and I did not need to handle something like this as well. Do you have any idea what you almost did?”

“Lord Bannerdown,” Claire tried to speak, but he held up a hand to her.

“Do not try to vouch for her, Miss Gundry. I am quite capable of handling this situation alone.” He turned back to Lady Florence. “You have shown so much recklessness with your behaviour, cousin. So much carelessness for your future prospects and my reputation. What do you think people would say if they knew I had young men sneaking onto my grounds to meet you deep in the night?” He paced angrily, his rage falling off him in waves.

“Lord Bannerdown, I know Lady Florence’s actions were indefensible—”

“Exactly,” he shouted. “It was foolish and irresponsible. Who is he, Florence? I demand to know who he is. This is my estate, and I will know who enters it.”

“It is only your estate when you wish it!” Lady Florence burst out. “You only care when it benefits you! Otherwise, you are so busy all the time with the hospital, but you do not care for Bannerdown or your title. Not the way my papa or grandfather did. You did not want me, Lord Bannerdown! I know you see me only as someone to be stuck with.”

“Lady Florence, do not attempt to know my thoughts.”

“He wants me,” she insisted. “My family left, fallen to consumption. Miss Gundry is cross with me. You do not want me. Lady Katherine is cruel and calls me awful things. But he ... my rider ... he wants me. He values me. My words, my thoughts.”

Lord Bannerdown’s glare set onto her. “You are still young and do not know a man’s true actions, Lady Florence. There is one thing a young man is after with a vulnerable young woman such as yourself.”

“Cousin!” Florence cried, her cheeks flushing pink as a new wave of tears slipped

down her face. “Do not sully what we have!”

“Tell me who he is, cousin.”

“No,” she sniffed.

“Lady Florence,” Claire began. “It is beneficial for everyone to know who your rider was tonight. Perhaps Lord Bannerdown can even arrange to meet with him officially and ask him of his intentions.”

Ernest cut a scowl at her, but she knew she needed to get Lady Florence back on their side if she was to divulge anything to them. Miserable, she watched the young girl shrink further and further into herself.

“I will tell you nothing,” she mumbled. “You do not need to know as it is none of your business. Nothing is. You have made that clear, cousin.”

“Lady Florence, returning from war and coming into this inheritance has been a great problem for me,” he seethed. “I am sorry I could not always find a way to speak properly with you, but I am doing—and have done—my best for you. I cannot be your father, nor your grandfather—”

“And I am not asking you to be, but you are still my family!” she cried.

He ignored that. Claire knew that he already felt so much guilt over his lacking ability to converse with her in such ways. His face hard, he rounded on Lady Florence.

“I am doing my duty now,” he told her sternly.

“Now? When it means you deprive me of any happiness I might even hope to have. I shall not tell you his name, Lord Bannerdown.”

“Regardless, I will find out,” he warned her. “You can either tell me it yourself, or I shall enquire alone, and who knows what other stories I may hear? If your rider attempts to meet with you beneath the cover of night, it is quite clear to tell his character. What else might I discover, Lady Florence?”

Her face was tense with tears she held back. She only shook her head.

“Then retire to your room,” Lord Bannerdown dismissed. “If you shall not tell me anything of use, then I will not stand and listen to your proclamations of love. Love does not sneak through the night. Love is honourable and wishes to be known.”

Claire watched as he spoke, and something eased in her chest, dissipating some of her earlier frustration. Love wishes to be known.

Her own hope rose, only to be quickly ignored when Lady Florence fled the room in a fit of tears.

“I hate you!” she cried. “And I wish my father was alive so I did not have to endure one more ignorant day with you!”

The door slammed shut behind her, leaving Claire alone with Ernest, who sighed and collapsed into an armchair. The tea on the table grew cold, untouched, yet Claire poured them both a cup.

“You must be frozen,” he said, glancing at her.

“I have found the cold has been good to cool down the heat of my anger,” she answered, smiling weakly.

“I wish it did for me. Was I too harsh on her?”

Claire hesitated. "There were things you said that were good for her to hear. I tried to talk to her several times myself, but she is very stubbornly independent and thinks she can do this alone."

"She is resolute, just like her father," he muttered. Ernest rubbed his fingers over his forehead and groaned. The mixture of anger and exhaustion on his face as he tipped his head back had Claire blushing and averting her gaze.

"I could not help noticing a feature on the young man's face," she commented lightly. "He had a scar marking his lip. As if he had taken a knife wound."

"Oh, truly?"

"Indeed," she answered. "It could be helpful to identify him."

"I will ask around," he said. "I must know who my cousin is risking herself for. I cannot let it continue unless I know his intentions."

"If it helps, I do not think he is the type of man to elope with her. From what Florence told me, he is very ... singularly minded. I believe he asked to meet her for a kiss and nothing more."

At that, some tension released in Ernest's shoulders, and after some quiet moments, he nodded. "I see." He sighed deeply, sipping his tea before wincing and putting it down. It must have grown cold like hers. "Miss Gundry, I am truly sorry for my argument with you in the garden. I was tired, worried, and fired up and wrongfully took it out on you. Instead, I should have thanked you for your help. You guessed she would go left, and she did. I would have had us out there all night and who knows what Lady Florence would have got up to?"

Claire only smiled at him, nodding. Together, they stood to leave, ready to retire for

the night. "I know a young woman's mind, Lord Bannerdown. I know how she acts when she is in love."

"How is that?" He paused at the door, holding it open for her.

"Reckless," Claire said, meeting his gaze. "Risky and not always proper."

Their gazes filled with something unspoken, and Claire blushed at the seriousness on his face. He truly was charming and handsome, and she found her breath catching in her throat. She struggled to admit how attractive his anger had been, even if the harsh words had been aimed at her. He had been passionate in his determination to secure Lady Florence's safety.

"We worked well together tonight, Miss Gundry," he said quietly. "Perhaps next time we shall do it again in rather different circumstances." He glanced behind her. "And warmer tea."

"I would like that." Her voice was whispery as they left the drawing room.

"Good night, Miss Gundry."

"Good night, Lord Bannerdown."

Chapter 15

Conversation wound through the gentlemen's club, accompanied by smoke and good wine. Ernest had spent the entire week agitated and reeling. The last few days had been spent tensely. Lady Florence was refusing to speak to either Ernest or Miss Gundry, and although he had tried to reach out to her in a softer manner than their argument had been, she was giving nothing back.

So, he had taken to the gentlemen's club in Bath, determined to find something.

He had not been there before, but as soon as he'd entered, he could not help picturing his cousin and uncle in there, spending their afternoons discussing prospects and the new Seasons, gossiping in that manner that Ernest found almost as bad as how the women did.

"A man named Victor, you are asking for?" one of the patrons asked him as he sat at a table by the window.

"Yes," Ernest answered. "He has a scar across his mouth."

"If I may ask, My Lord, why are you looking for him?"

"I do not wish to give details," he answered sharply. "Only to seek his presence."

"I do not know of any 'Victor'. If you had a family name, he would be easier to track down."

“Indeed,” Ernest muttered.

All his conversations had gone similarly. Nobody knew of anyone with only the name Victor, and as Ernest had no family name to identify him further, it was hard for anyone to give any leads. He grew more desperate as the afternoon wore on. He went from table-to-table, talking with patrons, asking questions, buying rounds in the hopes that other men might share stories and he’d catch something of use.

He sighed and sat alone once again, awaiting Graham’s return. He had informed his friend of what had happened that night, and he’d immediately offered to help him track down Victor. Ernest spotted him, laughing with a crowd of young men. He always fitted into these scenes so easily. Ernest had a harder time, feeling as though he constantly had one foot in Society and one foot out of it.

He supposed that was true.

How had Matthew, his cousin, and his Uncle George behaved here? Were they well-liked? Did they talk amongst others or keep to themselves? What did they discuss? He suddenly felt as though he had missed out on a lot more than he realized. Clearly, they had been admirable men. Lady Florence made clear the other night that Ernest differed from them.

“Ernest,” Graham said, finally coming back to his side, breaking him out of his doubtful thoughts. “I come bearing good news. That fellow over there, a Mr Worthington, owns his own club in the next town, and he knows everyone and everything. He has heard of a Lord Victor who matches your description. He is a year older than Lady Florence and is the youngest son of the Marquess of Tuberville. His older son, Lord Simon, is the heir to the estate and ten years older than Lord Victor.”

“I do not care for the brother,” Ernest said impatiently. “What more of Lord Victor?”

“You should care for the brother,” Graham insisted. “For he is hosting a salon in a nearby art gallery this very afternoon.”

“Now?” Ernest sprung up. “Well, then, what are we waiting for?”

The two of them headed out of the gentlemen’s club, with Graham calling to a few friendly patrons before they attended the art gallery. They stayed at the back of the exhibition, watching their host, Lord Simon, who presented the salon with patience and confidence.

His hair was dark and curling around his face, his smile bright, and his eyes full of knowledge as he spoke about art. Ernest tried to tamp down his anger once again.

He is not the culprit, he told himself.

But as they approached Simon at the end of the salon, he struggled to keep himself composed.

“Good afternoon,” Lord Simon called out. “I noticed you in the back of the crowd. I hope my display was up to the tastes of the new Lord Bannerdown.”

Ernest raised a brow. “You know of me?”

“Quite,” he answered. “You were the talk of town for the former Lord Bannerdown was quite well-liked. We discussed his heir frequently. And Mr Graham Courtenay, your reputation, of course, precedes you. You have done remarkable things in honour of our fallen men.”

Graham nodded and smiled tightly at Lord Simon. “Thank you for your kind words. We are here on some personal matters, actually. Some rather ... delicate personal matters.”

Ernest stepped forward. “Do you have a younger brother named Lord Victor?”

“I do.” Lord Simon’s brow creased. “Oh, heavens. What has he done now?”

“Now?” Ernest prompted.

“He... He gets himself into trouble sometimes. He is rather free-spirited, you see.”

“Free-spirited enough to compromise a young woman’s reputation?” Ernest asked. “I apologize for the accusation. I do not know for sure if it is your brother whom I caught with my cousin a week ago. But I believe he is the culprit from the glimpses I saw. From his character, do you believe he could be culpable?”

Lord Simon grimaced, nodding. “I will admit my brother is a rather hedonistic fool and is very ... relaxed when it comes to being honourable, especially with young women. If he is chasing your cousin, then unfortunately, she is not the first, nor the only one, I imagine.” He winced. “I apologize for the bluntness, but my brother does have his ways. I have tried to guide him better, but he is rather stubborn.”

“I only wish not to have my cousin’s reputation ruined before she enters Society, for she has not even debuted.”

“Goodness,” Lord Simon muttered. “I apologize for him, Lord Bannerdown. I shall put in a word with my brother, uncover the truth, and write to you. Thank you for bringing his actions to my attention.” He nodded sincerely, and Ernest shook his head.

“Thank you for cooperating,” he said. “And I apologize for approaching you so informally.”

“Do not worry.” His Lordship smiled. “Excuse me, I must be going.” He left, and

Ernest and Graham made to do the same. As they headed outside, Ernest to his carriage and Graham to return to the club, Graham stopped him before he climbed inside.

“Ernest.” Graham paused, cutting a fine figure against the snowy street behind him. “Have you heard more from Lady Samantha? I’m wondering if we should meet with her again soon. Your mother was quite upset about it, was she not? If we can keep her off your trail and see Lady Samantha soon, it would be quite beneficial. I do not want to see your hard work at the hospital distracted by Lady Katherine’s wrath.”

Ernest nodded. “Indeed. That would be quite good, I agree. I shall correspond with her. Unless you wish to?”

“I do not mind reaching out to her.” Graham nodded and stepped back. “Things are moving rather swiftly with the White Wing as well. It seems Lady Samantha’s arrival at Little Harkwell has spurred me somewhat into quicker action. I wish to honour him swiftly.”

“And I know you will,” Ernest said, nodding. “Do let me know what Lady Samantha says. Have a good afternoon, Graham.”

“Have a safe journey home, Ernest.”

As the carriage pulled away, Ernest going home, he could not help wishing for the friendly, joking best friend he’d had before the war changed Graham. And he could not help wondering in what ways the war had changed him too.

He entered Little Harkwell and immediately followed the sound of thumping piano keys.

Lady Florence had declined his invitation to the second theatre outing that week, and he was secretly glad, for he had not known how to act around her. But since their argument, she had lacked dedication to anything at all. She played the pianoforte angrily, her voice hard when he heard Miss Gundry urge her to sing. He knew he would find the governess in the music room.

“Lady Florence, you must perform well,” Miss Gundry said, sounding desperate, as Ernest entered the doorway. He saw the tight lines of Florence’s shoulders as she sat at the instrument, ignoring her governess.

“I do not care,” she answered. “I care only about Victor. He has not written to me in the days since you and Lord Bannerdown chased him off. I shall never speak to anyone ever again.”

Miss Gundry sighed, exasperated. “Perhaps we should pause for some refreshments. Shall I send up for some cakes?”

“Whatever you wish,” Lady Florence said sniffing.

As Miss Gundry turned to leave, Ernest caught her attention, beckoning her over.

“I am sorry to interrupt, Miss Gundry, but it seems Lady Florence might not miss you if you were to sneak to the library with me.”

“Sneak?”

He lowered his voice. “I believe I have found our culprit.”

Her eyes lit up. “Then I believe she will not miss me, no.”

“Please join me.”

Together, they walked to the library, and once there, Ernest glanced down the hallway to check it was clear before he closed the door. He did not like implicating his ward's governess in such a way, but he did not want to be overheard.

"You have found the rider?" Miss Gundry pressed, her face alight with excitement. "Who is he?"

"Mr Courtenay caught a lead about an artist hosting a salon in the art gallery in town. So, we went to have a look around and, well, we found not Victor but his brother. It turns out they are the two sons of the Marquess of Tuberville." He paced, looking at the window, but he thought he heard a sharp intake of breath. "We spoke with Lord Simon, the older brother. Lord Victor is our rider, though. He is a year older than Lady Florence. But Lord Simon seemed very troubled by the news, and I was almost sorry to relay it to him because he indeed confirmed that his brother is rather ... quick-handed with the women. He tries to woo many at a time. Lady Florence is not special to him, though I wish it were otherwise. He has promised to further investigate with his brother on our behalf."

Where he expected some response from Miss Gundry, he got only silence. He frowned, turning back to her. "Miss Gundry? Miss Gundry, you have grown rather pale. Is everything all right?"

"I ... " Her eyes were wide, her face suddenly white as a bedsheet. "I ... I think I may need to sit down, Lord Bannerdown."

Chapter 16

Her breath came short. She was very familiar with Lord Simon Tuberville, the oldest of two sons of the Marquess of Tuberville. But she had not known his younger brother was Lord Victor Tuberville.

The room spun around her as Ernest held her shoulders and eased her into one of the reading chairs in the library. A place she usually found comforting made her feel trapped and confined as the memories of her former life came to haunt her.

How fitting. She had been played by the older brother, and six years later, it was happening to Lady Florence with the younger Tuberville brother. Her chest and neck flushed with warmth, and she swore she saw stars.

Distantly, Ernest's voice reached her, but she could not focus until he was right there in her vision, and she could focus on it properly.

"Miss Gundry? I am right here. Do not fret." His words were awkward but kind, and she clung to them desperately to ground herself. "We shall protect Lady Florence at all costs. The Tubervilles are likely rather important, but I believe I can reason with them if I simply meet them."

Claire managed to nod, but her mind was elsewhere. It floated far away, somewhere far from Little Harkwell, far from Bath, even, and she was in a ballroom, excited for her debut, seeing Lord Simon for the first time. She recalled those kind green eyes that had met hers across the ballroom as if they were fated to meet and knew theirs would be the first dance.

Claire had been swept up.

Ernest's eyes met hers now, reminding her that her old life was buried. She was someone new now. She had long left that life behind her. His face was gentle, open, and she did not know how to respond to his kindness, but she wished to.

Except all that rose to her mind to say was every secret she had held within herself.

Claire could not keep her past a secret from Lord Bannerdown for much longer.

"We shall protect her," Claire whispered, nodding. "We shall because ... because I have the biggest warning of all to share with her." She twisted his fingers in her lap. "And with you, Lord Bannerdown. You were right to be angry with me the other night for protecting Lady Florence's secrets, and I fear you will be angry again at me now, but I must confess my own secrets."

"What secrets do you mean, Miss Gundry?" He paused before taking a moment to pull up a chair next to her. Around them, the library slowly became more open and comfortable again now that her fainting moment had passed. Instead, it was replaced by a fleeting courage that Claire knew she had to grasp with both hands if she was going to survive this conversation.

"I know Lord Simon Tuberville," she admitted. "Or, rather, I did know him."

"I am confused." Ernest frowned. "You mentioned this was your first governess role. Did you perhaps serve in their household?"

"I ... No, Lord Bannerdown. I was courted by him six years ago."

Ernest's eyes widened. He blinked, looking away from her. "I see. I ... How did you meet?"

Claire inhaled shakily. “We met at my debutante ball.”

Ernest gazed at her, confusion pulling his brow together and turning his mouth down. “Miss Gundry, please forgive me, but I am rather confused. You are a governess.”

“Claire Gundry is a governess,” Claire whispered. “But Lady Claire Garner was not. And that is who Lord Simon courted upon my entry into Society. It was a spring ball when cherry blossom trees were grown indoors, and their petals scattered over the ballroom. It felt magical the night I met him. Magical and beautiful. Candlelight softened the room, and the smell of chocolate was in the air. Wine flowed and music played, and I was excited, on the precipice of my future.” She stared past him, her gaze on the window. “And there he was, standing amongst a group of other young men. Lords, barons, earls. They were all there, eagerly awaiting the next prettiest debutante that caught their eye.”

“Miss Gundry ... You mean to tell me you truly are a lady of the Ton?”

“I was,” she confessed. “I was the daughter of the Marquess of Flogsend, Richard Garner, in Bristol. He was reclusive but well-liked. A man who knew where to put his money so I would have a better life. Or so I thought. I had one glorious Season in Society before ... before he passed away.” Her breath hitched. She could barely look at him for fear of losing her nerve. “He wanted to invest in businesses that often failed, and he gambled too highly for comfort. Not only did I need to fend for myself after his death, but I was informed that my father’s debts could have filled the entire upper story of Flogsend House with how steep they were.”

She shook her head, her chest tight with her confession. “I needed to settle his accounts, and with Mother not present in my life, for she left me when I was six years old, I had no option but to sell Flogsend and pass it to another good line. However, I did not consider that due to my father’s gambling habits and seclusion. I did not have any family I knew of that would help me. It took me many years to pay off his debts

and keep some money for myself. It was just enough to get me out of Bristol and into Bath to begin my role here, but that is all I had.”

“And your mother? You say she left you?”

Claire nodded. “She left me unaware that, when I was older, I would be left to shoulder my father’s debts and grieve him. I do not even know if she is aware my father is dead, but I am certainly not going to be the one to tell her.” Claire shook her head resolutely.

“But Lord Simon ... He treated me beautifully. At first. He was attentive. He wished to dance, and he was courteous. He came to meet with my father the following day after my debut and requested to court me. I still remember the earrings I wore for the ball. Red jewels—fake, of course, made only of paste, for my father could not afford real rubies, but I tried to love them all the same—and Lord Simon told me I was unique, for nobody else dared to wear such a bold colour, but I did. He was a dedicated man, which I liked. He was a scholar at the time, a budding genius, so he was well-known and liked among the Ton. He put his family first and talked at length of the title and responsibilities that would be his when his father passed. He presented such a life to me and dazzled me. Yet it was because of those responsibilities that there would be days when he would not answer my letters or call upon me.

“He would leave me to wait for him. My father chaperoned me, of course, but Lord Simon would show up sometimes, and other times, he would not. It was humiliating, but when he did come to call, he lavished me with gifts, spoke sweet words to me, and made sure his disappearance felt insignificant in those moments. But then it would all happen again. When my father passed away, Lord Simon sent me a very curt letter. All he did was apologize rather insincerely but explained briefly he would need to end our courtship. I was devastated. I had just lost my father, only to face the lack of prospects now, for I had turned down other offers. And then my father’s debts piled upon me. It was one thing after another.

“Eventually, I knew I had to leave. My father had ruined our name. My mother had caused a scandal with her disappearance, and I wanted to have nothing more to do with any of it. So, I renounced my title privately, took myself out of Society, and became a governess. I had to rebuild my life—except I was now in charge of it a great deal more.”

As she finished recounting her story, Ernest blinked at her, his mouth working, only for no words to come out. He had prompted her with questions to understand, but now it seemed she had used up his ability to respond.

Claire leaned forward. “Lord Bannerdown, you must forgive me. I did not mean to deceive you at all. Nothing must change after I have told you this. I beg of you for it not to change. I am no longer Claire Garner. I do not wish to be Claire Garner. My former life and attachments to it have all gone, and I am happy to keep it that way. I am Claire Gundry now and wish to forever be that. Please tell me you understand that.”

Ernest’s face changed from shocked confusion into a softer understanding. Slowly, he nodded and sat up straighter in his chair. “I understand, Miss Gundry. I understand why you lied.”

She flinched, waiting to be berated, but he did not.

“I ... I very much understand the desire to lose a name and reinvent oneself. It is not always possible, but you made it so, and I find you admirable for that. You shall stay on with your employment here at Little Harkwell. I believe you need to share your story with Lady Florence, though, Miss Gundry.”

“That was always my plan,” she quickly assured him. “I only did not realize I would confess so soon.”

“I am glad you did.” His eyes met hers, and she found genuine honesty and understanding in them. She had seen his anger at being deceived and had expected it, so she was surprised. Pleasantly so, but surprised, nonetheless.

“All I ask is that you are honest with me in future,” he told her, his voice growing harder. “I am feeling rather in the dark between your true identity and your knowledge of Lady Florence’s dealings. It makes me feel rather uneasy and like I do not know what is happening within my own house.”

Claire nodded, biting her lip. “Thank you, Lord Bannerdown. And ... well, on the topic of honesty, I must confess something else.”

Chapter 17

Ernest was not sure he could handle one more revelation, but he gestured for her to go on.

Miss Gundry's face throughout her story had been a picture of vacancy and fear as if waiting for his anger from the night she had confessed to knowing Lady Florence's secrets. But he found them very different, so he could not bring himself to be angry with her for this.

He felt responsible for Lady Florence and as though Miss Gundry had a duty of care to inform him of her actions. He did not feel the same for the governess but only waited to accept her story with understanding and compassion. He reeled from it. It was quite a lot to take in, even as many more things made sense to him now: her vague answers about her past, her education, her lack of governing before despite her age.

But the fact that she had been courted by the older brother of the man courting his cousin ...

Ernest could not sit comfortably with that news.

Are you jealous, imagining her giving her heart to another man?

He chided himself for such thoughts.

“My other confession ... It is about Lady Katherine.”

“My mother?” He frowned. “I admit she has become a rather elusive mystery even to me these days, so please do go on. If you have something about her that I should know, I will listen.”

Claire hesitated as if unsure, but Ernest caught her gaze again and nodded encouragingly. “Your words are safe here, Miss Gundry.”

She gazed back at him as a blush spread over her cheeks. “When we speak alone like this ... you may call me Claire.”

He sat back, surprised. “You are sure?”

“Unless you think it is too improper.”

“If you are happy for it, then I shall.” He gave a beat of silence and then said her name softly, “Claire.”

She let out a small laugh, more nervous than humorous. And then a solemn look passed over her face as she continued, “Lady Katherine delivered a threat to me. I recently received correspondence from my estranged mother for the first time in two decades. I put it away, not wanting to even look at it twice, let alone answer it. But I came back after an argument with Lady Florence to find my belongings tampered with. Lady Katherine revealed herself as the culprit and said she would tell everyone my identity unless I ...” She caught her breath and inhaled sharply. “Unless I convinced you to marry Lady Samantha.”

His stomach dropped sickeningly. He was not surprised but more disappointed to confirm his mother truly would stoop to such lows. He shook his head. “Was that why you asked my opinion of her?”

Claire blushed deeper. “No. She had not threatened me by then. I was merely curious

... as to how you view women of the Ton.” He could sense something else in her answer but did not push it.

He sighed. “My mother has become someone entirely unknown to me in these last several months. I am afraid I do not understand her motives for most things but a part of me is not surprised she has blackmailed you about something like this. I can only apologize for what she has put you through.”

“It is okay,” Claire told him, mustering a smile. “Although I imagine it must be comforting to know you have support to marry your late friend’s formerly betrothed. Some would see that as an honour, I am sure. Not to mention, it would further secure your place in Society.”

Now that she had revealed her identity as a former lady of the Ton, it was easy to see why she spoke the way she did. She knew a lot more than a governess would, and it baffled him how he hadn’t spotted signs earlier.

“Some days, I wish Society would simply shun me so I can return to being a commoner,” Ernest confessed in the quiet solitude of the library. It was as though it was a safe place, with so many books to watch over his confession and keep them safe. He sighed deeply, pushing a hand through his hair. “Did you not feel less ... shackled when you shed your title and former life? Sometimes mine fits like a jacket that has grown too small.” He frowned. “Or like a jacket that was never meant for me in the first place.”

“I did not at first,” Claire told him. “At first, I missed it terribly. I cursed and loathed my father, even as I grieved him, for robbing me of what I thought was my greatest happiness. But now I have found a new life, and I have Lady Florence, and after her, there will be other brilliant minds to nurture and teach, I am sure. I have more freedom, and I do not need a chaperone, which is rather pleasant. I can visit the town bakery whenever I please.”

He let out a quiet laugh at that. He gazed down at his clasped hands. “Sometimes, Miss Gundry, I miss the war. I know I said this previously, but that is a testament to my thoughts that this longing does not cease. I miss the shouts of men, for at least I knew I was doing something then. I knew I had a purpose and a reason to be there. When I am at a party holding champagne, I find myself wondering what my purpose is. What I’m doing, and it is not a comforting process. My mother takes to it marvellously, but I feel like I have been tossed into the wild stormy currents of the sea with no raft.” He paused. A stronger man would not have admitted such things. “To think my only thoughts should be on producing an heir to continue the Bannerdown title is ridiculous. To think my only purpose is to be extravagant and host parties and take a wife ... it is incomprehensible sometimes. And because of those thoughts, I am unable to help feeling inadequate. I do not like having this duty on my shoulders. I have faced the possibility—and reality—of risking a man’s life in surgery, and even that felt like a lighter weight to carry.”

Claire loosed a breath, loud in the sentient library.

And then her hand reached out to close over his own. He sat upright, surprised. Warmth bloomed through his chest at the simplicity of her skin on his. This is dangerous, he thought. So very dangerous.

His eyes found her mouth, and her lips parted, and his whole body yearned to lean in closer to her.

Ernest pulled his hand away before he succumbed to the urge to kiss Claire. He could not. He could not add yet another complication to either of their lives.

Claire cleared her throat, pulling her own hand back to her lap. “What should we do next?”

“I am not sure,” he confessed. “I must have some time to think of the best plan of

action. However, I do know one thing. I should be the one to confront Lady Florence about Lord Victor.”

Dinner was a tense but brief affair. Lady Katherine opted to dine with her friends instead, leaving Ernest to eat with Claire and Lady Florence, who still partially refused to speak with either of them.

“Did you know that Shakespeare says that art is a mirror held up to nature?” Ernest said, once their cutlery was placed down, and their glasses were empty. Lady Florence looked up, and a part of him was happy to have one topic he could reliably speak to her about.

“He did?”

“Indeed. How about you and I go to the gallery?”

Lady Florence hesitated. “I do not know. I am rather tired and shall retire early tonight.”

“Only for a moment,” Ernest said. “I shall not keep you awake long.”

She shared a glance with Miss Gundry, who nodded. It pleased Ernest to know she still took the encouragement of her governess seriously, even if she struggled with forgiving them. Still, they had done the right thing in scaring off Lord Victor.

“All right,” Lady Florence said, pushing back her chair. Ernest smiled and accompanied her.

As they entered the gallery, he asked her, “If you were a character in a Shakespeare

play and possessed magic, what would your magic be?"

Lady Florence did not even think about it for longer than a moment. She laughed. "It is strange you ask, for I have pondered this myself. I think I would have the ability to read people's minds."

"Truly?" He was surprised.

"Yes." He walked her up to one of the paintings in the gallery, a large painting with a fine golden frame. "Because that way, I would not have to rely on only the words they say to understand them."

The painting he took her to was of her mother and father. Matthew's kind eyes looked down at them, his stance proud and confident. The man who had been raised to be the next Earl of Bannerdown.

He never got to be, Ernest thought sadly. He sighed, his gaze going to Lady Florence's mother, Honora, married into the Harkwell family. Lady Florence was a copy of her mother, with her soft features and blonde ringlets.

"I think that is an advantageous ability," he said. "Would you like to know mine?"

"If you would like to tell me."

"I would possess the ability to do any task expected of me."

"What do you mean?"

He sighed, gesturing to the painting. "Sometimes I wonder what sort of earl your father would have been and if I am doing a good enough job of it. Sometimes, I wonder if I am doing my uncle proud enough." He nodded to the painting of the

former earl further down the gallery.

But Lady Florence's gaze was fixed on her parents in the painting. "Shakespeare was right," she said. "Art is a mirror of nature. But is it nature that took my parents? That left me here with only one man to love me who has not even contacted me since you scared him off?"

He sighed, and she turned to him.

"Cousin, I have found the identity of your admirer," he told her. Her eyes immediately hardened. "And through my findings, I know one thing for certain. Your tendresse cannot continue."

"You are cruel—"

"Please simply listen to me," he said. He would not tell Florence of Claire's identity. No, that was for her to decide. "I met with Lord Victor's brother today. Lord Simon. They are the sons of the Marquess of Tuberville, are they not?"

Lady Florence nodded timidly.

"Cl—Miss Gundry shared with me that Lord Victor attended Oxford but left before he found what he was looking for. Well, the truth is rather that he failed his classes because he was overindulging."

"He told me he searched for great purpose and had not found it in Oxford."

"He found many things while there, but a purpose was not one of them, I am afraid," Ernest confirmed. "His own brother confirmed he has more than one woman in his affections, and he attempts to ... impress you all for his own gain. He has no honour, Lady Florence, or he would have stayed that night in the garden and not run away. He

would have contacted you to apologize. He would have ensured you were safe despite my anger. He would have met with me properly and requested to court you. But men like him do not court in the proper ways. They do so in secret, Lady Florence. He is a man who shall play with your feelings and not honour them in the slightest.”

He knew his words rang true with his cousin when it was not anger that marred her features but sadness. He did not enjoy being the one to break such news to her, but he knew he must.

“I know you are right,” she whispered, “but I so very desperately do not want you to be. Victor is all I have.”

“That is not true, cousin.” He paused. “Just as it is not true that I hate you.”

“I am sorry I ever said that,” she murmured. “I was overwhelmed and upset.”

“I understand. But Florence, I want you to understand that when you debut, I shall watch over you and guide you through Society properly. I am your family, and I want to honour my duty to you but also because I care about you. I want to ensure no further misery befalls you. I want to ensure that your suitors remain good and honourable and will treat you as you deserve.”

“And I know Lady Katherine feels the same way,” Florence told him quietly. “She is just poor at showing it. Of all of us, it is clear to see how much she loves us. She has done good things for us.”

Ernest did not agree but kept his thoughts to himself. Was his own mother poisoning his cousin with her abuse and manipulation? He had risen above her words with great difficulty, and he could only hope she had not begun to prey on Lady Florence during the days he had worked late at the hospital.

Was that what Florence meant when she accused him that night in the garden of not caring about her?

Guilt pierced his heart.

“Cousin, I am wondering if some time away from Little Harkwell—and Bath in general—might do you some good; what do you think?”

“You want me to leave?”

“No!” he said quickly. “No, I don’t want you to do so, but I think some space from your grief and the city in general would be beneficial. You could recover from ... this ordeal with Victor. And you and Miss Gundry can reconcile properly without any interference. How about going to London?”

And that way he could keep Claire safe from his mother’s abuse and ensure Florence did not compromise herself or be tempted to find Lord Victor. It was the best solution to all their problems.

“Okay,” Lady Florence said after several minutes. “I think I agree with you. And I shall be on my best behaviour until my debut.”

He smiled and stood closer to her.

After a pause, Lady Florence said, “I think my father would have been proud. My grandfather, too. You are a good man, Lord Bannerdown. Thank you for still standing by me through my recent behaviour.”

“You are young,” he told her. “There is time to make mistakes so long as you learn from them and have others around to support you. That is me, and it is Miss Gundry. Do not forget that.”

“I won’t,” she agreed. “I think I shall now retire, Lord Bannerdown. Thank you for everything today and recently.”

They parted ways outside the gallery, with Ernest heading to his office. He had more plans of Graham’s to look over regarding the White Wing. But he was stopped when he pushed open the study door to find his mother sitting in the chair alongside one wall, her face turned to him as if she had awaited his approach.

“The governess has retired,” Lady Katherine said, smirking. “If that is who you were hoping would be waiting for you in here. I have heard about your secret rendezvous.”

“There has been no such thing, Mother.”

“Hmm.”

“Leave the girls alone,” he warned her. “You have meddled well enough with my life, as well as Lady Samantha’s. You do not need to involve them in your games.”

His mother let out a laugh, tipping her head back. “Oh, Ernest, dear. I cannot undo what is already in motion.” She stood up, sweeping her skirts behind her as she clasped his face. Once that gesture would have been tender, a soothing touch from his mother. Now, it had a sense of threat to it. “Do not fear. I shall still be here to guide you when everything comes to light.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I shall not meddle with Lady Florence or her governess.”

“Why?”

“Why bother? They mean little to me.”

But as much as she shrugged it off, he saw a flicker of uncertainty. It wasn't a lack of care that made her leave Claire alone, he realized. It was her own pride. He could see it in her eyes, the lift of her chin, and the stance of her shoulders.

And Ernest understood. He had told Claire he did not know his mother anymore, but as he looked at her now, he knew perfectly.

Everything is a game to her. Gossip, lies, scandals.

And the only thing preventing her from revealing Claire's secret was the fact that it would implicate Ernest himself, the golden heir. A direct attack could be his downfall from an already tentative perch.

"Mother, I do not think you are half as in control of anything as you believe you are," he told her. He sat behind his desk and nodded at the door. "Now, if you will excuse me. I have work to do."

His mother stared at him, and he thought she would protest until a slow, satisfied smirk graced her mouth. She gave a tut before she strolled out. Ernest sighed and tried to look at his papers, but the words blurred. He could not understand any of it.

Nothing made sense, but he would get to the bottom of it; he was sure of that.

And he would ensure Claire's and Lady Florence's safety, no matter the cost.

Chapter 18

Claire walked around Little Harkwell after making her confession, feeling so much lighter. Since admitting her former identity, she had grown closer to Ernest.

They shared quips during short carriage rides when Ernest attended the hospital and Claire went to the Haberdasher Bookshop, and they joked about the correct cutlery at dinner and discussed what suits Lady Florence would be most appropriate for. Ever since she had stopped pretending like she knew nothing about the ways of nobility, she felt so much more at ease. It felt like Ernest had grown closer to her, too.

It was as if confessing her true name had made him see her as more than his ward's governess.

But then ... perhaps he already had done so but knew it was improper.

She told herself it did not matter. She was not a lady of the Ton any longer. Whether he held any affection for her or not they could not pursue it. But it did not stop Claire from leaning into those feelings that were steadily growing.

They scared her, even as she got closer to Lord Bannerdown.

In the library, the curtains were pulled open to expose a stream of sunlight. It spilled onto the library floor, bathing Ernest in a shower of light that Claire could not quite look away from.

It caught the brown hues of his hair, lightening the strands. Claire's heart swooped,

and she tampered it down. She had not felt so giddy over a man since her debut days. Only the day before, she had been coming into Little Harkwell as Ernest had been leaving it, and they'd danced around one another, sidestepping, and he jokingly asked, "Can I have this dance, Lady Claire?" And although it was not who she was anymore, she had giggled, despite herself, and given in to the improper request and danced around the step to avoid crashing into him.

She had only hoped nobody had seen them.

Instead of worrying, she tried to turn back to the book Lady Florence had open on her lap. *The Taming of the Shrew*, a new favourite of hers that Claire had recommended.

"You mentioned several days ago that you had not chosen a favourite character," Claire said, giddy to share her joy. "Have you thought about it more?"

"I have," Lady Florence told her, giving her a secret smile. "I like Katherine."

Claire felt Ernest's attention on them, hearing his mother's name in quite a different scenario.

"Go on," Claire encouraged.

"Well, I like that she keeps the reader guessing. She claims to be 'tamed', and I believe Shakespeare does the act of making us unsure as to if she truly is. I want to believe her newfound affection for her husband is true, but I simply cannot believe it was done so easily. It is similar to *Romeo and Juliet*, where we believe they will come together, but we are kept in suspense. I truly admire how Shakespeare does both these things in his writing."

She caught Ernest's eye from across the library, finding him impressed by his cousin. He had a medical science book open in his lap and had been reading intently until

they'd happened to look up simultaneously. Her heart beat double-time, and she cleared her throat.

"Do you agree, Miss Gundry?"

"Sorry? Oh, of course. He is very adept at providing suspense, Lady Florence. Do you have any favourite lines? Perhaps we can incorporate it into a recital of sorts to display your recollection."

Lady Florence cleared her throat. "If I be waspish, best beware my sting. I like how it shows that many people can name someone bad, but when they truly are bad and give into what they are called, then they have only brought that badness upon themselves. It is like being called a grieving daughter, and everyone will acknowledge it, but when they see the signs of that grief, they do not know what to do with me."

Claire blanched, unexpecting of the depth of the young girl's mind. But she was quite right, really.

Lady Florence had possessed her moments in grief. Anger, rebellion, sadness. And she needed that space to grieve. Now, ever since Ernest had taken Lady Florence to the house's gallery several nights ago, she had been warming back up to Claire, something she was immensely grateful for. She looked back at Ernest.

"Grief is a fickle friend," she said, "and can make us act certain ways, but there is forgiveness in grief. Perhaps Katherine, in this play, grieves her former self."

"I think so."

Claire was too caught up in the soft way Ernest gazed at her as if her words were something he had needed to hear.

“Miss Gundry?”

Ernest caught her eye again and shook his head in a mocking scold as if to say you were not paying attention again!

But then his eyes lowered, his grin turned softer, more subtle, and Claire felt herself grow warmer. For a moment, she imagined they were two different people: a governess and a medic. Or perhaps an earl and a lady. Not this strange combination of their different lives but a combination of people that could have a courtship.

And then Lady Florence tapped her. “Miss Gundry, I was asking if you had a favourite line.”

“I do, in fact. Do I dream? Or have I dreamed till now? I do not sleep; I see, I hear, I speak, I smell sweet savors, and I feel soft things.”

“That is a peculiar choice.”

Claire hummed. “I have loved that line for a long time. It reminds me of ...” She almost said being alive, for there was a time where she thought she would not make it through destitution to provide for herself. It was a reminder of all she had given in her life to ensure she survived.

“It reminds me that we are all aware of our surroundings, and we do our best.”

“I agree,” Lady Florence said.

“I have to leave for my luncheon soon, and my eyes hurt with so much reading. Can I practice my pianoforte until I have to leave?”

“Of course,” she said. “I am happy to hear you play again, Lady Florence.”

“I never should have been so stubborn.”

As Lady Florence left the room, Claire went to follow, but Ernest held a book out in front of her, stopping her in the doorway. “George Washington was a fine leader. Many Americans were sad to see him give up his position.”

She glanced up at him. “Indeed, they were,” she said. “It would be a great shame for many people if some men stopped doing the things they excelled at.” She gave him a knowing look.

“I see what you mean, Miss Gundry—”

“Claire,” she corrected.

“Claire,” he teased. “And I appreciate you for saying it. It seems like not many are telling me those sorts of things.”

“I do wonder why we are so fixated, as a society, on making someone one or the other in positions. Why can you not be a medic and an earl? It is insane.”

“Quite,” he agreed. “But I am getting away with it so far, am I not?”

“You are.” She laughed. “But is George Washington the only reason you stopped me?”

“No,” he admitted. “I would like to pose an idea to you.” His brow furrowed, and Claire’s defences immediately went up, sensing something troubling. “Yes, Lord Bannerdown?”

“I ... I have spoken to Lady Florence about a potential trip to London for a short while. I think being in Bath is not the right thing for her at the moment, and I wished

to discuss the notion with you as well.”

“You wish us to depart to London?”

He nodded. “I want to protect you as you have tried to protect Lady Florence and me. In honesty, Claire, I am worried that my mother has already done something, and if she has not already done it, then she surely will. I think London will provide safety for you.”

He wishes to protect me, Claire thought, her heart swelling with delight.

But dread also pitted in her stomach at the thought of Lady Katherine. What could she do to Claire that she had not already done? Could she see her out of employment anywhere at all? Little Harkwell was not her only option, but it was her best one. She did not want to risk parting from Lord Bannerdown, and Lady Katherine could ensure that very thing happened.

Ernest placed his hand on her shoulder, causing her to meet his gaze.

“Claire, I swear to you I shall protect you, no matter what. My mother will not continue to hold your past over your head.”

She nodded, her heart full with happiness and feeling protected after she had been failed by those who swore similar things in the past. But it was for that very reason she could not entirely trust it.

“I must excuse myself,” he said, pulling away, and she immediately missed the warmth of his hand. “I am due back at the hospital to give a seminar. It was what I was brushing up on just now.”

“Cramming in your information at the last moment?” Claire teased. “That is terrible,

Lord Bannerdown. What will the medical students say?"

"Hopefully nothing, as they shall all be enraptured by my charismatic presence." He grinned at her.

"I know I certainly would be," she admitted, tucking a stray piece of hair behind her ear. "Have a good afternoon, My Lord."

"And you, Miss Gundry."

Claire saw Lady Florence off and into the carriage with Lady Katherine. Although she yearned to protect the young woman from the lady of the house, she knew she had nothing to prove Lady Katherine was even a threat to her.

And Lady Florence looked excited to go to the modiste ahead of her debut that year, while Lady Katherine looked positively bored.

Claire assured herself that such a bored woman would not go to lengths to jeopardize her ward. She hoped. Returning inside, she ventured into the cellar, where Winnie was hard at work on her manuscript.

"I am afraid I cannot stay and chat, Claire," Winnie said breathlessly. "I shall only have this brief time of Lady Katherine's absence to write down the scene I can see in my head! I think Prince Patrick is about to kiss Miss Winona and declare his love in front of everyone!"

"I shall not disturb you longer then, Winnie." Claire laughed, leaving the lady's maid to her writing. Instead, she ventured upstairs to the music room, happy for the peace in the house to tinker away. She had no duties and had prepared everything for the

remainder of Lady Florence's day.

She sat down at the instrument and began to move her way down the scales, clearing her throat as she sang the notes. Claire was utterly alone for the first time in a while. There was no Lady Katherine and her hawk eyes watching her, no ward to teach, and no Lord Bannerdown to send her heart racing. She enjoyed it while it lasted.

However, it was not long before she was interrupted by a footman. "A guest is arriving at the manor, Miss. Shall I show him to the drawing room?"

"Yes, thank you," she said. "I am sure Lady Katherine shall be home soon to attend him."

"He is not here for Lady Katherine nor Lord Bannerdown, Miss. He has come looking for a Lady Claire Garner."

"Excuse me?" Claire asked, her voice faint. She clung onto the pianoforte for support as her vision blurred at the edges. "I ... I shall see who it is and what he wants."

Her heart pounded as she rushed to the drawing room. There was only one man who knew her by that name who might recently have a reason to seek her out.

Claire slowed just before she entered the drawing room, and her palms began to sweat. For standing by the window was a man from her past. A man she had not thought she would see again.

Lord Simon Tuberville stood with his hands behind his back, humming to himself.

When he turned to face her, he was as every bit handsome as he had once been at the age of twenty-one. He looked more mature now, his smile broader as he regarded her.

Claire's mouth parted in surprise, no words rising to her aid.

But Lord Simon talked for her—of course, he did. For when she had needed his words, they had not arrived, but now she did not, they were there.

“Forgive me for giving your former name to the footman,” he said. “I did not wish to risk you not coming to see me. I knew the element of surprise would pique your attention.”

“Lord Simon,” she whispered. “I do not understand. Why are you here? Lord Bannerdown is out at the hospital, and Lady Katherine is at the modiste.”

“Which is precisely why I am here now,” he told her. “I do not wish to see them but you, Claire. Or should I call you Miss Gundry now? I hear that is who you are these days.”

Her stomach dropped. She took him in, unbelieving it was truly Lord Simon. She had thought she had buried her past well enough that he would not get wind of her—her place of employment included.

But it was not malice that drove him to say those things. They sounded sincere and polite.

“Lord Simon ...”

“Miss Gundry,” he greeted, bowing his head. “It is under quite different circumstances that we meet again.”

“I am unsure as to why we are,” she admitted. Pity passed through his face, his mouth turning down as if in sympathy. Still, he was surprised as he took in her governess's dress, and suddenly, Claire had never felt her fall from Society as immensely as she

did at that moment. This man could have been her husband. Had he not broken things off so abruptly then he likely would have been.

“I can clear that up,” he assured her. His hands behind his back, he began to explain, and he was every bit of the literary scholar she once remembered. He commanded a room, whether there was one person in it or one hundred. “I received a mysterious note explaining that Lady Claire Garner was now Miss Claire Gundry and was working as a governess for Lady Florence, the orphaned cousin of the newly-appointed Lord Bannerdown. That the former lady’s fall from grace had been quite drastic indeed, and imagine my surprise to realize that Little Harkwell was right on my doorstep. I had to see you, Miss Gundry. I had to make amends. I had to see how you fared.”

He moved closer to her, the persona he used to present himself when speaking dissolving into the tenderness she had seen glimpses of during their courtship. But this time, when his arms outstretched to embrace her, she moved back.

“I ...”

“Is it true?” he asked. “The Ton says the baron was riddled with debt, and his daughter handled them after his death. I should have known, Miss Gundry. I should have offered my aid.”

“Lord Simon,” she breathed. “I ... We both know you did not even offer aid in the form of a comforting word following my father’s death. That, at the very least, would have been a lifeline for me back then. I felt terribly alone.” She gathered her courage. “But now I am not, and I have a good life. I do not need your pity, and I may no longer be a lady, but I do not wish to be caught alone with you.”

She thought of Lady Katherine. She could return with Lady Florence at any moment. She could spin any sort of rumour between Claire and Lord Simon if she found them.

She could whisper into Ernest's ear about false things. She could convince him they rekindled an old flame.

Claire shuddered.

"You are right," Lord Simon conceded. "And I truly cannot apologize enough for how I ended our courtship. In all honesty, that was a bright, brilliant light for me. It kept me swimming above the surface when everything else threatened to drown me."

"That may be so, but at least you did swim," she answered. "I drowned."

"And yet you rose from the ashes," he murmured, taking her in. "I have long since matured from my selfish ways. I did not wish to be abrupt back then, but I had so many feelings for you I did not know how to handle them. I had a lot of pressure from my father to choose someone he found eligible and the right woman, yet I only wanted you."

"And you still did not choose me."

Her words weren't the bitterness of hurt anymore; she simply felt detached from the whole ordeal.

"I should have found you sooner," he said. "I am sorry I did not. I should have saved—"

"I saved myself, Lord Simon," she said sharply, defending herself. Even if she trembled with anxiety, she still held herself strong. "I proved that I did not need anyone."

"You have matured," he noted. "As have I." Lord Simon paused, his face tightening. "Miss Gundry, am I to blame for your ruin?"

Her mouth tightened. “That does not matter. It happened; I am living a new life now. And I would like you to leave this house and my life. For good, Lord Simon.”

He shook his head. “I am afraid my honour keeps me from that. See, I am here to see you but also to discuss the issue of my brother and Lady Florence. As repayment for the damage my brother has caused, I wish to set right every wrong done by the Tuberville name. It pains me to watch my brother make the same foolish mistakes I once did. And so, I shall return, Miss Gundry, and I shall help you in the way I once did not. I shall be honourable, and I shall rectify both mine and my brother’s mistakes.”

Claire’s mouth fell open. He could not possibly be suggesting he return for her hand.

He had promised it once, speaking to her of a future where they left Bristol behind, of saving her from her father’s seclusion, for she was a social butterfly destined for lavish balls and people surrounding her. Claire felt so detached from that life now.

“Lord Simon, your mistake has not lingered with me. You do not need to repay anything from six years ago. Much has happened since then, and I no longer need aid.”

“Not anymore, no, but you did then, and duty demands I honour that.”

“Lord Simon ...” Her voice was harsh. Where had he discovered this new sense of morality? He had wanted nothing to do with her after her name was ruined, thanks to her father’s debts and death. “Lord Simon, as I said, I am not interested, and you owe me nothing. That is all I wish to hear of it.”

“Are you uninterested because your pride keeps you working here? Or is it something else ... Perhaps someone else keeping you in Little Harkwell?”

“I do not know what you are suggesting,” she snapped. Claire turned to walk out, throwing a glare over her shoulder. “I do not need your help, and that is the end of things. Have a good day, Lord Simon.”

She walked out, and it was only when she returned to the music room that she exhaled deeply, pressing a hand to her chest where her heart thudded in a terrified, sick beat.

Chapter 19

March blew through the air, bringing with it the promise of springtime soon to arrive.

In no time at all, the snow would melt, and his journey home from the hospital would once become pleasant again. Perhaps he would even take a walk through the park when it got warmer, taking in a few last moments of freedom before the pressure of his earldom enveloped him the moment he returned to Little Harkwell.

But before he could even get to the monument for Archibald White outside the hospital, Graham called him from the entrance.

“Ernest! I am glad I caught you before you retired for the day.”

“Is everything okay, Graham?”

“Yes, yes.” He waved him off. “I called you back not to do with work but to invite you to dinner tonight at my house. It has been a while since I had company.” He paused. “I am having my cook prepare those potatoes you like.”

“The ones with the thyme seasoning?”

“Those ones, exactly.”

“Ah, well, good potatoes and company? How could I refuse?”

They laughed together, and Graham clapped Ernest on his shoulder. It had been

almost a year since the Battle of Waterloo, and he was seeing glimpses of a lighter weight on his friend's shoulders. They rode to Graham's townhouse, and his friend led him inside. It had been some time since he had visited this residence, and walking through the hallways made him reminisce about his simpler life: a medic and his assistant. Now an earl and a chairman, yet still holding onto their physician status.

"Have yourself a seat in the dining room, and I shall join you once I send for wine," Graham said, gesturing into the dining hall.

But as soon as Ernest walked in, his eyes landed on powder-blue sleeves capping pale shoulders and raven-black hair styled prettily.

He paused, rearing back, and snagged Graham just as he was about to disappear, no doubt on purpose.

"Graham, did you purposefully forget to mention that Lady Samantha and her aunt would be joining us for dinner tonight? I did not agree to this."

"She is a friend, Ernest. You are both my guests. What is the problem?"

"The problem is that you have set me up! You pressed to correspond with Lady Samantha, and now she is here. Why, you are not better than my mother, Graham!"

"Ernest, I assure you—"

"You are trying to set Lady Samantha and me up so you have a clear pathway to Miss Gundry, are you not?"

"You cannot be seriously accusing me of such a thing! I would never go against you. I gave you my word regarding Miss Gundry when I saw that it bothered you." He hesitated, and Ernest narrowed his eyes.

“Spit it out,” he hissed.

“It is only that I do agree with Lady Katherine regarding your potential match with Lady Samantha. I only wished to provide her with good company tonight, but I do think courting her—or at least entertaining the thought of asking her to court you—would be an honourable thing for Archibald’s memory.”

Yet, although his words sounded encouraging, something like uncertainty flickered across Graham’s face, and Ernest could not figure out the root of it.

“Ernest, you must believe me. It is not access to Miss Gundry that drives tonight’s dinner invitation. I simply want the best for you.”

“And you truly think that marrying Lady Samantha is what is best for me?”

“Well, why would it not be?”

The question hit Ernest terribly, and the realization of his answer that he dared not share settled in his chest. He was overwhelmed, his stomach growing heavy, at the thought of marrying a woman who ... who was not Miss Gundry. His thoughts slowly pieced together the revelation, and he sagged against the wall, even as Graham bypassed him, intent on retrieving wine.

He could not marry Miss Gundry or give in to his overwhelming feelings for her that were steadily growing, along with his need to protect her, but he could not marry another woman, either.

He looked into the dining room, where Lady Samantha watched from the doorway, waiting for either Ernest or Graham to return. Ernest steeled himself before he walked into the room, smiling politely.

“Lady Samantha,” he greeted. “Mrs Elizabeth Brooks.” He bowed to them, and they both rose, curtsying.

“Lord Bannerdown,” Lady Samantha greeted in return.

“It is lovely to see you again. I apologize it has been so long.”

“It is no matter,” she assured him as they all took their seats. “Although I must admit the chairman’s letters have kept me plenty company.”

“They have?”

“Indeed. He writes extensively. He has been telling me tales of Archibald. It is strange how it has been almost a year, and yet everybody is still watching me like a grieving widow. I do not want their pity, only their acceptance of me going back into Society when the Season begins again.”

“You have plans for it?” he asked, happy that her focus did not seem to be on pursuing him, at least.

“I do,” she answered. “And I cannot burden my dear aunt for much longer.”

“You are always a blessing to have,” her aunt assured her. “However, I have explained to Lady Samantha that she must not wait too long to reenter and find another match. I understand grief, but Lady Samantha must understand Society.”

The young lady nodded as if understanding, even if her aunt now addressed Ernest himself.

“And yourself, Lord Bannerdown?” Lady Samatha asked as Graham returned with a bottle of wine. He looked pleased at his guests conversing. “Is there to be a Lady

Bannerdown anytime soon? The Season must hold prospects for you, must it not?"

"Ah," he said, pausing. "I imagine so. Graham, that wine looks delicious. Is it European?"

"It is Italian," he answered. "Good eye for the name."

"I have been listening in on Lady Florence's lessons." He laughed. "I am learning the language patterns from Miss Gundry herself."

"An accomplished governess, from what I hear," Lady Samantha noted, smiling.

"Indeed, she is," Ernest answered. She is also accomplished at haunting my dreams at night and somehow always being there when I both want and need her.

"And yourself, Mr Courtenay?" Lady Samantha asked when the first course of dinner was served. "Is there a Mrs Courtenay on your horizon?"

"Marriage is not for a fellow like me," he grumbled. "I must admit the war changed me somewhat. I was jollier then. Now, I fear I would make any wife of mine miserable with my dour moods I am prone to and my long hours at the hospital."

"Of course, she would have to understand that," Lady Samantha said, her eyes sparkling. "A lady who truly appreciated a man of your position would surely understand."

"I would hope so." He laughed quietly. "Or perhaps she would chase me down to the hospital herself and cause a scene. Can you imagine, I am up to my eyes in paperwork and in storms my wife, asking why I was late home for dinner?"

Lady Samantha laughed aloud at that, and after the weight she had seemed to carry

when she visited Little Harkwell, Ernest was happy to hear her laughter. Grief could not take everything away.

The wine was poured, and Graham noted Lady Samantha's enjoyment.

"You have a good taste for fine wine, Lady Samantha?"

"Archibald taught me some in his correspondences," she explained. "So, I sampled a few upon his recommendation."

"It was actually him who taught me some differences between several wines."

"It seems we both have one more thing in common. How do you feel about the snow?"

He grinned, and Ernest loved seeing the glimpse of his old friend. "I love it."

"As do I! It is like the biggest, softest blanket."

"And coldest one," he pointed out.

"But that is what makes it marvellous! For afterwards, I can sit by the fire with a book."

Ernest watched their banter back and forth, marvelling at how they both seemed to tug off the shroud of grief from each other without realizing it truly. Lady Samantha was bringing out the side of Graham that Ernest had not seen since they toasted to their futures on the cusp of war.

"If it snows at the Toasting Ball, then I shall find you, and perhaps we can take a walk in the snow if the party gets too warm." Graham laughed. "As your friend, it

shall be my honour to show you around the grounds at the ball.”

“What is the Toasting Ball?” Ernest asked.

“It is what I have fondly called the fundraiser,” Graham told him. Ah. Despite spending many nights helping to fund and organize the fundraiser, Ernest had quite forgotten about the ball hosted in Archibald’s honour to help raise funds for the new hospital wing. “For he loved a good toast, and nobody is the host necessarily. It is a charitable thing so to call it after a host’s name did not feel right.”

Ernest quietly wondered if he just didn’t want to use the Bannerdown name to attach to his ball but knew his own would not have the sway needed to get invitations accepted.

“I wonder if your governess shall attend, Lord Bannerdown,” Lady Samantha enquired.

He stiffened. “Why would she?”

“I have only heard rumours that she has been accompanying you everywhere. To the playhouse, even.”

“She is my ward’s governess,” he explained, his voice tight. “And I have been attempting to bond with my ward by taking her on excursions and having her present at dinner parties, so her governess needed to attend. That is all there is to it.”

“If I may interrupt, Lady Katherine informed us of something different during our stay at Little Harkwell,” Mrs Brooks said. “And there is word around Bath as well.” She lowered her voice. “Word that ... well, that your governess has feelings for you. It is terribly unfortunate if she does. The poor woman, she must not have two coins to click together.”

“Mrs Brooks, please refrain from speaking about my ward’s governess in such a manner,” Ernest said, glancing at Graham and narrowing his eyes. Do something, he wished to convey.

“I am also rather curious about her,” Lady Samantha said. “See, I was at the modiste earlier today and ran into Lady Katherine and Lady Florence. I overheard her tell Lady Florence that Miss Gundry was not everything she said she was. I only assumed that perhaps she feigned some educational levels, but what if it is more? She holds herself rather differently than my governess did. Mine was rigid, stoic, and barely spoke, but Miss Gundry seems to be rather involved. Does she not?”

Although the words were said gently, with consideration, Ernest could feel his temper rising. How dare they discuss Claire’s personal life. He knew the truth, of course, but he could not believe his mother would risk gossiping so brazenly. And to Lady Florence, of all people. The young woman had just begun to trust Claire once again; he did not wish to see that compromised.

Ernest looked down at his course, a half-eaten pheasant, with the potatoes he truly liked under normal circumstances, but between the set-up that he struggled to believe was something innocent, the thought of marrying Lady Samantha, and the gossip about Claire, he had lost his appetite.

He craved her company. He did not wish to remain in Graham’s house any longer.

His rage flared, and he set down his cutlery with some force. “Graham, Lady Samantha, Mrs Brooks. I am afraid I must take my leave now. Enjoy the remainder of your evening and your dinner. I must leave for Lady Florence’s recital. Mentioning her has reminded me.”

“Ernest—”

“Thank you for dinner, Graham,” he said curtly. He bowed to the two women, walked out into the snow, and hailed a carriage home.

All he could think of was finding Claire and being in her company. He strode right into the dining hall, where the governess dined with Lady Florence. They both looked up in surprise at his sudden approach.

“Where is Lady Katherine?” he demanded.

“She—” Claire cleared her throat, startled. “She retired early, claiming a headache.”

“Good,” he said. “I need you both to listen carefully. I am telling you both that you must leave for London later this week. It is no longer a request, and I cannot fully explain why, but in the interest of me protecting you, I wish for it to happen as soon as possible.”

Chapter 20

Claire could not stop thinking about Lord Simon turning up at Little Harkwell several days ago.

She had yet to tell Lord Bannerdown of his visit, for he was already trying to protect her from so much. Additionally, she did not want him to get the wrong idea. She had told him Simon was a part of her past—perhaps bringing him up now would only cause more damage.

So, instead, she refocused her attention on packing for the trip to London, but her mind was on the pitying look Simon gave her. If he had heard rumours, then who else had?

When Claire only had an unpacked pile of clothing to show for her efforts, she headed down to the basement, finding the staff preparing for the day. They were taking plates up to the dining hall to lay out for breakfast.

However, she found Winnie fussing with a pot over the stove. She turned around to face Claire. “Claire! How is your morning?”

Claire sighed, sitting in a chair. “I am struggling, Winnie.” She rubbed her forehead. “Lord Bannerdown wishes Lady Florence and I to take a trip to London, but I cannot seem to focus on packing. I am feeling rather overwhelmed.”

Winnie frowned, turning to face her. “Why must you go to London?”

Claire hesitated. "For my protection. There are some things going around about me, Winnie, and I think I would like to tell you myself before you find out from Lady Katherine." She steeled herself. She truly did not think she would have to discuss her true identity so often in one week. "I used to go by the name of Lady Claire Garner." Her voice was lowered despite the kitchen having been emptied out already. She did not want anyone else overhearing, but it felt as though it was only a matter of time before the entirety of Bath knew who she once was.

She waited for surprise, but Winnie only smiled as she sat down, pouring them both a cup of tea. "I should be surprised, but I am not," she said. "You have always been very perceptive and free with your opinion and outlook. Many of us cannot always speak our minds as you do, but you have little fear about it."

Claire was surprised at Winnie's ease with her true identity and surprised even further that the young lady's maid was not angry at her. But she would understand the need for protection and secrets. Instead, Winnie reached over and held Claire's hand.

"I know who you are, Claire, no matter your name," she comforted her. "And whatever you have been through, or whoever you are, whether that is a lady or a governess, I am your friend, and you are mine."

Tears unexpectedly sprung to Claire's eyes. She held her friend's hand, squeezing tightly. "Winnie, you do not know how badly I have needed to hear such a thing."

She embraced the other girl, smiling into her shoulder.

"But you must do one thing for me if you are in London," Winnie whispered, giggling.

"Ah, I see your motives now," Claire teased. "What can I do for you there?"

“I was hoping I could convince you to drop off my manuscript with a publisher.” She bit her lip.

“You do not have to do any convincing. I would be very honoured to do that for you.”

Winnie let out a squeal as she clapped her hands together. “Thank you, Claire! I will drop off the story to you soon, so you have time to finish packing and include it in your belongings. I have absolutely no doubt this book will be a hit—you’ll see! It is much different than anything else I have ever written.”

“Then I shall ensure the publisher receives it in the very best manner.” Claire laughed as Winnie jumped up with excitement, bustling about the kitchen with a renewed purpose as she gathered what she needed to begin serving tea upstairs. Claire supposed she could not put off her packing duties any longer.

Returning upstairs, Claire entered the music room where both Lady Florence and Ernest stood at the pianoforte. At her entrance, Ernest’s face brightened.

“Ah! There you are. Miss Gundry, you are exactly the woman I am looking for.”

Am I? Truly? Claire’s heart rose with hope, even as she knew she had been the one keeping her distance from Ernest. It was unfair of her to do such a thing to him but with news of her identity potentially spreading from the mouths of both Lady Katherine and Lord Simon and who knew who else, she had wanted to spare him the downfall of being too associated with her.

“Tonight is the charity ball held in honour of my fallen friend, Archibald White. It has been named the Toasting Ball due to his love of toasting announcements. It is a silly thing Graham decided so the ball was not directly connected to either of our names but so the focus could be solely on Archibald himself. However, before the

ball, a luncheon will be held in a nearby assembly hall.”

He looked between the two of them, happiness radiating from his face. His cheeks were flushed, and his hands gestured excitedly.

“I would like you to attend with me, cousin, and for you to chaperone, Miss Gundry.”

Claire’s heart, so full of hope moments before, positively dropped as she considered it. Of course, she would have to chaperone if Lady Florence wanted to attend, but with so many rumours circulating about her, she felt so very hesitant to agree as she wanted to.

Guilt weighed on her for not yet telling Ernest about Lord Simon’s visit, and she could not help thinking that if she attended, then eyes would be on her, questioning, whispering about her heritage.

“I would love to attend, cousin!” Lady Florence said, as expected, clapping her hands. “I have not been to a proper ball before. I believe this shall prepare me for my upcoming Season!” She turned to face Claire. “You shall chaperone me, will you not, Miss Gundry?”

“Of course,” she heard herself saying, because she had made a promise upon her employment to put Lady Florence above her own needs. But she felt distant, detached from her body. She swallowed, meeting Ernest’s gaze, silently begging him to understand her hesitance.

He only nodded as if to tell her he would keep her safe. It was only a few more days until they could escape to London, and Claire would be relieved of all the eyes on her.

“I think Lady Florence’s lessons can be set aside for today,” Lord Bannerdown said,

smiling. “And instead, you shall both prepare for the luncheon. I shall meet you in the entrance hall at midday.”

“Thank you, cousin!” Lady Florence squealed before turning to Claire. “Come, Miss Gundry, we must prepare!”

Claire let herself be pulled away, still in a daze, and automatically prepared Lady Florence for her luncheon.

In the carriage ride, Ernest informed Lady Florence about the guests present for the luncheon and whom he planned to introduce her to. For now, it seemed like the day was proving a good distraction from the girl’s heartbreak.

Claire could not find the same solace as she lost herself in her thoughts. Everyone who walked past the carriage glanced in, and she pressed herself back against the seat, not wanting to be recognized. She was being overcautious. But now, with Lady Katherine’s poison spreading through Bath, Claire could not assume people would not look harder at her.

They had not recognized her in all these years, but a prompt could change everything.

“Are you feeling all right, Miss Gundry?”

“Yes,” she answered, but it was too quick, and Ernest saw right through her. He looked back at her, utterly unconvinced.

“Do you think Lady Alison will be there?” Lady Florence asked. “I met her at the public library several months ago, and it has been some time since we have been able to speak with one another.”

“Miss Harchester, the daughter of the Baron of Harchester?”

“That is her.”

“I am sure she will be. The baron has been invited.”

Lady Florence looked pleased, and as they continued the journey to the assembly room, Claire’s dread only grew. If many peers had been invited, did that mean Lord Simon would be there? And Lord Victor? She could only hope neither showed and did not cause a scene for either herself or Lady Florence.

Soon, they arrived at where guests went in and out of the assembly hall, and Lady Florence could not exit the carriage quickly enough upon seeing her friend, Lady Alison. Claire went to follow, but Ernest held her back.

“Please stay a quick moment,” he said.

She looked up at him questioningly. His hair had been pushed from his forehead, exposing those intelligent eyes she loved to look into. She swallowed now, her throat closing up.

“Have I overstepped, Miss Gundry? I feel as though you have grown rather distant from me in recent days. Should I return to our formalities of addressing one another? I do not wish to overstep in any way so if I have, please do set me back on the right path with you.”

It was only at his worry that Claire found her voice once again. Eyes began to bore into her back, watching them, whispering, and she felt the pressure of it all.

“I assure you, Lord Bannerdown, that you have been the perfect gentleman,” she told him softly. “It is not you at all that has me on edge. It is not only Lady Katherine who

has threatened my identity, but just the other day, I had a visit—”

Before she could confess about Lord Simon’s visit, his carriage pulled up behind theirs, and the man jumped out, smiling brightly.

“Ah, there she is! The very woman I have yearned to see once again.”

Claire’s breath caught, and she looked for a place to escape, but there was nowhere she could run to. Ernest moved just in front of her, looking at Lord Simon head-on.

“Lord Simon,” he greeted. “I believe you shall not like to cause us any trouble at such a charitable event. We have exchanged pleasantries, and you have helped me greatly regarding your brother and my cousin. It would be a shame to damage that.”

“Do not worry, for I am not here to damage anything.” His gaze locked on Claire. “I only wish to congratulate Lady Claire on her reentry into society, although I must admit, Lord Bannerdown, it seems you are keeping such a well-discussed woman to yourself. Are you coveting her to finally have a chance to court her, as the rumours say you wish to, or are you simply trying to protect her now that news of Lady Claire’s real identity is spreading?”

He bowed to Lord Bannerdown. “I shall see you inside. Enjoy your luncheon and ball later.”

He walked away with his head held high, and Claire turned to Ernest.

I must leave, she thought, even as he directed her to move towards the entrance.

“I cannot remain a governess for much longer,” she murmured to Ernest, who nodded. “I am risking both of our reputations. I can find work yet again in another city. I shall run as long as I need to, as long as I am safe, and finally escape the

rumours and those who know me, but you ... Lord Bannerdown, I cannot risk your reputation.” Dread filled her chest. “London is a brilliant idea, and I am grateful for it, but I cannot hide there forever.”

I shall have to make a decision about my future once the trip is over, she concluded.

Together, they entered the assembly hall.

Chapter 21

“Mother, I shall take another carriage,” Ernest told his mother later that evening as they left Little Harkwell to attend the ball.

“Oh, do not be so ridiculous, Ernest. How do you think that will look to those in attendance?”

“I care little for that, as you well know.” He avoided her gaze. “Have a safe journey.”

“Ernest, get into the carriage, you foolish boy.”

He stood his ground. They stood outside, the carriage door open. Lady Katherine was already halfway into her seat when he stepped back.

“I shall not play this game of yours any longer,” he told her, his voice clipped. “You have ruined Claire’s life—”

“Ah, it is Claire now? My, my, you are getting informal.”

“We are good friends,” he muttered. “But the point remains. You have ruined her life here in Bath, and I am trying to salvage it for her. I do not wish to be around you.”

She only laughed as if it were no matter. “Ernest, Miss Gundry should be kneeling before me in thanks that I have not sent her packing. Not just to London but for good. I have not ruined her; she ruined herself with her deceit. She lied to you, dearest. What sort of an honest woman does that?”

“What would you know of honest women? You will not tell me the truth about your involvement with Lady Samantha, nor will you dare to speak of my father.”

Lady Katherine’s face contorted in surprise, as if every time he spoke back to her like this, she was shocked. But she recovered quickly, as she always did.

“Everything I do, Ernest, is only to protect you. My investigation into Miss Gundry’s backstory did reveal her involvement with Lord Simon Tuberville. I know of his father, and he is a very pleasant, agreeable man. I should think he would like to know that the woman his son pined for years ago is alive and rather available.”

“Mother, do not—”

“I shall certainly not have her ruin my own son’s reputation,” Lady Katherine hissed.

“And the marquess will not have his son marry a mere governess.”

“Titles can be reinstated easily, Ernest.” There was something in her tone that he did not like. Something hidden—something he could not quite identify. “Once you have had your fun and exhausted yourself in London, you shall see how right I have been this whole time.”

“Right or not, I shall not ride with you. Have a pleasant time at the ball, Mother.”

He shut the carriage door and called for a footman to bring around a different one.

The assembly hall Graham had organized for the charity ball was large and spacious, filled with nobility all in their finest, turning out to honour Archibald. The sight pleased Ernest as he walked in and immediately spotted Lady Samantha. Of course,

she would be in attendance. He was taken aback by how many people surrounded her. She had thought herself shamed out of Society, but there she was, wholly accepted.

In a beautiful pale green gown, Lady Samantha looked as though she was a leaf floating through a river of sorrow, and he could only imagine how many people would have approached her, offering condolences over Archibald.

Beyond her, he noticed Graham among a group of board members, including Mr Stevens, who pointedly avoided Ernest's gaze since their squabble at the hospital a month ago.

Towards the back of the room, the Tuberville brothers watched the ballroom, talking with one another. When they noticed Ernest, Lord Simon nudged Lord Victor and urged him forwards. Lord Victor was so like his brother, only younger. A handsome face, dark hair, and green eyes, which no doubt had women fawning over. And then there was the identifiable scar on his lip.

Lord Victor glanced away, sheepish, as he approached Ernest.

"My Lord," he greeted, nodding his head.

"Ah, so you can speak," Ernest scolded. "You were not so amenable to greeting me that night on my property."

"Do not worry, Bannerdown. I am sure my brother shall be on his best behaviour. Is that not right, Victor?"

"My very best," the younger brother swore.

Ernest met Lord Simon's eye. "And what of yourself?"

“My behaviour will be perfectly honourable when it comes to Lady—Miss Gundry. We shared a past, but she has made it clear she does not wish to share a future.”

Ernest nodded. “All I ask is that you respect her position as a governess. She is not the lady you once knew.”

Lord Simon looked hard at Ernest. “No,” he agreed. “She is not. If you will excuse us, Lord Bannerdown.”

Ernest’s thoughts drifted to Claire, on the arm of Lord Simon when she was much younger. He could imagine her face more youthful, her hair longer, perhaps, loose and styled as a lady’s would be. Jealousy spiked through his stomach as he envisioned her in such a way, and he scowled down at the floor, chiding himself for being so foolish.

Minstrels filled the hall with music, and couples branched off to dance, but Ernest stood alone, wishing Claire was there. It was clear Lord Simon had wanted to rekindle his relationship with Claire, given his earlier comment, and Ernest could only wonder: was that her best option? Would she be safe with Lord Simon in a way she was not with him?

His stomach grew heavy as it had been when he had considered marrying a woman who was not Claire the night he had dined at Graham’s house.

“Bannerdown! You should not be standing alone. Come join us!” The call came from a heavily moustached man who Ernest recognized as Lord Burdon, one of his uncle’s friends. He roped Ernest into the group of five other men, all respected lords, barons, and earls. “We have been very eager to meet you, Bannerdown. We were good friends with George, all of us, old school friends, but when we heard the terrible news, we could not quite bring ourselves to visit you. But I must apologize for that. Word has spread of what you did for the viscount here tonight, along with Mr

Courtenay. And Bannerdown? Your uncle would have been proud. You are becoming a fine earl, and your ward, Lady Florence, is delightful. I spoke with her briefly at the luncheon. She has a bright mind and has spoken at length of your support in her future debut.”

Ernest blanched, unsure of what to say. The men noticed, and Lord Burdon clapped his back, laughing.

“Your uncle would approve of you being his heir,” he told Ernest. “Do not look so afraid. You belong here.”

Something inside of him eased. For so long he had relied on his mother’s validation and his own hope to get through each day as an earl. But hearing it from friends of his uncle directly spurred something within him.

And they did not once pose a problem with him still working at the hospital.

“We would like to make a group donation to the wing,” Lord Burdon spoke up after they discussed the monument Ernest had commissioned for Archibald. “We lost friends in the war, too, and I personally think this commemoration is wonderful.”

“If you see Mr Courtenay at any point, you should address all funding with him. He is the spearhead of the wing. I am merely some decoration supporting it.”

That got a few chuckles from the men, and Ernest felt a sense of belonging as he looked around for Graham.

He found him among the dancers, with none other than Lady Samantha in his arms. Ernest blinked, checking that it was who he thought it was, but no, it truly was Graham and Lady Samantha. They turned around, mingling with the other dancers, but there was no losing sight of Graham’s smile and Lady Samantha’s surprise, as if

she could not quite imagine herself having had such a moment with Graham.

When Graham caught Ernest's eye, the man leaned into Lady Samantha, saying something quietly to her. Her face lit up, and she turned to Ernest, giving a small wave. He nodded to her, smiling, as Graham walked over.

It was the most elated Ernest had seen in his friend in a long time.

"You look rather pleased, Graham, and I do not believe it is only the guest turnout that has you in such good spirits."

"Indeed, it is not." Graham laughed. "I have danced with Lady Samantha only once, but it is enough. Through our letters and dinner the other night, after you left, we found out how much we bring laughter to one another. I have spent a long year wallowing in grief and regret, but Lady Samantha makes me laugh again, Ernest. She is delightful. If I am terribly honest, Ernest, I believe we have been trying to match the wrong people."

"If I am terribly honest with you, Graham, I had suspected such a thing even the day we met her when you both conversed very easily with one another. It is good to see how she helps you find yourself again. It is good to see you laugh once more, Graham."

His friend clasped his shoulder, nodding.

And Ernest could only think there was hope for Lady Samantha's future yet. After all, she would not have to bother with the marriage mart if Graham wished to propose to her. And by the look on his face as he looked at her, Ernest imagined it was not far from his friend's mind.

"Are you going to choose a dance partner?" Graham asked.

“I do not think so,” he said. “Not tonight.”

“Might I be so bold as to suggest that the only woman you would want to dance with is not in attendance?”

Ernest could not keep denying his feelings. He sighed, nodding. “You would be correct.”

“Ernest, this ball is for Archibald’s wing in the hospital, but you do not have to remain present all night if your mind is elsewhere. There is a library at the back of these halls, open to the public. Perhaps you might wish to take a moment in there away from the noise and the guests?”

It was a lifeline; one Ernest was grateful his friend had picked up on him needing. “Thank you, Graham.”

His friend pointed him towards the library, and Ernest wandered over there, slipping away from the party.

He found himself surrounded by books, remembering the day he had sat with his cousin and Claire in the library at Little Harkwell as Claire talked Florence through Shakespeare. He remembered the look she had given him, demure and subtle, a hint of a smile as if she wanted him to chase her for more.

What would await them in London?

He strolled around the library, looking at row upon row of books, admiring the extensive medical science collection, but soon, the library door opening caught his attention.

“I shall return soon—oh, Lady Samantha. I thought you perhaps were Mr Courtenay

come to retrieve me.”

“I am afraid not,” she answered politely. “Although I am surprised to find you here, Lord Bannerdown. I do not wish to be rude or insinuate your company is not wanted, but I was supposed to meet Lady Katherine here.”

Just as Ernest’s heart pounded, slowly realizing exactly what was happening, and as he was about to urge Lady Samantha to run quickly away, footsteps sounded through the hall. Voices rose to them, and Lady Samantha clearly realized the setup a moment after he did. Her eyes widened, meeting his, just as Lady Katherine appeared in the doorway, followed by a group of Ton women.

She gasped, and the women echoed as they all witnessed Ernest alone with Lady Samantha.

“Lady Samantha!” Lady Katherine cried. “I did not know you had affection for my son. And Lord Bannerdown, you know better than this! How—how could you do this to poor Lady Samantha!” Her voice was hysterical, fake in its rising pitch, drawing more and more attention to the situation.

Lady Samantha began to protest, but Lady Katherine wailed over her.

“Lord Bannerdown, I have always raised you to be dutiful! Will you dishonour this poor woman, who has already been burdened with so much? I cannot believe I have caught you in such a position!”

“Mother, lower your voice,” he warned quietly.

“Are you ashamed, Lord Bannerdown?” she cried out, pressing a hand to her chest. “Lady Samantha, I must apologize for my son’s shameful behaviour. How terrible I have caught Lord Bannerdown alone with you, Lady Samantha.”

Ernest's jaw tightened as she raised her voice, ensuring that anyone who did not see would certainly hear.

“Mother—”

“Come, Lady Samantha. I must save your reputation while I can. I feel rather responsible for you ever since the day you strolled with Lord Bannerdown in the gardens of Little Harkwell itself.”

The narration fell together in an oh-so-convenient way. Ernest watched, enraged, as Lady Samantha's wide eyes fell on him as she was tugged from the room. Oh, his mother had him exactly where she wanted him. Her smugness before the ball made sense, but his thoughts went only to Claire.

She was all he wanted, and he would not let his mother take that from him.

Chapter 22

Claire woke up the morning after the luncheon with excitement thrumming through her. It was like somebody was lighting a candle from the inside, sparking energy through her. Preparing for the day was an easy task, her focus renewed by the thought of seeing Ernest.

She could not entirely remember when she had gone from going through the motions of her life to enjoying being a governess to now hoping that every day would begin with Ernest. Requesting him to break his fast with Florence and herself had been for the young woman's benefit but Claire found herself with plenty of selfish reasons to hope he kept joining them in the breakfast hall.

However, when she arrived, dressed in one of her nicer gowns that was practical for her role, she found only Lady Florence waiting at the table. For the first time in a while, there was no sign of Lord Bannerdown.

And Claire could not help her steps faltering as she blinked, looking around.

"Lord Bannerdown shall not be joining us today?" she asked Lady Florence. "Have I missed his presence?"

Lady Florence shook her head. "No, he did not arrive at all, not even to explain his absence." She sighed heavily. "My toast has grown cold, and my mood has grown miserable. It feels as though we are right back to the start of when he arrived and wished to have little to do with me."

“Oh, Lady Florence, I am sure that is not the case,” Claire said, sitting down. But she could not help as her attention strayed to the empty chair at the head of the table that Lord Bannerdown usually occupied.

He had once confessed to her, a week ago, that breaking his fast with her was his favourite part of his new routine, for he got to start his day with her. And that thrilled Claire, especially as their departure for London grew closer.

Soon, they would be away from Bath, away from the rumours and the threats and the constant feeling of looking over her shoulder.

But disappointment weighed heavily on her now as she buttered some toast and joined Lady Florence. They retreated to the library, where Claire continued the girl’s lessons in Spanish. Lady Katherine had said a Spanish prince might attend some seasonal balls, and Lady Florence was to be prepared to speak with him.

“And how do you ask how someone is doing?” Claire asked, but her attention kept flickering to the open doorway, waiting for Ernest to walk past on his way to his study.

“Que tal,” Lady Florence recited.

“Very good,” Claire said, her voice faint and distant, barely listening.

“It is not really, though, Miss Gundry,” Lady Florence protested. “As that is the informal way, is it not? I could not very well address a Spanish prince so informally.”

Claire realized then that she had tricked her into acknowledging that she was distracted.

“Miss Gundry, I do not know if a governess is allowed a day of absence, but you

seem distracted. If you are sick and need to retire, then I certainly shall not breathe a word of it to anyone. But I suspect you are not sick at all but distracted by thoughts of my cousin. Am I correct?"

Lady Florence's knowing smirk was enough for Claire to know she had been caught.

"You are right," she admitted timidly, feeling shy about admitting this to her tutee. "I ... I admire Lord Bannerdown greatly."

Lady Florence laughed quietly. "I know you do. It is rather plain to see. You look at him like—"

"Please do not say like Juliet looks at Romeo," Claire interrupted.

Lady Florence only laughed harder. "No, I was going to say like you see a brilliant, bright future with him. When you first arrived here, you did not look such a way. You often looked ... lost."

"Oh."

"But I am happy if my cousin has brought you back to knowing your way again. He can be your compass."

Claire blushed furiously at that before trying to compose herself.

"There is another thing," Lady Florence said tentatively. "And I have not entirely known how to broach the subject with you, but I do suppose this is as good a moment as any. I have ... I have heard some rumours, especially at the luncheon yesterday, that you have not always been a governess but rather a former lady like I am. That you were courted by Lord Simon, Victor's brother. Is this true?"

Claire hesitated before nodding. “I am sorry I did not confess my secrets to you directly.”

“They are your own,” Lady Florence assured her. “And I did not confess mine to you.”

“I almost did if that is any consolation. I almost told you when I found your letter from Victor. I wished to share my true story of my courtship with Lord Simon.”

“And if you ever wish to share that story with me, I will listen. You have been kind and patient with me when I thought nobody else had the time for me after my parents’ death. So, thank you, Miss Gundry. If the rumours come to light, then I am sure you might not stay on as my governess. You might even be able to reclaim your title. But I would still like to have you in my life, regardless. And that includes you having my blessing to pursue your admiration for my cousin if it is what you both wish.”

The information was something Claire processed slowly, and she was hesitant to realize that Lady Florence was offering her something beyond simply governess and tutee. She was offering confidence and friendship.

For which Claire was grateful.

“Now, how might I formally address the Spanish prince?” Lady Florence teased, but before Claire could answer her, Lady Katherine appeared.

“Lady Katherine!” Lady Florence called out. “If I may bother you for a moment, do you know where my cousin has gone? He has not attended his study nor breakfast this morning. We have not seen him since he left for the ball last night.”

Claire’s dread grew the moment she watched Lady Katherine’s smirk grow. She shrugged as if unbothered, encased in a smart, beautiful red gown. “Perhaps he was

up early to spend as much of his day as possible with Lady Samantha. After all, they were caught together at the ball last night. I found them myself in an incredibly compromising situation.”

Claire fought to keep her composure neutral, but her heart was crushed. She had feared his feelings for Lady Samantha, and he had admitted she was lovely in looks and personality. Had everything got too much for him? Had he decided that Lady Samantha was a good, safe option for him?

Her chest tightened.

Ernest was not a rake. She had to believe that. He had barely known how to be around Claire at the very start, let alone court another woman simultaneously. There was something not right about Lady Katherine, who had been the very person to discover them, and she was bragging about it. Surely, a mother who had caught her son in a compromising situation would be somewhat ashamed or muttering about honour and doing the right thing by the woman he was caught with.

Lady Katherine only looked pleased with herself, as pleased as she had been during the other times she had set up a meeting between the two.

But...

A small voice in her head whispered that perhaps Lord Bannerdown had finally succumbed to all of that and fallen for Lady Samantha.

Lady Florence glanced at Claire before smiling at Lady Katherine. “Indeed. Well, I hope he is back in time to dine with us.”

“I would not hold out hope.”

And then Lady Katherine was gone in a swish of red, and Claire was left hardening herself against the onslaught of disappointment and crushing weight of a potential circumstance she did not like.

I must know the truth, she thought.

“Lady Florence, I think I shall end our lessons here for the day. You may return to your beloved Shakespeare.”

Claire waited, waited, and waited. She waited throughout the afternoon, long into the evening, and as the sky had well-turned inky black, she still waited, but there was no sign of Ernest.

She paced and paced, so much so that she imagined she would wear out the floorboards.

Hours passed, Lady Florence retired for the night, and still, Ernest did not show.

Claire switched between watching from her window, keeping a candle lit so he would know she was waiting for him, and watching the door, hoping he would knock.

And when a knock did sound on her door, Claire jumped to open it, wrenching it open—only not to find Ernest but Winnie, who looked troubled.

“Claire, there is a visitor downstairs for you.”

Claire did not waste any time. Perhaps it was Ernest arranging a secret meeting! Perhaps they were fleeing to London early. She raced past Winnie, who called after her to slow down. Would Lady Florence be down there, waiting?

She had been right.

He did not have affection for Lady Samantha after all.

Ernest wanted her. He wanted—

It was not Ernest who waited for Claire in the basement but an unfamiliar face. She halted sharply, slowing her gait right down to a respectable pace as she beheld the stranger.

“Lady Claire Garner?”

The name dropped through her. Not another Ton member from her past coming to seek her out.

“Yes?” Her voice was shaky as she tried to place the woman’s face.

“You are as beautiful as the day I walked away,” the woman said, causing Claire’s stomach to drop. “You have grown into such a beautiful woman. You have thrived, as I knew you would, even without me. I am Lady Magdalene Garner, Claire. I am your mother.”

Claire felt the room spinning around her. That was why the colour of her eyes was so familiar—they were her own on a stranger’s face. And her hair... it was the same wheat colour as Claire’s. She was so very much like her mother, and it hurt to know.

But anger came from that hurt as she stormed forward. “Leave. I would like you to leave this house immediately. One person has already seen you, and that is enough.”

“Claire, wait—”

“Oh, I waited long enough,” Claire snapped. “Your six-year-old waited at the window for you for years before giving up, finally. Do not even ask me to wait for you any longer.”

“I only mean please wait to hear me out before you send me away.”

“Why?” She cried. “Why should I hear anything you have to say? Why now when I have made a new life for myself?”

“And I am so proud of you for it.”

“Do not condescend to me.”

“Claire, I have come to reconcile with you!” Magdalene protested. “I was encouraged to seek you out by Lady Katherine of this beautiful home.”

Claire gaped at her. Of course, Lady Katherine was at the centre of yet another ploy to upend Claire’s plans. “I do not wish to reconcile. You are barely a mother to me after you abandoned me. I would like you to leave and never come back. Do not write to me, do not seek me out, and do not ask about me.”

Magdalene lifted her chin, her mouth quivering as if hurt. “I will return, Claire, and that is my promise. I have a right to know my own daughter.”

“And I had a right to know my mother when I was a little girl, but you took that away from me.”

Her anger simmered in the basement. If Magdalene would not be the first to leave, then Claire would. She did not have to endure this. But before she could stomp away, Magdalene departed, and Claire was left alone in the basement.

I have sent her out, yet I feel exactly as I did twenty years ago, wishing she would come back.

Chapter 23

Exhaustion weighed on Ernest as he looked around the gentlemen's club, constantly aware of the darkening sky outside the window.

He had wandered home late from the ball, avoiding the guests leaving the party, including his mother, and had left for the hospital early in the morning. He had stayed late, taking on his colleague's work as an excuse to stay longer to avoid returning home.

His mother was not someone he could face, and seeing Claire, knowing that his mother had likely already gloated about the scandal she was telling everybody she had caught, was incomprehensible.

A stronger man would have marched right home and spoke the truth. Ernest poured his only drink for the evening. Just one, he had promised himself. And then he would be dutiful and return home. He just needed some time. He had hidden away today, sequestering himself in the corner of the gentlemen's club. If he showed his face in Society, then there would be questions.

He had already fielded some of them at the hospital that day.

Will you now propose to Lady Samantha?

Lord Bannerdown, did you truly compromise the young woman?

Do you think yourself honouring the viscount by being caught alone with Lady

Samantha?

They weighed down on him, and he had ignored every single one, sending only a scathing look their way before leaving for the club.

But he could not avoid them all forever, and least of all, Claire. She would know something, and he needed her to know the truth more than anybody. He would not be able to bear it if she believed the word going around about him.

The ton was calling him a rake.

Him!

He could barely even say hello to Miss Gundry the first time he had seen her, let alone flirt with another woman.

No, he needed to come up with a way to prevent Lady Samantha from entering into any obligation he was forced to present and had to find a way to prove his innocence. He swigged his drink.

I will curse my mother until the day this is all over, he thought bitterly. Fury was becoming something he was more and more familiar with lately, and he could not keep his emotions under wraps where his mother was concerned. She was doing everything to ignite his temper, and he did not know why. What was she doing? She spoke in riddles, smug, awful riddles that he did not know how to decode.

How could she expect him to go through with marrying Lady Samantha? That was what everybody now expected him to do. It would be honourable, to save her from being shamed out of Society and prospects.

And how could he even hope to guide Lady Florence into this labyrinthine society

when he could not even figure it out for himself?

A man moved through the crowd, his eyes on Ernest. But it was quite possibly the only man Ernest would agree to see, for it was the only man who knew Ernest truly.

Graham.

He sat down and helped himself to a drink from the bottle Ernest had bought despite not planning to have more than one drink.

“You have had some isolated time long enough, dear friend,” Graham said. “It is time for company now.”

“Is it good company?”

Graham snorted. “It is honest company.”

“Graham, I did not—”

“I know,” he said. “Lady Samantha called upon me first thing this morning before I left for the hospital. I believe her, and I believe you. The only person I do not believe is Lady Katherine. I have never been fond of her, you know this. I believe she can be like a snake, slithering through the tall grasses, only to strike when nobody is watching.”

“That I can see,” Ernest muttered. “Thank you for believing me. I do not know what I would have done if you had not. I feared you thought I was encroaching on your admirer.”

“My admirer,” Graham repeated, clearing his throat. “You have expressed your distaste for courting Lady Samantha well enough for me to know you had no interest

in meeting her in private. But what do you want, Ernest? It is time to admit the truth. What do you want from your life because I fear it is not this.”

“It is not,” Ernest agreed. “The truth is I admire Claire. I admire her so much I sometimes cannot think when she is not near me. The thought of her sitting in Little Harkwell wondering if I was indeed caught in a scandalous act with Lady Samantha tortures me, yet I am a coward and cannot go to her. Not yet. Not until I have a solution.”

“A solution, you say?” Graham’s smile deepened. “Well, as it happens, I might have one for you. As I mentioned, I saw Lady Samantha this morning. And I thought more about your words yesterday. She brings out a part of me I have not seen since before the war. A man that I thought I had lost on the battlefield. Myself. My old self, and she says I make her feel laughter again, the way she did before ... before grief invaded her heart. I have grown fond of her over time, Ernest and I have already presented the idea of marriage to her, and she is very excited about the prospect. I have warned her I cannot offer her what another man with a title and an estate would, but I can offer her a life of laughter, affection, and dancing.

“For so long, I believed you and Lady Samantha should have been the two to court. But now I see it is me who can honour both my friendship with you and Archibald. I was a coward not to suggest it in the first place, but seeing how much the idea of you and Lady Samantha marrying crushed you, I can see now how strongly you feel for Claire.”

Ernest shook his head. “But Graham, are you sure you not only say this for my benefit? You enjoyed Claire’s company.”

“And I still felt weary and grief-stricken. But with Lady Samantha, it is different.”

“I warned you off her,” Ernest muttered. “Are you sure you are not simply being

agreeable to that?"

"I assure you," Graham told him, meeting his gaze seriously. "Lady Samantha is happy with the idea and agrees we can work on a future together where we shall honour Archibald. But, Ernest, in exchange, I beseech you to chase your own happiness."

"I do not know what that means anymore."

"Yes, you do."

Yes, I do, he thought.

"It is Claire," Graham told him gently. "And you really do need to chase her before she does something drastic in response to both the rumours about herself and the ones now about you."

It struck him like lightning, then. Claire would not leave for London without him, would she?

He stood up so fast he banged his knee against the table. "Thank you, Graham. You are the truest friend a man could have asked for."

"Do not wax poetic to me, you fool. Go on, go after her."

And he did. He raced from the gentlemen's club and made it back to Little Harkwell as fast as he could. He would start something real with Claire properly—he would make her see he was honest and true. He would lavish her with finery and riches if that was what she wished. He would give her comfort and long days in the summer and warm nights in the winter.

He wanted a future with Claire, and he would be damned if he let his mother take that away from him.

It was the middle of the night by the time he made it back home, and he heard the sound of a door closing in the basement. He paused, slowing his gait not to look odd to the staff, only to find Claire trudging up the stairs to the main floor of the house.

Her face was twisted in devastation, and tear tracks shone on her cheeks. Her mouth was sullen, and her eyes were downcast.

Ernest could not hold himself back anymore.

He went to her, his footsteps gaining her attention. She gasped upon seeing him, and a moment of relief crossed her face before he swept her up in his arms.

“Claire,” he murmured, holding her close. He no longer cared who saw them. “Claire, whatever you have heard, I beg you not to believe it. It is not true.”

He heard a snuffle pressed to his jacket. “I did not believe it. Not truly. You are an honest man.”

“I am,” he said. “And I am here for you; whatever has you so distraught, I am right here.”

Chapter 24

As soon as Ernest's arms wrapped around her, Claire melted into him. Every bit of tension she had carried all day dissolved, and she went slack in his arms. Her mother's encounter left her rattled, but his presence made her feel as though she could actually handle it.

The ghost from her past would hopefully remain that.

Claire was an adult—she had made her own life away from her mother, and she surely got to decide whether her mother remained in it. This time, Claire got the choice.

“Come with me,” she murmured, leading Ernest to her own chambers. Once there, they slipped inside, and she found solace in the privacy it would allow them.

“My mother came here looking for me,” Claire confessed. “She was apparently invited by Lady Katherine, which is no surprise anymore. But she wishes to reconcile with me. I cannot let that happen. She can enter my life and utterly ruin it. She can undo every bit of hard work I have put into my life to get where I am today.” Her voice cracked as she collapsed on the end of her bed.

“My mother is at the centre of everything wrong,” Ernest hissed. “I will never let my mother ruin your life, Claire. This is your life, and she cannot take that from you. I am so sorry my mother has involved herself in your life in her attempt to punish me through becoming acquainted with you. She is playing a dangerous power game, and I do not know when she will stop.”

“I do not know what my mother wants,” Claire said. “Although ...” She thought of the letter her mother had sent her and retrieved it from her desk. She brought it back to Ernest, and both perched respectfully on the end of her bed.

“See, there.” Ernest pointed to a return address that mentioned a hotel in Bristol.

“That is near where I am from,” Claire told him. There was a tight knot of anxiety in her chest that she could not get rid of, no matter how many times she tried to ease herself. “Will you attend with me tomorrow? I do not think I can do it alone.”

“Of course, I will,” he promised. “But I should retire to my own room, Claire. I cannot be caught in here. But before I go, I must inform you that anything my mother said about Lady Samantha is not true. She set us both up.”

“I know, Lord Bannerdown.”

He gave her a charming smile. “Please call me Ernest.”

“I ... Okay.” She let out a nervous laugh.

“I wish for that as I want to tell you my feelings, Claire.” He hesitated, stood before her. “My friend, Mr Courtenay has proposed to Lady Samantha, and the two of them are planning to marry. They have come to care for one another. But I care for you, Claire. And I swear I shall not abandon you in any way. These last several months have been made bright because of you. I have weathered everything because of you. Claire, you are brilliant and beautiful. Your voice brings me peace, and your smile makes every day feel as though it is the kiss of summer. You have not only brought Florence and me closer together, but you have given me new life. But that is only a life I wish to share with you. I cannot imagine one day without you here, and even just spending the day apart from you today has been torturous.”

Claire's eyes widened. She had convinced herself that she was the only one who felt the way she did, but Ernest's confession spilled from his lips, beautiful, and exactly what she needed and wanted to hear.

"Claire," Ernest continued with a growing smile, "How do I compare thee to a summer's day?"

"Oh, Ernest." She laughed, stifling her mouth with her hand so they were not heard. "Ernest, I feel every part the same. I have grown to care so deeply for you, and I tried to deny my feelings for so long due to my position, and not wanting to be improper. I felt as though I brought forth a messy life, and I did not want you to have to be tangled up in it. But the more I tried to pull away, the more you tugged me in, and I was helpless to fall. I dream of you day and night and search for you in every room I step into. You are not only a guiding light for me, Ernest, but you are light. You have made what was a very lonely life good again. You have made my life something I love once again."

Her eyes met his, and he held her hands in his own, bringing them to his mouth to kiss. The soft brush of his lips was tender and sent shivers through Claire.

"You must sleep now, Claire," he told her. "And tomorrow, we shall confront your mother."

After Ernest left, Claire giddily climbed into bed, once again feeling that weight lift from her shoulders. With her head cushioned on the pillow, she could not fight the smile on her face. She believed Ernest, and for the first time in a long time, her future felt within reach.

Standing before her mother in the hotel room where Magdalene was staying, Claire

waited for the woman to speak.

Ernest waited outside for her, and Claire was left looking in the mirror of herself, only twenty years older.

“I am very touched you have come to see me,” Magdalene said. “After yesterday, I did not want to hope for anything at all.”

“You turned up in the middle of the night with no warning,” Claire shot back. “Of course, I was very shocked.”

“I did write,” Magdalene said. “Clearly, you received the letter, or you would not have found me here.”

“Mother, what is it you wish to gain from reaching out to me?”

“I told you. I wish to reconcile, my dearest Claire.”

“Why now? Why not even ten years ago? Why not when I debuted? Or when my father died, and I was left destitute? I needed a mother all that time ago, not now.”

“Then have me as a friend,” Magdalene offered. “Claire, I cannot undo the mistakes I made or redo the times I was not there for you, but you must understand that I had to leave. The baron was not a good man, and I knew of his debts. I knew he was a risk-taker, and there were many days when I felt as though I was one of those risks, destined to blow up. I had to leave, and France—where I left to—was no place for a young girl.”

“So, you left the young girl behind to fend for herself,” Claire muttered. “It is unthinkable. Do you know what your actions did to my father?”

“That is what I am trying to say, Claire,” Magdalene stressed. “I did not cause those ways of his gambling and investing. Of his solitude. He was like that during our marriage. I simply could not take it anymore. I met Gerard when he was travelling through Bristol, and when he asked me to leave for France with him, I could hardly say no.”

“You could hardly say yes!” Claire argued. “You had a child. You abandoned me!”

“I had to escape,” Magdalene whispered.

“And was it worth it?”

Magdalene’s eyes filled with tears. “I have returned to England with nothing, but at least I have not returned to the worthless, abusive man that your father was.”

“He was so awful, and yet you felt very comfortable to leave me behind with him.”

“I wished to take you. I made plans with Gerard to retrieve you once we were settled but ...”

“But you forgot?” Claire guessed. “Because while you forgot me, Mother, I was trying to debut alone, my father forgot half the time that he had responsibilities as a baron, and when he died, his debts passed to me. I had to balance his debts, and when there was nothing left and I was destitute, I was forced to leave that life behind. I became this. Miss Claire Gundry, a governess to a wonderful young woman whom I could not bear to leave behind, and she is not even my own child. I do not understand how you could have done that to me.”

“I cannot explain more than I already have,” Magdalene whispered. “All I can promise is that I shall spend every day attempting to make up for what I have caused. Will you let me? I merely wish to know you are happy and perhaps meet with you

occasionally.”

“I do not know.” Claire’s admittance came through her tears. She had to look away from her mother’s red-ringed eyes. “This is a massive shock to me. I thought myself no better than an orphan, really. My father was dead, and my mother did not want me. You do not get to want me now, for that is my decision to want you back in my life. Do you understand?”

Timidly, Magdalene nodded. “You have grown into a very headstrong woman, Claire. I am pro—”

“Do not say you are proud of me. I cannot bear to hear that. Because I practically raised myself when I should not have had to. My life should have been different.”

“But does this life make you happy?”

Claire’s mouth tightened. “I have found ways for it to do so. And that is enough for me.” She turned to leave, unable to bear more of this. “Mother, I cannot forgive you for abandoning me, even if you have indeed changed your ways. I must ask you for some time to process your return to my life. I cannot guarantee the answer at the end of that time will be a yes, but I need it regardless.”

Her mother—how strange it was to envision her as that—only nodded. “I shall await your correspondence then.”

Claire nodded before she left the hotel room. There was no point in lingering, and she had nothing more to say. There was only that tight knot in her chest that she was scared would burst any moment. She said nothing as she approached Ernest, who looked at her, alarmed.

“What happened? Are you all right?”

She shook her head to indicate she could not yet speak. And she did not until they were in the carriage—and then she broke like a dam, and her tears spilled in uncontrollable bursts. Ernest was immediately there, holding her shoulders as she cried into him.

“Ernest, I have no idea what to do,” she whispered. “This place has become a nightmare. Rumours, whispers, gossip, judgemental looks. I feel as though Lady Katherine has tricks up her sleeve that I cannot predetermine, but I will keep on worrying about how she will ruin my life further. First, Lord Simon and now my mother. I cannot endure this. Do—do I become yet another Claire? Start over elsewhere? Or do I help my mother and start anew with her and try to overcome the past hurt? Do I give in to Lord Simon?”

At that, Ernest’s eyes darkened, and he leaned over her as he shook his head. “No, do not. That is not the answer.”

His voice was low and hard in the confined carriage space. Yet as he loomed over her, Claire felt the safest she ever had done. She looked up, meeting his gaze.

Do you see it? she thought. Do you see the love I harbour for you in my eyes?

She could not say it the night before, too anguished by her mother’s arrival, but she wanted to say it now. She wanted to hear him say it, too.

“Then if Lord Simon is not the answer,” she murmured, “who is?”

“I am,” he whispered. “I—as I said last night, Claire, I have admirations for you that I am not willing to deny any longer. I cannot keep on denying it. I am no master of words, not really, yet there are not enough poets in the world who could capture my love for you. I am a man who uses his hands to convey things. My work at the hospital, on the battlefield, proposals, gestures, so words are not my strong suit but ...

Claire, I understand that we both have pasts that haunt us. They seem to follow us around every corner, but I believe we can make something better. You think your only option is to return to your past, but there is another option. An entirely new future, created only by yourself.”

Claire’s mouth parted, words not coming out. “What are you trying to say, Lord Bannerdown?”

“I am attempting to ask for your hand, Claire.” He laughed. “Albeit awkwardly, I am presuming. I do not want Lady Samantha or anybody other than you. I wish I had made that more obvious.”

“Oh, you have,” she murmured. “But I longed to tease you. However, I must say I am at a loss for words myself. I want to marry you, Ernest, but only if you are sure this is the life you want. I am a woman caught between two lives, it seems.”

“And I am a man of the same situation.”

“So perhaps we fit rather perfectly,” she whispered.

“An earl and a governess.” He laughed.

“A lady and a medic,” she added.

“I love you, Claire Gundry.”

“I love you, Ernest Barnes.”

He shuddered above her at her use of his proper name. Not a lord, not an earl, simply a man who had once been a commoner and was forced into a noble life. But he was still himself underneath. To Claire, he was everything rolled into one man.

And together, there would be no further secrets, only a future where they both learned how to trust and begin anew.

Chapter 25

Happiness followed Ernest around over the remainder of the day and the rest of the week. He had done well to avoid his mother, for she was out in Society, chattering with anyone she could. Ernest knew she had heard of Graham's proposal to Lady Samantha, for he had heard the commotion from the parlour upon her reading about it in the gossip sheets.

But he had his own engagement to tell her about.

The day they were due to depart London came swiftly, and Ernest knew that day was his best chance to tell her. He did not want his mother to be left in the dark about his life, but he also did not want to risk her retaliating against Claire.

"Will you truly not say goodbye to me, Mother?" he asked in the drawing room doorway. Lady Katherine sat alone, her armchair positioned by the window, where it had been ever since she realized her plans had begun to slip. "You will not say goodbye even to Lady Florence?"

"I do not care for goodbyes," she said, her voice as cold as ever. "So simply leave me be, Ernest, and be on your way."

"Do not pretend you are sad to see me go. You have only ever cared about reclaiming Little Harkwell, and now it is yours to manage for the next couple of months. You shall be able to do it alone and invite whomever you please without any interruptions. I should think you are glad."

“Hmm.”

“Is that all you truly will say?”

“I have no more to say to you.”

She was angry at him for not pursuing Lady Samantha, for ruining her well-laid plans, and at Claire, for turning both Lord Simon and Magdalene away. Ernest knew his mother hated having no control, and knowing that was slipping from her would be a terrible ordeal to endure.

“Then, if that is the case, I have one last parting thing to say to you,” he told her. “I am to marry Claire Gundry.”

Lady Katherine went very still. Where she rested on the arms of the chair, her nails dug into the material as she looked around at him. “What did you say?”

“I am marrying Claire Gundry,” he told her. “And that is all I have to say on that matter.”

“Do not walk away from me, Ernest!”

“Did you not just tell me to?” he asked, raising his brows as if surprised at the contradiction.

“You are a fool. This whole family has bred fools! I tried to prevent it all from the start, Ernest, and I could have protected you. I tried to protect you—especially from that governess riddled with deceit. How could you marry her when you do not know her?”

“The only woman I do not know, Mother, is you!” he shot back. “Tell me the truth.

All of it. About my father, your—your obsession with this legacy of the Bannerdown name. Tell me.”

An evil glint in her eye unnerved Ernest as she stood and stalked towards him. “I wanted everything for you, Ernest. I left your father behind because I knew we deserved more. I had been a lovestruck fool and left it behind when I was younger. But as soon as I held you in my arms, I knew I needed to achieve better for you.”

“I perfectly loved everything you gave me with my father,” he told her, anguished. “I did not need a title or an estate to love and appreciate.”

“Oh, but you did and look how much you have grown and achieved.”

“Mother, I am not a child anymore,” he argued. “I do not need to be spoken down to in such ways. I did not wish for this life. Tragedy befell your brother, yet you have not seemed to care at all. Lady Florence has craved a connection with us both, but due to your treatment of her, I also put up my walls. I wish I had not done so, Mother. This life fell into our lap, and sometimes, I wish it had not happened!

“It did not simply fall into our lap,” she sighed. “Do not belittle it so. Sometimes sacrifices are necessary for greatness.”

He paused. “What sacrifices? Do you mean leaving my father?”

Her eyes widened. “Y—yes, yes, of course I do.”

“Mother,” he warned. “Tell me what has happened. What happened to my uncle and cousin was an accident, was it not?”

“Of course, darling.”

“Mother.” His shout rolled through the room, catching her off-guard. “Tell me the truth once and for all.”

“Ernest—please, you must understand. What I did was only for you. You deserved a better life than that townhouse and playing the role of a medic. I needed to rescue us both.”

He stepped towards her. Her expression flickered. “How did you rescue us?”

He saw the moment his mother gave in. Her lower lip trembled, and she sagged against the chair she had been in. “When I learned of my brother’s illness and terrible battle with consumption, he begged me not to contact Matthew or Honora. He said they would catch it and be at risk. He asked me to send for a physician at once.” Her head cocked as she told her tale, and dread pitted in Ernest’s stomach. “Instead, I simply sent for his son and daughter-in-law and did not send for a physician. I saw an opportunity when it arose. Ernest, tell me you understand why I acted in such a way. I did not think they would die. I merely thought that my brother would recover, and after seeing how well you would take over the estate while he recovered, he would see what a good choice it would be to let us live here once again. I quarantined with Lady Florence to protect her.”

“Mother, did you know they would all die?” he choked.

But she shook her head. “I did not. I simply thought to have them all out of the way temporarily, to give you a chance to prove yourself.”

He did not believe her. Perhaps, at first, she had not thought to be terrible, but over time, it was as though her choices had hardened within her, and she now claimed them as rightful. A meaningful sacrifice for him to take glory.

“This is why you push Lady Florence? Why you yell at her? And why you tried to

force me into a marriage with Lady Samantha?”

She shrunk back, nodding.

“You have tried to control everything to alleviate your guilt.” He shook his head. “Well, Mother, you have your wish. I am the earl, but I do not wish to be. I do not like this life. But Claire makes it bearable. I do not need your reconciliation in trying to meddle with my life. I am well old enough to choose my own paths. Do not attempt to contact me while in London, and do not expect to receive word from me for a long, long while.”

“Ernest—”

He shook his head, turning to leave the drawing room. “Your tyranny must end, and I will keep Lady Florence and Claire safe from you. For good. I do hope this large, empty house is worth it during the next few months.”

With that, he turned on his heel and walked away from her.

Chapter 26

London had dazzled Claire for a week, but for Ernest, it had been a week of not knowing what to do. She watched him wander from room to room in the townhouse, vacantly silent, and Claire had done everything she could to bring him back to himself.

She dined with him, strolled with him around London, and had even been to his favourite bakery that he had told her about.

Still, it was a slow process to get him to smile at her and speak properly again.

She sat with him in the townhouse garden, enjoying a pleasantly mild day. The snow was melting around them, and the sun was showing its face slightly. She delighted in its warmth, no matter how brief.

“I just cannot believe it,” Ernest murmured, gazing off. “I cannot bring my family back, nor undo what my mother caused, but the lengths she went to ... It is rather barbaric even though no true crime was committed.”

“It is awful,” Claire agreed. “And a lot of her actions make sense. She has been obsessed with wealth and prosperity for a very long time. Even Winnie has complained about the high standard she demands of her maids.”

She reached over to take his hands in hers. “Ernest, is there anything I can do? I hate to see you so ... Not yourself.”

“It will take time for me to truly recover,” he murmured. “But I shall get there.”

“I do not wish to rush you,” she assured him. “Although there is a play tonight in London proper that I wanted to ask to attend.”

“Is Lady Florence interested?”

“I was actually hoping it would just be you and I,” she admitted, biting her lip.

“Oh.” He blinked, smiling in that small, playful way she had missed. “I would very much like that, Miss Gundry. But what will the Ton say?”

She gasped teasingly. “Oh, dear, Lord Bannerdown. They might chase us right out of London!”

Her teasing was enough to get him out of his reverie and laughing quietly. There was still a sense of vacancy in his eyes, but she was glad for the singular brief moment of laughter.

“Is anybody out here?” a male voice called from within the house. “Your housekeeper has sent me right in.”

“We are out here, Father,” Ernest called, standing up. Claire did the same, tucking her hands before her as her eyes fell on a man who emerged from within the townhouse. He looked exactly like Ernest but older, grayer, and with a thin moustache. He had kind old eyes as if he had seen plenty yet managed to keep such tenderness about him.

Claire smiled, curtsying.

“Mr Barnes,” she said, ducking her head. “It is a pleasure to meet you.”

“Father, this is Miss Gundry, Lady Florence’s governess. She is accompanying us during Lady Florence’s stay in London.” He paused, reminding himself that his father would not disapprove of his choices and was not the same as his mother. He had been raised humbly and would support Ernest. “Claire is also my betrothed, Father.”

Claire herself blushed as Mr Barnes kissed her hand.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Gundry. Although ... I do wonder where Lady Florence is if you are out here. Or are you now able to drop such a pretence and think I do not see through it?” He gave a playful wink, and Claire immediately relaxed.

“My father taught me everything I know about being a medic,” Ernest told her.

The three of them retreated inside the townhouse into the parlour where wine had been freshly prepared and poured. Claire stayed a respectable distance from Ernest, in an armchair that faced him, while Mr Barnes sat adjacent to them both.

“Father, I wanted to tell you about my mother,” Ernest said.

For Claire, listening to the tale of her wrongdoings for the second time somehow made it all the more stark. She still could not quite believe it. But she was even more surprised to see that Mr Barnes did not look entirely surprised.

“Your mother ... she always harboured an obsession for her title. She always talked about getting it back one day, and it drove a wedge between us to the point where we would go days without speaking. She had an affair, it seemed, with her love for a title. I felt less and less important to her, until one day, she simply disappeared. And the next thing I knew, I was still Katherine’s husband, but she was now Lady Katherine, the lady of Little Harkwell. I truly cannot say I am surprised she went to such lengths.” He shook his head.

“I have told her she has the house to manage alone now,” Ernest muttered.

“I believe she will likely retreat to one of the other properties, do you not agree?” Mr Barnes asked. “I think distance shall be her way to save face. For if the Ton were to get word of this, they shall curse her to the heavens, I imagine.”

“My uncle was very well-liked in Bath,” Ernest agreed.

“And you are well-liked as well, my boy,” Mr Barnes said. “And you have a fine betrothed here. I cannot see why Bath would not welcome you both with open arms no matter what becomes of your mother. Scandals can wash away like ink stains, Ernest. It will take a while, but soon, nothing will be left of it. Focus on your future, yes? You have a prosperous one, it seems.”

Mr Barnes shared a knowing look with Claire, who nodded eagerly. Together, the three of them dined on wine until the late afternoon before Mr Barnes had to depart for a meeting in the evening.

His departure left Ernest and Claire alone, and Ernest turned to her just as the sun began to dip in the sky.

“I wish to do this before we attend the play,” he told her, and she gasped as he moved down onto one knee, gazing up at her. He took her hand in his and reached into his pocket with his other hand, producing a ring. “This is no family heirloom, for I cannot think of a worse thing at this moment.” He laughed softly. “But I had this especially made for you, Claire. It is a new ring for a new beginning between us both. New lives—ones that are our own and only ours to decide. Claire, you have changed my life. You have given me courage and bravery, support and love. You have been patient and encouraged me when I wished to give up hope. You are dastardly intelligent, and I fear I cannot keep up with you, but I wish to spend every single day of my life attempting to do so. You have given Lady Florence a chance to connect, to

love, and to feel passion. You are an unwavering candle in the snow, Claire, and I shall follow you through any darkness life tries to shadow us with.”

Claire blinked at him through her tears, her breath hitching. But as she offered her ring finger for him to slip it on with, a door opened.

“What is happening?” Lady Florence asked, gasping. “Oh, heavens above! Have you said yes, yet? Oh, I cannot miss such a moment.”

“If you will stop interrupting, then I am sure Claire shall!” Ernest laughed aloud as Lady Florence rushed into the room, holding back a squeal. She practically pushed Claire forward, towards Ernest.

“Yes,” Claire answered. “I shall marry you, Ernest.”

Lady Florence’s sound of joy could have shaken the entirety of London, but all Claire cared about was being swept up in Ernest’s arms. She was engaged—she was engaged, and her life was starting to feel a lot clearer, and that was all she could wish for.

That night, she sat at her desk in her room in the townhouse. Winnie’s manuscript had been mailed to her that day.

She realized this was not the story of Prince Patrick and Miss Winona, but of another one. Lord Basington and Miss Godfrey—Claire smiled at the play on their names as she slowly realized that the characters mirrored them—a lord and governess who slowly fell in love over the course of one beautiful but sorrowful winter. As she read it, she discovered the villain, Lady Kimberley, who had dealt a hand in the death of her brother and nephew. And then there was Lady Felicity, who was Miss Godfrey’s

ward, and Claire read the same events she had lived through, fictionalized, on paper.

She read for a long time, enraptured by her friend's writing. Indeed, it should be a hit, as Winnie had proclaimed.

And Claire realized what Winnie had done. In writing of the former owners of 'Long Hallingstone House' and about their deaths, it alluded to the real Lady Kimberley's—Lady Katherine's—guilt. Winnie, the clever lady's maid, had suspected her all along, and had now written the story into a publishable state, ready for the Ton to decide should it be published.

Claire smiled, reading through from the viewpoint of 'Lord Basington'. When a knock on her door signalled Ernest's arrival, Claire held up the sheet she read from.

"Lord Basington had always loved Miss Godfrey," she read aloud. "From the moment he laid eyes on her, to the very tumultuous end of their lives at Long Hallingstone House. He could scarcely think of a better life than spent with her."

"Ah," he said. "This sounds promising."

"You are Lord Basington, of course." Claire giggled.

"Oh, I know, Miss Godfrey." He laughed as he came around her, wrapping his arms around her shoulders. She clung onto his upper arms, leaning back into his touch.

"I believe this Lord Basington wishes Miss Godfrey to know he adores her," Ernest murmured, pulling her face up to his. "And that he wishes to be at her side, no matter what comes next. He does not know the future, but he is rather excited for it."

"And Miss Godfrey wishes Lord Basington to know that he saved her," Claire whispered, meeting Ernest's gaze. "And that she was lost without him. And that he is

the most handsome man she has ever set eyes on.”

She smiled prettily at him, her heart fluttering in her chest, as Ernest leaned in, his mouth pressing to hers in a tender kiss. His mouth was soft against hers, and Claire leaned up, turning to clutch his jacket.

“We shall miss the start of the play,” she murmured, kissing him between her words.

“I do not mind if you do not,” he teased, drawing back to raise his brow at her. “For if I cannot have a trip to London and kiss my betrothed when I wish, what can I do?”

“Well, I would say the most ideal thing would be to kiss her again,” Claire suggested playfully. “That is a wonderful place to start.”

Epilogue

A month passed, and Claire and Ernest found themselves in Bristol.

The street Claire had lived on with her father was not one she had intended to see again, but as the carriage pulled up outside Flogsend House, she did not quite know what to make of her former home.

It had been kept in a beautiful state, the white front of the townhouse tended to intricately and maintained. The gardens were tidy, and the pathway was clear of falling petals from overhead trees.

“Will you tell me more about Flogsend?” Lady Florence asked Claire, peering alongside her through the carriage window.

“It is where I grew up, as you know,” Claire reiterated. “But I spent many happy years here. It was where my own governess taught me every language I could ask for, and where she taught me to be proficient on the pianoforte and harp.”

“I did not know you played the harp!”

“Oh, yes. I actually prefer it over the pianoforte.” She frowned. “But my life here was not always as happy as I remember. I watched from that window up there—” She pointed to one of the higher floors, a small peeking window. “For my mother to return, to no avail. And I spent the rest of my days being a ghost, so I did not disturb my father. But you know what? The days I spent with my governess were some of the best.”

“I can also say the same thing,” Lady Florence said softly, smiling at Claire.

“And tomorrow I shall marry Ernest, and my life shall start over for the better.”

“I am only glad Lady Katherine shall not be in attendance,” Florence muttered. “I do hope she finds peace in Scotland after she was exiled from the Ton, but I cannot help thinking she does not deserve the forgiveness. What she did to my father, my mother ... It is a betrayal I cannot forgive yet.”

“And you do not have to,” Claire assured her. “It is yours to decide alone when you are ready.” Claire reached out to hold Florence’s hand. She was no longer her governess but was about to be her family. After her wedding tomorrow, that was what they would be to one another. They already were in every way that mattered, but tomorrow it would be solidified in name, truly.

The following morning, Claire’s only wish was that she did not trip over her dress as she descended the stairs in Ernest’s London townhouse.

At the base of the stairs, her mother waited with tears in her eyes and a hand over her heart. Although Claire had not yet forgiven Magdalene, she had opened communication long enough to invite her to the wedding. Claire had offered to repair the damage done slowly but had made sure her mother knew it would be a very long road to forgiveness and normalcy.

Still, seeing her there unlocked something in Claire that she did not realize she had craved all her life. The knowledge that her mother would be there on her wedding day. Her father had told her to bury such a notion, for her mother would never return.

Yet there she was, waiting for Claire, and looking as though she could hold all the

pride in the world in her expression.

“Claire, you look lovely,” her mother told her, gathering her hands. “Lord Bannerdown is a very lucky man indeed.”

“Thank you,” Claire murmured, unsure of how to take a compliment from her mother. She cleared her throat right as Winnie appeared, placing her veil atop her styled hair. Winnie brushed back tears, sniffing.

She had moved to London two weeks prior upon Lady Katherine’s departure to Scotland and was now serving as Claire’s own lady’s maid, but Claire suspected it would not be a long-lasting position. She had already published the story of Lord Basington and Miss Godfrey, and the Ton had raged for it, loving her every word. Winnie had discussed the prospect of making stories based on true events within the Ton, letting people clue into who the scandals centred around.

Claire had no doubt her friend would be a prolific author soon with multiple published works out in the world.

She could only hope the Haberdasher Bookshop sold them so she could return to her favourite haunt in Bath one day.

“You are the most beautiful bride, Claire,” Winnie told her. “And I shall not cry, I promise!”

“I shall.” Claire laughed. “This is the happiest day of my life already.”

“We shall wait for you outside,” Magdalene said gently. “Take a few moments and meet us when you are ready. We have plenty of time, dear.”

Claire nodded, grateful for the offer.

As the house emptied out, Claire caught her breath by the door, watching as her mother climbed into one of the carriages.

“Are you watching the outside so you can plan your escape?”

Ernest’s voice came from behind her. Claire whirled around to face him. He stood at the top of the staircase, handsome and striking, but it was he who looked struck by Claire. His lips parted as he took her in, a small blush working over his cheeks.

“I thought you had already left,” Claire said, smiling, as he descended the stairs to approach her.

“And yet here I am, quite intent on riding to the church with my wife-to-be,” he murmured, pulling her close to kiss her cheek. “I feel as though I am the luckiest man in the world to be marrying such a beautiful bride. You are beautiful, Claire.”

“And you are handsome.” She giggled, kissing his cheek right back. “I cannot believe we are here, finally getting married.”

“Are you suggesting I took too long?”

“You took plenty of time,” she corrected, laughing softly.

“Well, we are here now. And I shall not be letting you out of sight.” He pulled her towards him, and his lips pressed to her forehead. “However, I must remind you, Claire, that you are smart and incredible. You are brave, bold, and intelligent. And you can be anybody you want to be. You can do anything you wish and must not feel compelled to marry me, do you understand?”

Claire pulled back. “I know this, as you have told me many times. But all I wish, Ernest, is to be your wife. That is all I would ask of the universe. The rest of our

future is something we shall figure out together, but right now, I only wish to be your wife.”

“Well, I believe I can make that happen,” Ernest murmured as he leaned in to kiss her.

It was lingering and affectionate, and Claire’s heart swelled as she was pulled into the arms of her husband-to-be, ignoring the world outside. For they had faced plenty of trials and waited for goodness.

For a few more moments, the world could wait for them.

THE END

Chapter 1

William Montague, the Earl of Bannon, stood at the edge of the field, his eyes narrowed against the midday sun as he watched the workers struggle with the plow that had gotten stuck in the thick, clinging mud. He felt a familiar sense of determination settle over him. Despite being the master of the estate, he had never been one to stand idly by while others toiled, but not many understood that about him. Still, he was unwilling to change.

“Hold on, lads,” he called out, striding toward them. “Let me take a look.”

The workers paused, wiping sweat from their brows as they stepped aside to make room for William. They respected him not only for his fair and just management of the estate, but also because he never hesitated to join them in the hard labor. His willingness to get his hands dirty set him apart from many other landowners, and it fostered a deep sense of loyalty among those who worked for him.

Kneeling beside the plow, William assessed the situation. The blade was deeply embedded in the mud, and the more they had tried to pull it free, the more entrenched it had become. He grunted, rolling up his sleeves. “All right, we’ll need to lift it together on my count. Ready?”

The men nodded, their faces set with determination. It would not be the first time that together, they would solve a troubling issue.

“One, two, three, heave!” William shouted, and they all heaved with all their might. The plow shifted slightly but remained stuck.

“Again,” William urged, his voice calm but firm. He knew how to give orders without them sounding like orders, but rather like advice. “One, two, three, heave!”

This time, the plow broke free with a sucking sound, and they stumbled back, laughing and clapping each other on the shoulders, happy that the issue was sorted out.

“Well done,” William said, a rare smile lighting up his face as he patted one of the younger workers on the back. These were those rare occasions that reminded him he was still able to smile. “Let’s get it cleaned up and back in action.”

As the workers moved to clean the mud from the plow, William took a moment to catch his breath. He enjoyed the physical labor—it was a way to escape from the grief that lingered in his heart. The rhythm of the work, the strain of his muscles, and the camaraderie of the men provided a temporary reprieve from the memories that haunted him.

“My Lord,” one of the older workers, a loyal man by the name of Thomas McKenzie, approached him with a look of worry on his weathered face. “You don’t have to do this. We of course, appreciate all the help, but an earl should be in the house, not get dirty in the field with us workers.”

William nodded with a smile, appreciating the concern in the man’s voice. After all, he knew his brother and his son. They all worked in his fields, side by side. “I know, Thomas. But it is good to work alongside you all. It keeps my mind clear.”

Thomas nodded, understanding more than words could convey. “Aye, it does that. But don’t push yourself too hard, sir. We need you in good health for many years to come.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” William said, patting Thomas on the shoulder.

As the day wore on, William continued to work with the men, feeling the familiar ache of tired muscles and the sweat running down his back. It was exhausting but also oddly comforting. Here, in the fields, he could lose himself in the simplicity of the tasks at hand, each one a small victory against the relentless weight of his sorrow.

They kept working for a few hours longer, when they all headed back to the manor house. As they all walked back, the chatter of the workers drifted off into the distance, and he could barely hear it any longer, as his eyes beheld the familiar outlines of Bannon Hall. It was his ancestral home, a place filled with memories of his childhood and the generations before him.

The grand manor stood proudly at the heart of the estate, its stone walls a testament to the enduring strength of his family. But now, as he walked back from the fields, his body aching from the day's labor, the sight of Bannon Hall brought a pang of sorrow.

Two years had passed since his wife's death, yet the grief still clung to him like a heavy shadow. She had succumbed to a relentless illness in one of the very rooms he now dreaded to enter. He had closed it for everyone, locking it forever as it was, just like he himself was. The house, once filled with her laughter and warmth, now seemed cold and empty, devoid of that light she exuded wherever she went.

He paused for a moment at the edge of the lawn, staring up at the grand facade. The evening light cast long shadows, and he could almost imagine her standing at one of the windows, watching him with a smile. Shaking off the memory, he forced himself to move forward, his boots leaving a trail of mud on the manicured grass.

When he finally entered the house, he was a sight to behold: muddied, disheveled, and utterly exhausted. But that exhaustion provided him with what nothing else could, a momentary peace of mind. Although that peace lasted for a very short time, he was still grateful for it.

As William reached the top of the staircase, he nearly collided with his aunt, Theresa Dalloway, who was hurrying down the hallway toward him. She was a woman in her early fifties, with a kind, lined face that bore the marks of both joy and sorrow.

Her dark hair, streaked with silver, was pulled back in a neat bun, and she wore a simple yet elegant dress that spoke of quiet dignity. Her eyes, a deep, understanding blue, reflected her concern as she took in his appearance.

“William, my dear,” she exclaimed softly upon seeing him. “What on earth have you done to yourself?”

He forced a tired smile. “Just a bit of work in the fields, Aunt Theresa. Nothing to worry yourself about.”

She reached out and gently brushed some mud from his sleeve. “You are covered in dirt, and you look utterly exhausted. You cannot keep doing this to yourself. Besides, an earl is not supposed to be in field with his workers, you know that.”

“I’m fine, Aunt Theresa,” he insisted, though the weariness in his eyes betrayed him. It was indeed a long day. “The work helps.”

His aunt sighed, her expression softening. “I know it does, my dear, but you must take care of yourself. Grief is a heavy burden to carry alone.”

William looked away, the familiar ache in his chest tightening. “I just... I need to keep busy.”

His aunt nodded, understanding exactly what he was referring to. It was hard on all of them. “I know. But you also need to rest, to heal. She wouldn’t want you to drive yourself into the ground.”

He swallowed hard, her words hitting that place inside of him he had been trying to keep hidden away from the rest of the world. "I know. It's just... hard."

"Yes, but remember that it is not only about you," she reminded him of the most painful thing of all. "Georgiana has refused to have dinner again. That child needs you."

"I know," he said, feeling defeated.

His daughter Georgiana was only ten years old, yet she had already suffered one of the hardest blows life could deal to a child, and that was the loss of a parent. A mother, nonetheless. Sometimes, William wished it could have been he who left them.

He felt that Rebecca, his late wife, would have known how to comfort Georgiana. She would have known how to keep Bannan Hall in the thriving state it always was. Unlike him, who allowed it to slowly start to decay. He knew it all, and yet, he was powerless to change anything.

"I'm worried, Will," his aunt said, softly touching his elbow. "Your life is in utter disarray. You need to bring some order to it. That will help Georgiana as well. She needs someone, Will. A mother."

William sighed, acknowledging her words. "I know, Aunt. I know everything. But I haven't met anyone suitable for the role."

"You mean, you haven't even tried," she said, touching a sore spot. "You have been locked up here for the past two years, and Georgiana has been locked up with you, not of her own will. She is a child, William. She needs the company of other children as well. This isolation is not healthy for her, I fear."

“What would you have me do? Marry just anyone?” he asked, his voice growing tense.

His aunt shook her head. “No, of course not. I am not saying you should marry just anyone. You need a partner, someone who knows you, someone who can help you manage the estate and most importantly, someone who can take care of Georgiana. You know that Victoria has offered many times to come and help.”

William’s expression darkened. Victoria Livingston was his cousin on his late wife’s side of the family, whom he had not seen much of during the time his wife was alive, but who appeared very eager to come for longer visits. He knew exactly what she wanted, and he didn’t like it one bit.

“Victoria is only after my money,” he said gravely. “She doesn’t care about me or Georgiana. I don’t want such people in my home.”

His aunt looked at him with weary eyes, her age and exhaustion evident. “I am not saying you should marry her, but you need to consider your options, William. You know that I am seven and fifty years of age. I am not getting any younger. I won’t be always around, and it would make me relieved to know that you have someone by your side when my time comes.”

William frowned. “I don’t want to talk about that, Aunt Theresa.”

He had enough death talk. He didn’t need any more of it.

“I know, but that is your problem, Will. You don’t want to have the important conversations. You prefer running away from what will inevitably happen. Is that how you want to live your life? And most importantly, is that how you want Georgiana to live?”

William's heart softened as he looked at his aunt. As always, she was right. She had been a pillar of support for him throughout those two years. Now, it was time to share the burden with someone else. Georgiana deserved a mother.

"All right, Aunt Theresa," he finally acquiesced. "I shall think about it."

"Please do," she urged him. "For all our sakes."

As she turned to leave, William felt a heavy weight settle on his shoulders. He knew she was right, but the thought of marrying again, of opening his heart to another woman, felt impossible. His love for his deceased wife was still too strong, his grief too raw.

His aunt paused turning in the direction of the corridor, looking back at him with a soft, pleading expression. "William, I just want you to be happy. We all do."

He nodded, forcing a small smile. "I know, Aunt Theresa. And I appreciate it."

When she left, the silence of the hallway enveloped him. He felt torn between duty and his own aching heart. The estate needed a lady's touch, and Georgiana needed a mother figure, but the idea of replacing his wife felt like a betrayal.

He made his way to his room, the conversation replaying in his mind. He knew he couldn't ignore the issue forever. His aunt's exhaustion and Georgiana's neglect were clear signs that something had to change. But the path forward seemed murky, filled with uncertainties and fears.

Chapter 2

Giles DeVere paced furiously through the dimly lit halls of his London home, his footsteps echoing off the dark wood floors. The house, with its closed curtains and dark wallpapers, felt stifling, almost suffocating to Nora, who stood silently in a corner, watching her uncle's rampage. The air was thick with tension as Giles muttered angrily to himself, almost oblivious to her presence.

"Damn it all!" Giles shouted, slamming his fist onto a table, causing a delicate porcelain vase to teeter precariously. "That blasted shipment of spices was supposed to be our saving grace! Now, it's all gone to ruin."

Nora bit her lip, her heart pounding in her chest. She had seen her uncle in that state many a time before, so utterly consumed by rage and frustration. He owed several debts, she knew—social debts from light gambling, patronage, and his membership at the gentlemen's club. But the loss of the spice caravan had pushed him to the brink of panic.

"What am I to do now?" Giles continued, his voice rising with each word. "The creditors will come knocking soon enough. And what of my reputation? To be known as a man who cannot pay his dues—it's unthinkable."

He moved to the window, yanking the curtains open with a violent tug, letting in a sliver of the gray London light. The room, still mostly in shadow, seemed to reflect his inner turmoil. He ran a hand through his disheveled hair, his face a mask of worry and anger.

Nora took a tentative step forward, her voice trembling. “Uncle, surely there's something we can do. Perhaps we can speak to your creditors, arrange some sort of—”

“Speak to them?” Giles interrupted, a bitter laugh escaping his lips. “They are sharks, Nora. They smell blood and they will not be appeased by mere words.”

He turned away from her, staring out the window with a clenched jaw. Nora felt a pang of helplessness, her own fears mingling with her uncle's. The oppressive atmosphere of the house seemed to close in around her, the darkness pressing down on her chest. Nora had been trying to come up with a way of leaving Uncle Giles and his oppressive home, but she knew that as a young woman she had very few chances of doing so.

After the tragic death of her parents in a fire at a very young age, Uncle Giles had taken her in. His own daughter Melody had immediately become a sister to Nora, in every sense of the word, where even Uncle Giles did not make any difference in his treatment of the two girls. He had always been a controlling man, concerned only with money and status, which often came at the expense of his family members.

It was then that Uncle Giles turned to Nora again, dismissing her with a wave of his hand. “Leave me. I cannot think when you're lingering there, watching me.”

“Yes, Uncle,” Nora nodded, shuffling out of the room and heading toward a small library at the end of the corridor.

Her uncle had never been keen on reading, but his late wife was. From the little that Nora could remember of the woman, she was kind and soft-spoken, preferring the company of books and her children, Melody, and Nora—whom she had taken on as her own—to the company of the ton, which her husband revered so much.

Sadly, the woman had passed away young, having succumbed to an illness that took her away... fortunately in haste and without much pain.

Nora hid herself in the library, as she always did when her uncle was in one of his moods. It was a place he rarely visited, so she had no fear of being interrupted or sought after.

She could satiate her curiosity, grateful for her aunt's wide array of interests during her lifetime. This was where she could hide herself away from the rest of the world and lose herself in a book, in a reality that wasn't her own, but rather a better one, a more beautiful one, one where she was allowed to be herself.

As the morning light streamed through the small, high windows of the library, casting a soft glow over the endless rows of books, Nora suddenly heard the door open. Her eyes darted in the direction of the sound, only to be relieved upon seeing the face of her cousin.

"Melody!" she exclaimed, placing the book she was holding on a nearby table, then rushing to embrace her cousin. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see you, of course," Melody revealed, her blue eyes wide and joyful. In fact, ever since she had left that house, she was glowing. It was impossible not to notice.

"Have you spoken to Uncle since your arrival?" Nora hesitated to ask.

Melody shook her head. "I heard him talk to himself from the main hallway. I asked Thornton about his mood, and he assured me that he did not want any visitors, which suits me just fine, as I came to see you and not him."

Thornton had been Uncle Giles' butler for the past twenty years, and he had more of

a fatherly influence on the two girls than Uncle Giles had himself. Thornton would tell them when to avoid the man, especially when he was in a particularly bad mood, and that morning was obviously no exception.

“We could go out into the garden,” Nora suggested, not wanting to stay inside the house and stumble onto her uncle, “and sit on the bench.”

Melody beamed at the idea. “I would like that very much. We could have some tea and scones?”

“Just like old times,” Nora said with a sigh.

While she was overjoyed to see her cousin so happily married to a man who not only loved and cherished her, but nurtured her soul, Nora had to admit that the oppressiveness of her uncle’s house became even harder to bear with her cousin gone. She knew that she herself needed to leave as well, that she wouldn’t be able to endure it much longer.

Fifteen minutes later, the two ladies were seated in the garden, with cups of tea in their hands, relishing the aroma.

“Is this new tea?” Melody wondered. “I don’t remember Father having it before.”

“Yes,” Nora confirmed. “Lady Cunningham has announced that all households ought to have this tea. If I remember correctly, as Uncle has corrected my pronunciation so many times, it is Pu-erh tea.”

“Purr tea?” Melody repeated, sounding like a cat purring.

“No,” Nora chuckled. “Pu-erh,” she explained, offering the correct pronunciation once again. “Apparently, it undergoes a unique fermentation and aging process that

can take years, even decades. And it is this aging process that enhances its flavor and value, making it a highly sought after commodity.”

“So, yet another symbol of status that Father simply had to obtain?” Melody frowned.

“You know that as well as I do,” Nora confirmed. “He is buying insanely expensive tea, and yet, he has substantial debt he doesn’t know how to resolve.”

“Is that why he was so furious when I arrived?”

Nora sighed, her shoulders slumping. “It’s a long story, Melody. He’s been under a lot of pressure lately, with the failed spice caravan and all his debts. But it’s more than that. I don’t know how much longer I can live here.”

“Oh, you poor thing,” Melody said, taking Nora’s hand into her own. “Things must have been so hard for you after I left.”

Nora smiled reassuringly. “You cannot blame yourself for finding a way out. I need one for myself as well. You know what a hard man your father is. He doesn’t believe that women should be educated or have any true purpose in life beyond being wives and mothers. But I want more than that, Melody. I want to learn everything there is to know. I want to do something meaningful.”

Melody seemed to hesitate, almost as if she had something to say, but wasn’t certain whether it was the right moment for it.

“Is something the matter?” Nora wondered softly.

“Nora, I... I don’t mean to upset you, but Travis told me something you should know. He was at Lord Fauntleroy’s card game two nights ago, and there, Travis overheard Father talk about marriage.”

“Marriage?” Nora echoed. “Mine?”

“Yes, yours,” Melody acknowledged. “Apparently, he thinks it’s the best solution, given the circumstances.

Nora felt as if someone threw a bucket of ice-cold water over her. “But... who does he want to marry me off to?”

“I don’t know,” Melody admitted. “He didn’t mention a name, but apparently, he already has someone in mind. And he seems determined to go through with it soon. Perhaps it could be a way for you to finally escape this house.”

“Escape?” Nora’s voice reverberated around them, returning to her with even more incredulity. “Melody, you know how I feel about marriage. The last thing I want is to be another man’s servant, to be needed just for the purposes of bearing children and then live my life according to someone else’s rules, just like I’ve been doing so far. It wouldn’t be an escape. It would be just a change of a home, but with another master. I want to be free, to choose my own path in life.”

Melody reached out, taking Nora’s hand into her own. “I understand that, Nora. But what can you do about it? My father won’t give you the freedom you seek. To him, you are a daughter. A commodity that is to be exchanged for benefits in society, just like he did with me.”

Nora smiled. “But Travis loves you.”

“Yes,” Melody gushed. “I was fortunate. Travis is the most wonderful man in the world. I couldn’t imagine being married to anyone else.”

“I am very happy that is so, Melody, you know I am. But I know that won’t happen for me. I... I am not that fortunate,” Nora said sadly. “All I know is that I cannot let

your father dictate my future. I am very grateful for what he has done for me, for taking me in when I had no one, but I won't be his tool in his quest to climb higher on the social ladder. I have to find a way to make my own choices, to live my own life."

"You know you can always stay with us," Melody suggested tenderly.

Nora was washed over by love for her cousin. They had grown up together, as sisters, and their bond had only strengthened in time. Now, she couldn't imagine her life without her, although they did not see each other as often as they used to.

"I really appreciate your offer, Melody," Nora replied, feeling as if she might start crying at any moment. "But you and Travis have only been married for two years. You need to spend time together and alone. You need to... work on expanding your family, and I would only be in the way." Nora chuckled and her cousin joined in.

"Yes, I am hoping that we might have some good news to share very soon," Melody said mysteriously, much to Nora's delight.

Melody was one of the kindest people she had known, and she deserved nothing but happiness. As for herself, she viewed happiness as something other than being married to a man. She never planned on getting married, simply because she believed that no man would understand her need for intellectual pursuits, her need to be her own person, without having to adjust to someone else's needs.

In the end, it seemed easier to simply remain alone her entire life, and do the things that made her happy. However, the ton viewed it as selfishness, although she didn't see it as such. It was her own life, and she had the right to be responsible for it.

"I am so happy," Nora spoke, blinking away a few stray tears. "And don't worry about me. I will find a way out of this, I promise."

“I know you will,” Melody nodded. “You have always been the more resourceful one. Just remember that you are not alone in this. I am here for whatever you need.”

“Thank you, Melody. I needed to hear that,” Nora responded, wrapping her arms around her cousin and embracing her tightly.

The two cousins sat in silence for a moment, drawing strength from each other’s presence. Despite the oppressive darkness of Uncle Giles’ home and the uncertainty of the future, Nora felt a spark of hope. With Melody’s support, perhaps she could find a way to break free from the constraints that bound her, and forge her own destiny.

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“You didn’t like any of the young ladies you’ve met so far?” Maude Sheffield wondered aloud, as she sat in the study of William’s London abode, a place he had not visited in two years.

“No, not really, Lady Sheffield,” he said as politely as he could.

After all, Lady Sheffield was a close friend of his aunt’s, and the last thing he wanted was to offend her in any manner or undermine her efforts at helping him find a suitable bride.

She looked puzzled beyond belief. “I really thought Lady Wilhelmina Turlington would catch your fancy.”

She did, only not in a way that William would have liked her to. Lady Wilhelmina was pretentious. She seemed more interested in whether she would be able to stay in London and attend balls as a married woman, than in her potential role as a mother to a ten-year-old girl. No, she would have been an absolutely disastrous choice.

“She is a... fine young lady,” he tried his best to remain courteous, although there were several other epithets he wanted to use whilst describing the aforementioned lady. “I just did not feel us... a match.” That statement made no sense, but William didn’t care, as long as he gave a reason—even a farfetched one—as to why he disliked her, without resorting to the truth.

“What about Lady Anabel Finnegan?” Lady Sheffield urged, refusing to admit defeat.

William cleared his throat, as he tried to find a way to describe someone who was

simply devoid of much intellect. There was nothing wrong with Lady Anabel per se, only she seemed not to have a single thought of her own.

William felt as if she were merely a puppet, repeating someone else's words, her father's, mother's, brother's, and now she needed a new puppet master. William had no interest in being such a figure in someone's life. He needed to diminish his burden, not to add to it.

"Another fine young lady," he said simply. "I was just hoping to find someone more... ambitious."

"Ambitious, you say?" Lady Sheffield's eyes widened at the word. "If that is what you are looking for in a bride, I have the right candidate for you. Miss Nora DeVere. She is considered highly intelligent by those who know her. However, that also makes her less... malleable, if you know what I mean."

"You mean, less obedient," he actually smiled.

Obedience was not something he was looking for in a wife. Not even a sharp intellect was a must. It would be a nice addition to a pretty face, but that was not what he was most concerned with. All he wanted was a kind soul, someone who would understand what Georgiana was going through and who would know how to help her, someone who possessed motherly qualities. So far, none of the ladies he had met were in possession of that.

She smiled back. "Obedience is a fine character trait of a future wife."

"I suppose so," he said, not wanting to get into a debate. "So, may we go and meet Miss DeVere?"

"Her uncle has cordially invited us to come tomorrow morning," Lady Sheffield explained. "Only, I'm afraid that I am busy tomorrow morning, so you would need to

go on your own, if you don't mind."

"That is fine," he agreed.

Let's just get this over with, he thought to himself. He had been in London for a week already, meeting two to three ladies on a daily basis, and that was only fueling the rumors around him. He was still unable to find a suitable mother for Georgiana, and he was losing hope with each passing day. At one point, he had almost given up. Then, he reminded himself that the decision to find a new wife was not an impulsive one.

His aunt had been suggesting it for about a year already, but lately, it had come to his attention that Georgiana was struggling. The few times that she had to interact with other children, she started to withdraw too much into herself, shying away from company, which she relished before.

William finally understood that by remaining a widower, he was destroying his daughter's future. Georgiana needed a mother. And not only that, but she also needed a role model, someone who would help her join society when the time came, and she only had a few precious years left until her debut. All that assured him that he could not go back home without a wife.

He arranged all the details with Lady Sheffield, then saw her out. The rest of the day was spent in fruitless business endeavors, as he could barely focus on anything. Then, the following morning, he found himself in the carriage, headed toward the DeVere residence.

He arrived there with a sense of dread, which had preceded his other introductions as well. His mind was preoccupied with the conflicting feelings of duty and his sheer resistance toward what needed to be done. Georgiana needed a mother, but the thought of marrying a woman he had no interest in filled him with unease.

He arrived shortly, knocking on the door and being led in by the waiting servant, to whom William had handed his hat and coat. For some reason, he couldn't help but think of Lady Sheffield. She had been accompanying him to these social engagements, and only in her absence did he realize that she served as a comforting shield against the matchmaking attempts of London's elite. But today, he was alone, invited by Lord DeVere himself.

Giles DeVere greeted him in the grand foyer, his expression a mix of forced politeness and impatience. William immediately felt a prickling dislike for the man, an instinctive reaction he couldn't quite explain.

"Lord Bannon, it is an honor to have you grace our home," Lord DeVere said, his voice overly theatrical, as if he were trying to hide something. In addition to that, the man seemed nervous and ill at ease.

"Lord DeVere," William replied, giving a stiff nod. "Thank you for the invitation." He looked around, hoping to see a lady in attendance, but the viscount was alone.

"Have you been in London long?" the man asked.

"A week," William replied, confused as to why his niece was not with them.

"From what I understand, you have not been here for quite a while," The viscount pressed on, urging William to take a seat on the chaise lounge, while he himself got comfortable in the armchair opposite him.

"Yes," William said simply.

He was waiting for some clarification as to why they were only the two of them there, but instead of an explanation, The viscount kept coming up with new questions regarding the weather and other irrelevant things. The dark, oppressive atmosphere of the house did nothing to improve William's mood. It was stifling, with heavy drapes

blocking out the sunlight and dark wallpaper creating a somber ambiance.

William answered all the questions politely albeit curtly. Then, Lord DeVere seemed to remember something, and William hoped that finally the much-needed clarification was to come. Only, it did not. “My Lord, may I offer you a drink?” The viscount inquired.

William inhaled deeply, shaking his head. “Thank you, but I must refuse. Lord DeVere, I was under the impression that your niece would be with you. However, I see now that I was mistaken.” Upon those words, William got up, signaling that unless the lady appeared within seconds, he would be leaving.

“My Lord, I’m afraid that my niece Nora is making herself appear to be rather unreliable,” Lord DeVere’s tone of voice was dripping with disdain. “She doesn’t usually have a tendency to disappear at the most inconvenient times.”

William raised an eyebrow, already disliking the man even more. He actually didn’t like either of the two. The man had an air about him that William didn’t like, and the fact that the young lady in question simply decided not to appear when the visit was scheduled spoke more about her character than any words ever could.

“That sounds unfortunate,” he replied coolly, not wishing to dwell more deeply into a matter than was, at least for him, already finished. His niece was obviously not someone William could entrust Georgina’s upbringing to, so there was no point in him staying there any longer.

“Perhaps we could reschedule, My Lord?” Lord DeVere asked, as William was already heading toward the door.

“I’m afraid that is out of the question,” William replied confidently, without any intention of justifying himself. “I have no time to give any lady a second chance.”

“She is a headstrong girl,” Lord DeVere tried to explain, but William would not have it.

“There is nothing wrong with a headstrong girl, Lord DeVere. However, it is a matter of upholding one’s word. It was stated that your niece was to be here, so we could meet. She is not here. That says a lot about her character. Thank you for your time.” He offered the man his hand. The viscount looked in utter shock, then shook William’s hand firmly. “I will find my own way out. Good day.”

William closed the door behind him with a heavy sigh. As he walked down the dimly lit corridor, he had to admit to himself that he was slightly disappointed. Judging from Lady Sheffield’s words, he was actually hoping that his search would come to an end right there.

He was eager to leave this oppressive home, but just as he reached the front entrance, a small commotion caught his attention. In the hallway, a young servant child, likely no older than ten, had dropped a basket of freshly laundered clothes. The little girl’s face crumpled in distress, her eyes welling with tears as she stared at the scattered garments that now lay strewn over the freshly polished floor.

“Now, now, there is no need to cry,” a gentle voice was heard from another direction.

William remained partially hidden from plain sight, curiously watching the sight that unraveled before him. William turned and saw a young woman kneeling beside the child, her hands deftly gathering the fallen clothes. Her presence was a stark contrast to the gloom of the house; she seemed to bring a lightness with her, a kindness that immediately drew his attention.

“There, it’s all right,” she said softly, her smile warm and reassuring. “Everyone makes mistakes. Let’s pick these up together, shall we?”

The girl nodded, sniffing, and together, they carefully gathered all the clothes back

into the basket. From what Lady Sheffield had told him about Nora DeVere, that had to be her. The young woman was truly stunning. Her wheat-colored hair was tied up in a loose bun at the nape of her delicate neck, but her lips were the most expressive part of her face. Luscious and full, when she smiled, they revealed a row of pearly whites that seemed to illuminate the entire room.

When their work was all done, the little girl got up and smiled at Miss DeVere. “Thank you, Nora.”

Miss DeVere patted her head gently. “You are most welcome, Helen. But you did most of the work yourself.”

Those words made little Helen beam with pride, and William could immediately see what Miss DeVere had done there. Her kindness managed to outshine her rudeness at refusing to meet him in her uncle’s study. As the child scampered off with the basket, Miss DeVere stood and brushed a stray lock of hair from her face.

That was when she noticed William standing in the shadows. Their eyes met, and for a moment, the world seemed to pause. William saw not just a pretty face, but a soul full of compassion and kindness, traits he had not expected to find in the niece of Giles DeVere.

Her cheeks flushed slightly, her eyes widening in surprise. She obviously wasn’t expecting to find him there. Perhaps she hoped that he had already left. She gave him a nod, before turning to leave.

A moment ago, William was determined to leave. But now, he was rooted to the spot, his mind racing. Without a second thought, he turned and headed back to The viscount’s study, hoping to find him still there. He knocked on the door, and was granted access.

“My Lord,” Lord DeVere said, seated at his writing table and sipping a drink. “I

thought you were leaving.”

“I was,” William acknowledged with a steady voice. “But I’ve reconsidered.”

“You have?” The viscount was obviously taken aback by this new and unexpected turn of events.

“Yes,” William nodded.

“And what, may I ask, has brought about this change of heart?” the man seemed curious.

“I shall keep that to myself, if you don’t mind,” William replied. “All you need to know is that I am willing to consider a match with your niece.”

A slow smile spread across Lord DeVere’s face, though it did little to warm his eyes. “Very well, Lord Bannon. I will make the arrangements.”

“Do so,” William said. “I will remain in London for the duration of these arrangements.”

At that moment, the door opened, and Miss DeVere was standing in the doorway, looking incredulous at both men.