



The Earl's Error

(Bluestocking Book Club #1)

Author: *Rose Pearson*

Category: Historical

Description: A wrongful accusation. A reluctant partnership. A romance neither expected.

Miss Joceline Trentworth knows precisely what she wants: a good book and a quiet place to read it! Unfortunately, her mother has other ideas and she is thrust headfirst into society, grateful for her fellow bluestockings who quickly rally around her.

When Lord Albury's stolen necklace is unexpectedly found in her very own bedchamber, however, Joceline is quickly embroiled in a confounding mystery – and held in Lord Albury's sights!

Theodore is sure Miss Trentworth was the one who stole his necklace and is determined to prove it! Drawing close to her in hopes of catching her out, he begins to realize that he might be the one confounded in the end!

Total Pages (Source): 20

PROLOGUE

“S he takes far too much after you!”

Joceline winced as she sat in the window seat of the drawing room, hoping that neither of her parents became aware of her presence behind the curtain. She was doing as she always did at this time of the morning: reading in a quiet, cozy space with no one to interrupt her.

Though her mother and father believed that she was reading elsewhere and thus, they could speak openly and without her overhearing... though at this moment, Joceline very much wished that she could be elsewhere given that she was the topic of conversation.

“I know that you wish she was a good deal more like her sister, but I do not think there is anything wrong with Joceline’s love of reading,” she heard her father say, gently. “Come now, my dear, you are being a little too harsh, are you not?”

“Harsh?” The screech that came from her mother’s lips had Joceline wincing, curling her knees up against her chest, her arms wrapping around them as she listened. “My dear husband, can you not see that we must find Joceline a match this Season? She has already had one Season and made little impact upon the ton in any way whatsoever! How are we meant to find her a suitable husband if she continues to behave in such a way?”

“In what way is she behaving?” Lord Melford asked, echoing Joceline’s own sentiments. “Yes, she is quieter than Sarah was but that does not mean –”

“She knows too much and speaks of that knowledge without thinking!” Lady Melford interrupted, speaking loudly and over the top of her husband. “Yes, she is quieter but when she speaks, it is clear to all and sundry that she is nothing other than a bluestocking! You must prevent her from speaking out.”

Joceline blinked quickly, a tightness growing in her chest though her pain was somewhat lessened by her father’s hasty defense of her.

“I will not prevent Joceline from pursuing her love of reading, Martha,” he said, with a firmness that had been absent from the conversation thus far. “I do not see it as a failing as you do. Rather, I think it perfectly suitable for any young lady to desire to expand their mind by reading and learning as Joceline does. It is a rare quality and one that ought to be supported.”

There was a breath of silence and, in that moment, Joceline thought that her mother might step aside and agree to all that her husband had said... only for that idea to be knocked away.

“Supported?” she exclaimed, making Joceline’s ears ring. “We cannot do such a thing as that! What will the ton say? What will society think? Believe me, if you do such a thing as this, then Joceline will never find a suitable husband.”

“I do not think that is true,” came the mild reply as tears came to Joceline’s eyes, broken over how little her mother seemed to care for her and instead, cared only for the match that Joceline was one day to make. “There are bound to be other gentlemen in society with the same opinion as I.”

This made Lady Melford snort disparagingly. “I hardly think so.”

“Martha.” This time, when Lord Melford spoke, it was with a trace of anger in his voice which, Joceline heard, seemed to quieten her mother a little. “I will not have

you quash Joceline. I understand that you desire to see her wed and that is a good desire. I too have the very same. However, I will not permit you to force Joceline to hide that part of herself from the ton. It is not to be done.”

“By why ever not?” came the question, a wheedling tone in the lady’s voice now. “Why would you say such a thing? Can you not see that her chances of a successful match are much diminished?”

There came another moment of silence, only for Lord Melford to sigh heavily. “And can you not see, my dear, that her chances of a happy future are entirely extinguished if we force her to wed a gentleman who does not know who she truly is?”

Tears began to fall from Joceline’s eyes, not only from the upset that came from hearing her mother speak so but also from the gentle comfort in her father’s clear understanding and care of her. She pressed her hands to her cheeks, trying to stem the flow and doing her utmost to cry as silently as possible for fear of being discovered.

“I – I did not think...”

“We must consider Joceline herself,” Lord Melford finished. “You may do as you please in London society, taking her to whatever occasions you think ought to be attended and presenting her to various gentlemen as you see fit. But do not ask her to keep her true self hidden from them all, for it will not bring her any sort of happiness though it might bring you a little contentment. Your desire to see all of our children married and settled is a good and reasonable one, my dear, but things are different when it comes to Joceline.”

Lady Melford let out such a heavy sigh that Joceline could practically feel the frustration emanating from her.

“Would that she was more like her sister,” Lady Melford muttered, darkly. “Sarah

was everything a young lady of quality ought to be. You know as well as I that various gentlemen were pursuing her, though none are seeking out Joceline's company!"

"And our son made his own choice, and all has worked out well, yes I know." Lord Melford's tone sounded a little heavier now, as though he was tiring of the conversation. "Each of our children is very different to the others but that is not something to lament over, my dear. Please, we must think of Joceline's happiness over our own."

Another sigh and Joceline wiped at her eyes, the ache in her chest returning with a fierceness that stole her breath. Her mother complained a little more but Joceline barely gave it any attention, struggling with the awareness that she disappointed her mother a great deal.

It was not something that many young ladies were encouraged in, Joceline knew, for to be bluestocking was seen as something of an embarrassment, something that ought to be hidden away. Her father, the Viscount, had always encouraged her, however, both she and her sister to read and to learn and to explore as much as they wished, though Sarah had been less inclined to do so. Instead, she had dreamed of balls and dancing and courtship while Joceline had been learning about some far-flung countries whose people and practices were so very different from her own. Yes, Joceline had known that her mother was somewhat displeased with her learning and knowledge but she had never, until this moment, understood that her mother saw it as shameful. She believed that Joceline would never make a suitable match without pretending she was not as learned as she was and would be quite contented for her to marry a gentleman who did not know her as she truly was! Grateful for her father's determination and his continued encouragement, Joceline dried her tears and picked up her book again, the room now silent.

It is a good deal better than other young ladies, who have been told from the

beginning whom they will marry, she thought to herself, her eyes flickering over the page as she fought to find her place. I am still permitted to be just as I am in the hope that I can find a gentleman interested enough in me to overlook my bluestocking ways!

A faint flickering hope that she would be able to do so quickly faded as she thought about her mother's concern and lack of belief that Joceline would be in any way successful. What would happen if, in her second Season, she had no more success than in the first? Would her father's attitude change? Would she be forced into a match she did not want?

Shaking her head as though to clear her thoughts, Joceline let out a slow breath and closed her eyes. She could not let herself think in such a way, not now, not when she had so much still to experience. At the present moment, she had her father's support and that had to be enough.

Besides, I shall have my friends around me, she thought to herself as the edges of her mouth lifted, bringing them to mind. I shall not be the only bluestocking in London and mayhap that shall be enough to soften Mama's concern. With that smile still lingering on her face, Joceline finally returned her full attention to her book and, with her mind now a good deal more settled, made her way into the story once more.

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“Now, Joceline.”

Joceline glanced at her mother as they stepped into the ballroom. “Yes, Mama?”

“This is not to be as things were last Season,” her mother said, briskly. “You are to push yourself forward a little more. You are to seek to have your dance card practically filled at as many balls as we attend. You are to laugh and smile and converse – but not too much, you understand.”

Fully comprehending what it was her mother was saying by making such a statement, Joceline nodded. “Yes, Mama.” She had no intention of pretending that she was anything other than a bluestocking, however, for having overheard her mother and father’s conversation, Joceline felt herself confident in her father’s encouragement of her. “I shall do my best, certainly.” This was meant in every seriousness though Lady Melford did not appear to take it as such, given the frown that quickly settled over her forehead.

“You are the only focus now, Joceline,” she said, putting her hand on Joceline’s arm as if to make sure that she was paying full attention. “I will be watching your every step and listening to your every word.”

This made Joceline scowl.

“You may think that you can do as you please and continue as you did last Season but I am telling you now clearly, I will not permit it,” Lady Melford stated, looking into

Joceline's eyes. "You cannot hide behind your sister this Season and thus, you must be seen by others, known by others, and acknowledged by others. That is the only way."

Joceline nodded though, inwardly, her stomach twisted at the thought of trying to have a conversation with a gentleman that she did not know and who might not have any interest in knowing her! Sarah had been excellent in her conversation and her manner, able to have words flowing between herself and whomever she was speaking with, all within a matter of seconds, it seemed! Joceline, on the other hand, had found it difficult to speak easily with others, for, truth be told, the conversation had been vacuous and disinteresting. The talk of gossip had been most displeasing to her and she certainly had not had any thought of joining in and whispering about others in society! Even the imagining of it had been displeasing and thus, she had spent many a time in society standing very quietly indeed as her sister, mother or another in the group had spoken. She had been a very willing observer.

Not this Season, it seemed.

"Joceline!"

Her considerations flew out of her mind at a familiar voice and, turning, she quickly grasped the hands of Lady Rosalyn. "Rosalyn! How wonderful to see you!"

"And I you!" her friend exclaimed. "Goodness, it has been some months since we were last in company together and I confess that I have felt your absence every one of those days." She grinned, her eyes twinkling. "I have had no one to discuss the recent goings on in – oh!" Her smile cracked and she bobbed a quick curtsy, her gaze going over Joceline's shoulder. "Lady Melford, good evening."

"Good evening." Joceline's mother said, her tone a trifle cold. "Lady Rosalyn, I presume that you are not here alone?"

“Not at all, but I am being permitted to come and join my friend for a time,” came the reply, as Lady Melford’s lip curled just a fraction as though this was greatly displeasing. “I am grateful to know that I am trusted!”

Joceline, catching her friend’s intention in saying such things, turned to look up at her mother. “Might I walk with Lady Rosalyn for a time? Just around the ballroom, no further.”

Lady Melford drew herself up. “I am disinclined to permit such a thing, Lady Rosalyn. Joceline’s dance card is not yet filled, though we have only just arrived.”

This did not put Lady Rosalyn’s enthusiasm to the test. “Then I shall return her to your side with every dance filled, I assure you. Good evening, Lady Melford.”

With that, she took Joceline’s arm and then hurried her away from her mother, pulling her to the quiet part of the ballroom so they might speak together.

“It is truly delightful to see you again,” Lady Rosalyn said, squeezing Joceline’s arm. “I was so hoping that you would be present, for there is much that I need to tell you!”

“Tell me?” Joceline asked, turning to look at her friend, a trifle wide eyed. “Is it that you are engaged?”

This made Lady Rosalyn laugh aloud, making Joceline’s face heat. “No, no, not in the least. That is not something that I should undertake lightly. Since I have been away from London, I have not found any interest from any gentleman in the nearby vicinity of my father’s estate. Though that is to be entirely expected given that they all only think of shooting and hunting and the like!”

Joceline laughed softly at this. “You mean that you have tried to engage them in conversation about other matters?”

“Indeed.” Lady Rosalyn looked suddenly very serious. “I have tried to speak of the war and all that has been happening there but I am given nothing more than an incredulous look and then a stunned silence. Either they do not know what it is that I am speaking of or they do not think that a young lady such myself ought to know anything about it and thus, they do not wish to encourage me!”

With a grimace, Joceline sighed and looped her arm through her friends as they meandered slowly around the ballroom, forgetting all about her mother’s expectation that she return with a full dance card. “That is not at all encouraging.”

Lady Rosalyn nodded. “Indeed, it is not. My father is not particularly concerned as regards my unwed status, which is a relief, but then again, he is not particularly concerned about anything aside from his own estate and family name!”

Joceline smiled sympathetically. “That brings both its own difficulties and its blessings, I suppose.”

“It does.” Lady Rosalyn sighed and then, after a moment, gave herself a small, brisk shake. “But I do not mean to be throwing all of my concerns out on you. That is not what I meant when I said there was much I needed to tell you.”

“No?” Joceline’s interest quickened. “Then what it is?”

Lady Rosalyn beamed at her. “I have found some new friends and I have been eagerly awaiting your arrival so that I might introduce them to you.” When Joceline nodded, Lady Rosalyn laughed softly. “You do not understand, they are not just any sort of acquaintances. They are all bluestockings!”

Joceline’s eyes widened. “Truly?”

“Truly,” Lady Rosalyn smiled. “Come with me now and I will introduce you to them

all.”

Allowing her friend to lead her, Joceline’s eyes caught on a familiar face though there were two others that she did not recognize. “Miss Sherwood – Eugenia.” She smiled and embraced her friend. “It has been so long since I have seen you!”

“Almost a year!” Miss Sherwood responded, as Lady Rosalyn smiled. “But we are back in company together again now, are we not?”

“And let me introduce you to two new acquaintances so that we shall be a merry little band of bluestockings!” Lady Rosalyn said, with a smile. “Lady Amelia, Lady Isobella, might I introduce you to Lady Joceline, daughter of Viscount Melford.”

Joceline curtsied and then, as she rose, smiled warmly. “I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Lady Isobella, and yours also, Lady Amelia.”

“And we you!” Lady Isobella exclaimed, her eyes alight with clear excitement. “Lady Rosalyn has told us so much about you and we have been eagerly awaiting your arrival here in London.”

Joceline threw a sidelong glance toward her friend. “Just what have you been saying?”

Lady Rosalyn laughed. “I have been telling them that your father is supportive of your desire to learn and to read and the like. That is not something that all of us have been granted, unfortunately, though I know that we are all glad to have some solidarity.”

“Indeed.” Lady Amelia nodded fervently. “It is good to know that there are other young ladies like us, those of us who seek to expand our knowledge and think it a good thing to do.”

“Especially when society thinks it ill,” Lady Isobella added, with a grimace as the light faded from her eyes. “It certainly does make one feel a good deal less isolated.”

Joceline smiled at the small group, feeling her spirits a good deal lifted now. “You are right that I have my father’s support but I certainly do not have my mother’s and it is she who is here with me in London.” Her smile began to dim. “I have overheard her speaking of my bluestocking ways with a good deal of disparity and that has made things a trifle difficult for me, I confess.”

“I can imagine that must have been very troubling to hear also,” Miss Sherwood said gently, her understanding and sympathy apparent in her expression and in her voice. “I am sorry for that.”

Joceline hesitated, wondering if she ought to speak honestly when in the present company given that she had only just been introduced, but then she considered herself right to do so. “It was painful, yes. I confess to you all that my heart was sore upon hearing all that my mother thought of me but, at the same time, I was also grateful for my father’s support and understanding. Though I do wish that he was in London with us!”

“He is not here?” Lady Rosalyn asked. “I thought he would be.”

Joceline shook her head. “He was called away on business.”

“I am here with my brother,” Lady Rosalyn told her, with a wry smile. “So though he is just as disinclined towards my learning and the like, he is a little... distracted given the very many young ladies present and his own desire for a bride.” This made not only Lady Rosalyn laugh but the others with her and, as they did so, Joceline felt her heart squeeze with a sharp, fierce delight. She had not had any sort of camaraderie like this before! Yes, she had known Lady Rosalyn and Miss Sherwood the previous Season, but for there to be five of them who all felt the same way was quite different!

“I think we shall all be excellent friends,” she said, making the other young ladies smile. “It will be an excellent Season, I am sure, now that I have you all with me. No amount of constant demands from my mother shall dampen my spirits, not now that I have friends with whom I can share my passion for reading.” She chuckled softly to herself, a lightness in her spirit now. “In fact, even though I am expected to dance and to smile and to converse as my mother expects, I will have a fresh endurance, knowing that I have many a friend sympathizing with me as I endure dull conversations and the like.”

Lady Rosalyn giggled. “Oh, we shall have to put up with many a frustrating conversation, I am sure! Do you know that the last time I tried to speak to a fellow about what I had been reading recently, he turned bodily away from me and showed me no further interest whatsoever?”

Lady Isobella gasped. “Goodness, that was most rude of him!”

“Indeed,” Lady Rosalyn agreed, “though at least I knew that this was someone I am now able to ignore for the rest of the Season!”

This sent smiles around the small group and Joceline drew in a long, steady breath and then let it out again just as slowly. Here, she felt herself at ease – and that in the center of a London ballroom! She had never expected such a thing as this, had thought that it would be a good deal more difficult than this for her first ball and yet now, despite it all, she had not only met her friends from the past Season but also made two more acquaintances! Yes, she determined as she looked at each and every face, this would be a very good Season indeed.

Theodore rolled his eyes as his mother stalked into the drawing room, clearly displeased. “Mother, you must attempt to make it a little less obvious whenever you are displeased with me.”

Lady Albury snapped her heels together and drew herself up, even though, given Theodore’s tall frame, she was somewhat diminutive. “This time, my dear son, it is not you that I am displeased with.”

Theodore’s eyebrows lifted. “Then I am all the more astonished, for I am usually the one standing far from your good graces.”

His mother sighed heavily. “I think that if you continue in such a way then you shall find yourself just as you have described.”

With a small sigh but with an attempt at a smile, Theodore looked back at her. “Then do you wish to tell me what it is that troubles you? What it is that makes you appear so upset?”

“I shall.” Clearing her throat, his mother made her way to stand at the side of the room, looking out of the window before turning her attention to him. “We are here in London and I have found myself greatly displeased with the extravagance shown by my acquaintances whilst I myself have nothing to show!”

This did not make any sense to Theodore and though he tried to keep the frown from his face, he did not quite manage, garnering himself a furious look from his mother.

Evidently, she thought that he ought to know what it was he spoke of.

“You do know that Lady Marselle has brought with her the most beautiful rubies from France?” she exclaimed, throwing up her hands as her cheeks went red. “And Lady Falkirk has shown off her diamonds which were a gift from her husband!”

“He is a Duke after all,” Theodore murmured, though this was not what his mother wanted to hear, given the way her face grew all the redder. “I apologize for my lack of understanding.” He put out one hand to her. “Please, what is it that troubles you?”

“I have nothing!” Lady Albury exclaimed, her eyes wide now as she attempted to make him understand. “I have left most of my fine jewels at the estate and you will not permit me to have the heirlooms, even though, by rights, they belong to me.”

This made Theodore frown heavily. “That is entirely untrue, though you are well aware of that, are you not?”

His mother looked away.

“When I took on the title, the heirlooms became mine,” he continued, gravely. “They are priceless, as well you know.”

“But I have worn them on many an occasion and you must know that I should take great care of them.”

“It is not about that,” Theodore answered. “Mother, you have many fine jewels and you are able to show off your wealth and standing just as any other can do.”

Lady Albury sighed and shook her head, her lips flattening. “I knew that you would not understand.”

Theodore lips pinched. It was not as though he did not have any understanding in this, for he truly did. His mother was someone who delighted in being admired – she always had been – and yet, if someone came to threaten that security, she had to push herself higher than ever before. Now, feeling herself standing below these other two ladies, she was demanding the heirlooms that did not belong to her, simply so that she might show herself to be just as great as they, if not higher in her standing.

And I do not want to do such a thing.

Theodore sighed as his mother put one hand to her forehead, now looking sidelong at him as if she were trying to work out how best to coerce him into doing as she wished.

“The heirlooms are, as you said yourself, at the estate.” Theodore shook his head. “I cannot return for them.”

“Why not?”

“Because it is a three day journey!” Theodore exclaimed, frustrated that his mother would be willing to send him away for the best part of a sennight to fetch the confounded things. “And I would be going there for very little reason.”

“Your mother’s contentment is a good reason, is it not?”

The manipulation hit Theodore hard and he looked away, his jaw tightening as his hands clasped together in his lap. It was not the first time his mother had behaved in such a way, not the first time that she had done whatever she could force his will. There were times that Theodore had been able to withstand her, had been able to put up enough of a defense to prevent her from forcing his hand but those times had been swiftly followed with more than a few difficulties, though his father had been alive at that time and had been able to assist him with it all. Now, however, it was only his

will who stood against hers.

And I am wearied enough by it all already. Is this something that I truly wish to put up with at this present moment, especially when I am here in London for the first time since my mourning for my father came to an end?

No, he considered, that was not something he desired to endure now. After all, he was here for the London Season, wanting to enjoy himself in fine company and, mayhap, considering which of the young ladies of London he might be willing to consider, if he was to do so, but to have his mother frustrating him at every turn, whining and crying and demanding meant that every day, near enough every moment would be spoiled.

Inwardly, he groaned.

“I cannot go back to the estate for the heirlooms.” Again, he tried to speak firmly but his mother’s chin wobbled and a single tear fell to her cheek, making him wince. “Mother, what you ask is too much.”

“I do not think that any good son would find himself in a quandary over his mother’s happiness,” Lady Albury sniffed, looking away from him now, her eyes watery. “Do you want me to be shamed in front of my friends? Do you truly desire for me to lose my standing in society?”

“I hardly think that you will do so simply because you do not have the emeralds,” Theodore answered, though there was less strength in his voice now, his mother’s wheedling wearing him down as guilt ripped through him – guilt that he knew he did not deserve but felt nonetheless. “As I have said, I know that you have plentiful jewels and do not need to have the emeralds.”

“Are you sure you cannot send someone for them?” His mother came closer to him

now, her hand going to his arm though her eyes were still filled with tears. “I should not have asked you to go yourself, that was selfish of me, I know.”

Yet more manipulation from her lips, Theodore thought, his jaw tightening. She means none of those things.

“It is only that I am so sorrowful over the mockery that is sure to come upon me when I cannot display the same wealth and standing as my companions,” she sighed, lifting her hand from his arm. “I am sure that there is a man you trust who would go to the estate and fetch the jewels for you? What about Whitaker?”

Theodore grimaced. “Whitaker is my man of business, not someone that I send on a fool’s errand.” The moment the words came out of his mouth, he knew that he ought not to have said such a thing. His mother let out a cry of seeming sorrow and turned away from him sharply, walking directly across the floor towards the door and flinging it open in a most dramatic fashion. Her wails did not stop, the echoes of them running through the hallway and up towards him, making Theodore wince with every one.

Sighing, he pushed himself to his feet and walked to pour himself a brandy. It was a little too early, mayhap, but his thoughts were now in disarray and he found himself in need of some restoration.

“Is it quite all right to step in?”

Theodore turned, glass in hand. “Castleton! Goodness, I did not expect to see you here!” Setting the empty glass down, he strode across the room and shook his friend’s hand, slapping him on the shoulder with the other. “When did you come back to London?”

“Only yesterday.” Lord Castleton winced. “It took me a fortnight to travel here and

truth be told, I regretted my journey once I was halfway here! Much to my wife's dismay, of course."

Theodore smiled. "I am sure that Lydia did very well in convincing you to continue."

"She did. And I would not have her upset," Lord Castleton continued, with a small, gentle smile as he thought of his wife. "She did so very much want to be here, especially she is going to see her family. Besides which, her sister is to marry at the end of the Season and I know how much she wanted to be present for that."

"Then I am glad she was so convincing," Theodore answered, walking back to the brandy table. "Can I offer you a drink?"

His friend nodded, then cast a glance over his shoulder towards the door. "Might I be bold and ask if everything is quite all right?"

Theodore rolled his eyes. "You know as well as I how my mother can be." Lord Castleton was more than a friend; he was Theodore's second cousin though they considered themselves to be friends first. Thus, he was all too aware of Lady Albury and her ways, offering Theodore a sympathetic smile as he nodded.

"Then I can well understand your need for a brandy at this time of day," Lord Castleton answered, with a chuckle. "Has it been very bad?"

With a glance at his friend, Theodore scowled. "My mother has come in to inform me that though it is not I that have displeased her, it is only I who can bring an end to her upset. Though when I have refused, that has caused her to become irritated with me also!"

"And what is it that you are refusing to do?"

Theodore quickly informed his friend of the story, making Lord Castleton snort when he heard the demand that Lady Albury had made.

“She cannot expect you to ride all the way back to the estate to fetch the heirlooms, can she?” he asked, as Theodore nodded. “Truly?”

“Yes, of course she can – and she does!” Theodore exclaimed, handing Lord Castleton a drink. “You know as well as I that the only person she thinks of is herself and that I, in refusing to do as she asks, have found myself now causing her great distress. No doubt she will make her way directly to Lady Yarmouth’s house and declare to her sister that I am the very worst son that has ever lived.” Letting out a long breath, he shook his head. “It does not help that my aunt is residing in London at this time also. She too will have something to say to me about this, I am sure.”

“And what are you going to do?” Lord Castleton took a sip of his brandy and then smacked his lips together. “You will not give in to her, I hope, for you cannot think to ride back to the estate, can you?”

Theodore shook his head. “I am determined to stand against her manipulation though, I will admit, that I have found myself weakening towards her.” He would not have told this to anyone other than Lord Castleton, disliking the fact that he was admitting his weakness but doing it all the same. “The words she throws at me causes me so much guilt, I find that I am quite broken by it all.”

Lord Castleton frowned. “I am sure that you do but you are quite right to refuse her.”

“She did suggest that I send Whitaker.”

At this, his friend’s expression grew dark. “You cannot send your man of business away from London to run an errand for your mother. Do you not need him yourself?”

With a small nod, Theodore looked away. “It is difficult when I feel guilt in my decisions.”

“But it is not a guilt that is right,” Lord Castleton stated, unequivocally. “You need not feel anything like that and certainly do not need to alter your plans. You must find a way to stand up against her.”

And feel the weight of her frustration settle upon me. Seeing his friend lift one eyebrow just a little, Theodore let out a groan. “It is not as easy as it sounds, my friend. The way that she wails and cries when she does not get what she desires, that is one thing, but I then must bear all of her frustration and all of her anger in various different forms – and all directed towards me! It is a heavy chain that tightens itself around my neck and the only way to release it is to give her what she desires.”

Lord Castleton prodded one finger into Theodore’s chest. “No. The only way to release it is to make her see that you will not give in, no matter how much she presses you! Your strength will prove that to her, whether you believe it or not. All you must do is endure.”

“Though whether I have the strength enough for that, I cannot say.”

“I shall help you,” Lord Castleton responded, quickly. “You have managed to do such a thing a couple of times before, have you not?”

Remembering the agony of the occasions when he had steadily refused, Theodore gritted his teeth and nodded. “That was before I was the Earl, however. Before I took on the title. My father was able to bear the brunt of it.”

Lord Castleton dropped his hand but fixed Theodore with a steady gaze. “Do not give in to her, my friend. Stay in London. Do what you came to do, to enjoy yourself and all that the Season will bring you! Show her that you will not be forced into doing as

she desires.”

A sudden slamming of a door somewhere along the hallway made Theodore wince though, as his friend glanced towards the door here, as though expecting Lady Albury to suddenly sweep into the room, a fresh determination came over him. Yes, he concluded, his friend was quite right. Lord Castleton’s presence was more than enough to convince him that yes, he did have the strength to refuse his mother, no matter how much pressure and complaint she heaped upon him.

“You are quite right.” Finishing his brandy, he nodded to Lord Castleton. “Your words have brought strength back to my mind. I shall not move from my position; I shall not bend to her will. I am the Earl now, I am the one who bears the title and the responsibility and thus, the heirlooms remain where they are: at my estate.”

“Precisely.” Lord Castleton grinned and Theodore nodded, a small smile touching his lips. “And all will be well.”

Wincing, Theodore hesitated. “I am not certain it shall be,” he answered, slowly, “but I can endure it.” He took a breath and set his shoulders. “I must .”

The novel was more than a little engrossing, to the point that Joceline did not even hear the maid knock at the door. It was only when the girl opened it and stepped into the parlor that she lifted her head.

“Forgive me, my lady, but the mistress –”

“It is quite all right.” Joceline waved the young girl into the room. “I was reading and did not even hear your knock.” She smiled and the young girl appeared to be relieved, given the way her eyes no longer were wide with concern and color slowly touched back into her cheeks.

“Thank you, my lady. It is just to say that your mother desires for you to join her in the dining room just as soon as possible.”

Joceline frowned. “The dining room?”

The maid nodded. “Yes, my lady. She broke her fast later today and has not yet risen from the table.”

Joceline glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece but did her best to keep her surprise to herself. She had presumed that, by this hour, her mother had already risen, broken her fast, and was busy with some other matters in the house but to hear that she had still been abed all this time was more than a little surprising! With an inward sigh, she set the book down and then got to her feet, promising herself silently that she would return to it just as soon as she could.

Making her way to the dining room, Joceline forced a smile as she stepped inside. “Good afternoon, Mother. I hear that you wish to see me?”

“Yes, I do.” Lady Melford set her teacup down on the China plate with a gentle rattle. “We are to go to the fashionable hour in Hyde Park this afternoon.”

Joceline blinked, her stomach dropping low. “I see.”

“And you are to stay away from those friends of yours,” Lady Melford continued, with a somewhat icy glare. “Do you understand me, Joceline? I am not having you waste your time with ladies who are not focused on the same thing you are this Season.”

“Whatever do you mean?” Joceline said, her hands curling as she fought upset. “Mother, I am here to enjoy the London Season and being with my friends permits me to do so.”

“But you are here primarily to make a match,” came the firm reply. “Do you not understand? You are here only to find a suitable husband, and enjoyment is, to my mind, a secondary consideration. Therefore, you are not to spend time with these young ladies, or —”

“I shall spend time with them, just as I please,” Joceline interrupted, aware that she was being rude though she felt no upset at speaking so. “That is not what father wanted for me.”

Lady Melford’s eyes flashed. “And how, might I ask, would you know what it is that your father desired for you? Did you hear him speak? Did you hear him say that he wanted your happiness?”

Joceline drew herself up, determined now not to let her mother push her aside. “Yes,

in fact. I did.”

This made Lady Melford’s brow furrow. “I hardly think that is true.” The heavy weight on her forehead pulled all the lower. “Indeed, I am sure that you are lying to me.”

“I am not.” The fear that she would be pulled away from her friends was a great one and Joceline fought against it with all she had. “I heard father stating that my happiness was of greater importance than simply marrying for marrying’s sake, Mother.” She lifted an eyebrow when her mother’s eyes widened. “I know very well that father is eager for me to find happiness and contentment and I have no interest in simply going to any and every gentleman until I find someone who is able to tolerate me.”

Lady Melford looked away.

“I will come to the fashionable hour and, of course, I will speak to many and smile just as I ought. I danced at the ball, did I not? It is not as though I am refusing to do as you expect.”

“You ought not to be spending time with other bluestockings,” came the quick reply, her mother’s eyes sharp and glinting. “They make you all the worse!”

Joceline shook her head, pain lancing through her heart. “Mother, I am already very well aware of just how little you think of me when it comes to my desire to read and to learn. I cannot help that, I am afraid, but I will not permit you to take me away from my new acquaintances. I have already told you that I will do just as you expect in conversing with various gentlemen and ladies during the fashionable hour but I will not spend my every waking moment in pursuit of a husband! I am here to enjoy my time in London and that means I shall be with those who I consider my friends. Those who have the same interests as I, those who understand the same things as I do.

Yes, you may find it a little embarrassing to have a daughter who is so determined to show herself to be a bluestocking , but I know that I have father's blessing. Your lack of support, I am afraid, will do nothing to prevent me from being just as I am."

Lady Melford's hand tightened into a fist and slammed down, hard, on the table. "Do you not understand the shame you are bringing on yourself?" she hissed, her eyes narrowing. "Do you not see just how much upset you bring upon me? This is greatly distressing, to have to step into society with the awareness that there are many in the ton who will laugh at me for having a bluestocking for a daughter!"

"I am afraid that is not something that I can help," Joceline answered, aware of the tears now burning in her eyes but refusing to let herself cry in front of her mother. "Now do excuse me, so that I might go and prepare for the fashionable hour."

Without waiting for her mother to state that yes, she was permitted to take her leave or no, she had to remain, Joceline turned on her heel and hurried out of the room. She heard her mother's voice come after her but she did not so much as glance behind, the ache in her chest beginning to burn hot as a single tear fell to her cheek. Walking quickly, she decided to return to the parlor to collect her book in the hope that she might find a little solace there, only to come face to face with two unexpected visitors being led towards the parlor by the butler. The butler, upon seeing her, inclined his head and came quickly towards her, though Joceline was all too aware of the gaze of the gentleman fixing upon her no-doubt tear-stained face.

"My lady, there is a lady and a gentleman come to call," the butler said, in a quiet voice so that the visitors would not overhear. "I apologize for bringing them to the parlor without your awareness nor the awareness of your mother, but the lady walked into the house as though it was her own and I could not prevent her from doing so."

"Oh." The ache in Joceline's chest began to burn again as she glanced to the two visitors and saw the gentleman frowning. "Introduce me, if you please, then send

someone to fetch my mother.”

The butler nodded, turned, and then gestured to the lady. “Might I present Miss Joceline Trentworth, daughter to Lord Melford. Miss Trentworth, this is the Earl of Albury and his mother, Lady Albury.”

Joceline dropped into a curtsy, aware that she had not had the opportunity to dash the tears from her cheeks, feeling the moisture sink into her skin. “Good afternoon.”

“I am acquainted with your mother,” Lady Albury said, crisply. “I do hope that she is at home. I very much wish to speak with her.”

Joceline threw a look at the butler, who quickly scurried away. “She will join us in a few moments.” Thinking silently to herself that her mother would require more than a few minutes in which to prepare herself for this meeting given that she had risen too late, Joceline walked towards the visitors. “Please come and join me in the parlor. I will have the maid bring us some tea if you would like.” Opening the door, she stepped inside and then waited until both guests had sat down before she, after ringing the bell, sat down with them. With a small smile, Joceline let her gaze drift from one of the guests to the other, rather surprised that both had thought to simply appear at their door without prior arrangement. The lady had sharp, dark eyes that flitted from place to place, seeming to take everything in and, at the very same time, with an air that was somewhat critical, given the slight curl of her lip. She was looking around the room unabashedly, showing no caution whatsoever, and Joceline, in truth, found herself instantly disliking the lady. The gentleman, on the other hand, sat tall, a good deal higher than his mother given his height, though his hands were settled in his lap and he was not looking about anywhere. Rather, his gaze was directed to the fireplace, as empty as it was, making her wonder what it was he found so interesting there. With very dark hair that sat like a shadow over his forehead and a seemingly somewhat staid expression, he did not give any hint of enthusiasm or even delight to be present. For a moment, his blue eyes met hers and a light shiver ran

through Joceline's frame. She did not know why but pulled her own gaze away as quickly as she could, surprised at how much she disliked his gaze fixing to hers.

"Your mother, is she going to be long?"

Joceline forced a polite smile. "I am afraid I cannot say."

"Do recall that we arrived most unexpectedly and Lady Melford could have been caught up in another activity," Lord Albury murmured, throwing a wearied look in his mother's direction. "Or with another guest."

Lady Albury sniffed. "Is that why we have been shown into the parlor rather than the drawing room? Is it that there is another guest present?"

Astonished at the lady's questions, Joceline opened her mouth to try and form a response but quickly closed it again. There was very little that she could say for she certainly did not want to lie but nor did she want to state the truth, given that it would embarrass her mother! Closing her mouth again, she fought for a response, only for Lord Albury to break in.

"Might I ask if this book is any good?" Gesturing to the novel she had left on the chair next to him, he smiled briefly though it did not reach his eyes. "I presume that you have been reading it, Miss Trentworth."

She nodded slowly, aware that he had asked her such a thing to quieten his mother's demanding questions. "Yes, I have been reading it. I have been engrossed in it, truth be told."

Lord Albury's eyebrows lifted. "Then it must be an exceptional read."

"I do not know if I would say exceptional though I have certainly been enjoying it,"

Joceline answered, seeing but not acknowledging the way that Lady Albury sighed and shifted in her chair, making her displeasure known – though whether that was with the conversation or the fact that Joceline’s mother had not arrived yet, Joceline did not know. “It is an interesting story.”

“Do you read often?” Lord Albury asked, casting a hasty glance towards his mother as though he were silently praying that his questions would be enough to silence her until Lady Melford arrived. “I am sure that many young ladies enjoy these novels.”

Something dropped into the pit of her stomach and Joceline’s smile became fixed. It was the first time that she had an opportunity to admit that she was a bluestocking and though she had every sense of pride in being called so, there was still something about saying it aloud that had her hesitant. “I read very often, Lord Albury,” she answered, slowly, choosing each word with great care. “Though I do enjoy novels, I also enjoy books about this world and all the incredible things in it.”

This did not seem to interest Lord Albury for he only nodded and then turned his head away, as if what she had been saying was very dull indeed, making Joceline’s cheeks flush. Much to her relief, the door then opened and revealed her mother, who came into the room all at once, her eyes fastening upon Lady Albury.

“Goodness, Lady Albury! Can that be you?”

“It is indeed.”

Joceline watched as the two ladies greeted each other with such effusiveness that Joceline was greatly surprised, for her mother had never spoken in such a way to anyone as yet! Whoever Lady Albury was, she was clearly more than welcome.

“And you have been introduced to my daughter, how wonderful,” her mother continued, looking hard at Joceline though her smile remained fixed. “I do hope that

you have rung for tea, Joceline?”

“I have.” Lifting her chin, Joceline kept her gaze trained upon her mother, though Lady Melford quickly turned her attention back to her friend. When the tea came, Joceline served it quickly and carefully, noticing that Lord Albury had become almost silent, just as she herself had done. Wondering at the reason for his presence, Joceline sat back down and picked up her tea, hoping that her mother’s conversation would not take too long and that the visit would not last any great length of time. She had a book to return to.

“Did I tell you? Albury here is to host a ball very soon at the house, to which I am certain you shall both be invited.” Lady Albury leaned forward and beamed at Joceline and then to her mother. “It is to be an excellent affair, for I am to invite the very best of society. It shall be a prestigious event, of course.”

“Oh, how wonderful!”

Was it just Joceline’s ears, or did there seem to be a slight strain in her mother’s voice now that she had heard this from Lady Albury? Sipping her tea, she looked to Lord Albury again, surprised to see him frowning, a glint of steel in his eyes. He was certainly a very strange fellow, Joceline considered, for once her mother had arrived, he had only greeted her before falling silent. Was there nothing he wanted to say?

“We also are to host an event, though it will not be a ball,” Lady Melford said, looking to Joceline. “Is that not right, Joceline?”

Joceline, who had never heard of such a thing, had no other choice but to smile and nod. “Yes, that is so.”

“What shall it be, if not a ball?” Lady Albury asked, a tiny hint of mockery in her tone which made Lord Albury’s brows fall even lower over his eyes, his jaw

tightening. “A dinner, mayhap?”

“A soiree.” Joceline’s mother spoke with a firmness that surprised even Joceline, thoroughly confused as to the strange connection between Lady Albury and her mother. “But it is just as you have said, we shall invite only the very best of society so that it is a very intimate affair.”

Lady Albury waved one hand. “Oh, I quite understand. You will want to invite us both, I am sure?”

There came a brief hesitation on the part of Joceline’s mother, making even Joceline’s eyebrows lift in surprise. Tension clawed up her throat as she waited, seeing even Lord Albury’s attention now turned towards her.

“Of course we shall.” It had only been a momentary pause before Lady Melford’s answer but the strain that was now dancing between them all was more than palpable. Joceline’s skin was crawling, her heart hammering and it did not surprise her in the least when both Lord Albury and his mother chose to take their leave a short while later. Had her mother meant to insult them in such an obvious way? Surely not! For what purpose would she have done such a thing?

“Good afternoon,” she murmured, rising to her feet to bid farewell to the guests, questions burning in her mind though she did not speak a single one. “A pleasure to meet you both.”

“A great pleasure,” her mother emphasized, speaking so warmly it was as if none of the previous tension had been caused by her. “I am truly delighted to see you again, Lady Albury.”

The lady smiled and took Lady Melford’s hand for a moment. “As am I,” she said, before quitting the room.

The moment the door shut, Lady Melford rounded on Joceline. “What possessed you to permit them into our home?”

Joceline blinked in surprise. “I – I did not. The butler told me that Lady Albury made her way into this house without even asking if she could do so and he had no choice but to show her to the parlor.”

Hearing this, Lady Melford snorted, walked back to her chair, and sank back down into it, a grimace on her face. “That is precisely like her. I should have expected it.”

“I – I do not understand,” Joceline said, slowly. “Do you not like the lady? I thought you were very close friends, delighted to see each other again.”

This made her mother snort. “No, not in the least. That is what we pretend to be but I do not like her in the least bit! She is always far too demanding, doing her best to stand up against the rest of us in society, as if she has to prove that she is of higher standing than the rest of us.”

Joceline frowned. “She was the wife of an Earl, however.”

“But that does not matter!” her mother exclaimed, her face flushed red. “Do you not see? Your father, even though he is a Viscount, is richer than some of the Marquesses in society! But yet Lady Albury, rather than simply be contented with her acquaintances and her standing in society, is always determined to prove herself to be better than us all. That is the only reason she came here.”

“You mean by speaking about the ball.”

“Indeed.” Lady Melford grimaced. “I chose not to state that we too were throwing a ball, for our event must be different from hers. Though it can still be more impressive than her ball.”

Joceline, not understanding why their soiree had to have more success than Lady Melford's ball, chose to keep her mouth closed rather than say anything more.

"I shall have to start planning immediately. And," the lady continued, waving one hand at Joceline as though she were to pay rapt attention to all that was being said, "it must be after her ball so that we can see what she has done and then improve upon it."

"Yes, Mama." There was nothing else for Joceline to say though, inwardly, she considered that if her mother was now to become distracted by this rather than pursuing her love of reading and learning, then that might do rather well for her!

"Her son appeared to be very dull, which does not surprise me." Lady Melford scowled. "An Earl he may be but he does not have any great character, does he? He did not say more than a few words, though that, no doubt, came from his mother's presence. She has him under her control, I am sure, just as she manipulated and coerced her husband."

This did not sit well with Joceline and she shifted uncomfortably in her chair, disliking hearing such things about a lady she did not even know. "He did try and speak to me," she said, coming to the defense of the gentleman though this only earned her a roll of her mother's eyes. "That was before your arrival."

"Think nothing of it. That gentleman is not someone that you need to consider, my dear. That entire family is disagreeable and I should very much like us to stay away from them... though I must continue with my pretense of friendship, of course."

"Of course," Joceline murmured, looking down at her hands.

"I will have to go and begin thinking about this soiree!" her mother continued, as though she had not heard Joceline. "There is much to be done."

Watching her mother walk out of the room, Joceline frowned as she thought about all that she had learned. One thing she determined she never wished to be was false, for witnessing both her mother and Lady Albury speaking to each other as they had done whilst inwardly despising each other a great deal was rather distressing to consider.

“Though I may now be free to meet with my friends as often as I wish,” Joceline murmured to herself, her eyes going to her book as a small smile tugged at the edge of her lips. “And that can only be a good thing.”

4

One week later

“I do not like that you organized this ball without my permission.”

Lady Albury sighed heavily and fluttered her fingers in Theodore’s direction. “Now is not the time to complain about it, my son. Our guests will be here momentarily!”

I wish that I had found a way to prevent this.

In the last week, Theodore had discovered a fresh despondency when it came to his mother. Seemingly as punishment for refusing to fetch the heirlooms from the estate, Lady Albury had not only planned this ball without his awareness but had only mentioned it when they were in company, meaning that he had not any opportunity to prevent it! He had wondered why she had insisted upon bringing him to call upon Lady Melford and her daughter, a little suspicious that it had been done to introduce him to a young lady that his mother thought suitable. Once the conversation was at an end and they were returned to their carriage, however, Theodore had come to understand that the visit had been done solely to push forward an old rivalry, to bring it back into the light. He had been deeply angry with her for the announcement of the ball and had told her in no uncertain terms that it would not take place, only for her to inform him that the select invitations had already been sent out.

Thus, here he was on the night of the ball, wishing that he had a way to step back from it all.

“As I have said, the guests will be here in a moment so we must go down.” His mother offered him her attempt at a warm smile. “Now, do not look so despondent. This evening will be an excellent one, I am sure.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Theodore noticed a footman stepping out of the shadows, a parcel in his hand. The footman stayed back in the shadows, clearly waiting for a moment to come to the fore and Theodore beckoned him closer at once. “Yes?”

The footman inclined his head and then came towards them, though he handed the parcel to Lady Albury rather than to Theodore. “This came only a few minutes ago, my lady.”

At once, Lady Albury grasped the parcel, a gasp escaping from her.

“What is it?” Theodore asked, a little suspicious that his mother had purchased something all the more ridiculous to elevate herself in amongst society. “Pray do not tell me that you have decided to buy something to add to your finery. You look very well already.”

His mother cast him a long look before turning away from him. “I do not think this concerns you, Theodore. Do excuse me for a few minutes. In fact, why do you not go to the ballroom so that you are ready to greet the guests as they arrive?”

Her secretive behavior made Theodore all the more suspicious though he said nothing, narrowing his gaze just a little as she walked away. There was something about that parcel that she did not want him to see, though Theodore had no choice other than to do what she had suggested. He could not simply linger in the drawing room and wait for her to return, not when the guests were soon to be arriving.

With a small sigh and a shake of his head, Theodore slowly began to meander

towards the ballroom, his mind full of weighted thoughts. He had done well in standing up to her and refusing her demands of the heirloom necklace, he knew, but that did not mean that the days that had followed had been easy. There had been many a time he had felt himself weakening under her complaints but yet, he had managed to stand against her and, in doing so, had found a slow-growing strength.

Though I did not manage to prevent this ball, he thought to himself, grimacing. I shall have to be more aware of what she is doing in the future.

Standing alone just outside the ballroom, ready to greet his first guests, Theodore clasped his hands behind his back and listened to the orchestra as they played in the empty ballroom. It was a beautiful piece and Theodore closed his eyes to listen, sensing a calmness that flooded through his entire frame. Yes, she ought never to have done this, ought never to have planned a ball and invited guests all without his consent, but it had been done and there was nothing else for him to do but to enjoy it.

“It is good to see you with a smile on your face, Albury. I am sure that you will enjoy this evening.”

Theodore opened his eyes. “Perhaps I will but –” The words stuck in his throat, a choking sound emitting from his lips as he stared at his mother, horrified by what he saw.

“You will not be angry with me, I am sure!” she exclaimed, gesturing to the emerald necklace which now adorned her neck. It contained three rows of jewels, each an emerald and each greatly valuable. “You know how much I needed these and if you were not going to fetch them for me, then I thought I would send for them myself.” She smiled and tilted her head, the emerald earrings catching the light. “Can you not see how much I care for you? I did not trouble you any further for the heirlooms, did I? Instead, I found a way to fetch them myself.”

The tightness in his throat increased with every second until he could barely breathe. His eyes were fixed on the emeralds, his heart pounding as sweat broke out across his forehead. How could she have done this to him? He had expressed himself clearly that she was not to have the emeralds!

“You are upset, I can tell. But that will pass,” she continued, speaking gently now as though she were speaking to a child. “Come now, our first guests are arriving! I can hear their footsteps approaching.”

Theodore did not, could not, move. The shock of seeing the emeralds was more than he could put into words, his breathing labored now as pain struck at his heart again and again. He felt weaker than ever before, as though the strength he thought he had in standing up to her was now gone entirely, sapped by her selfish actions. The sheer lack of respect for him as the Earl of Albury and for what he had decided was like a knife stabbing at his heart, making him feel as though he was nothing more than an ant, able to be trodden on and forgotten by her.

“Lord and Lady Greenock, how delighted to have you join us this evening,” he heard his mother say, though still, he said nothing and did not move an inch, staring fixedly at his mother. “You are the first to arrive and we are overjoyed to be able to welcome you to our prestigious ball.”

“We were delighted at the invitation,” Lady Greenock gushed, as Lord Greenock approached Theodore, ready to shake his hand. “I do not think that I have ever attended a ball of yours before, Lord Albury, and I am sure it will be a wonderful one.”

Theodore blinked three times, trying to understand what it was that Lord Greenock was saying to him but found that he could not. His chest was too tight, his hand wooden as he managed to grasp Lord Greenock’s and shake it. There was no smile on his face, no words spoken to Lord Greenock himself and despite his mother’s

warning look, he simply could not pull himself out of his shock.

“If you would just make your way into the ballroom,” he heard his mother say. “You must see the chalked floor! It is truly magnificent.”

“I thank you.” With a momentary glance towards Theodore, Lord Greenock took his wife’s arm and then led her into the ballroom

At the very next moment, his mother’s fingers wrapped tightly around Theodore’s arm, forcing him to look at her.

“Whatever is the matter with you?” she hissed, as yet more voices were heard in the hallway. “Do you not see that we are greeting our guests? You cannot simply stand there and say nothing!”

Anger rolled around in a ball in Theodore’s stomach and he yanked his hand away, the pain in his chest finally breaking and giving way, instead, to fury. “I cannot believe that you would do such a thing to me.”

“Do what?” his mother asked, stepping back. “If it is about the heirlooms, then I cannot see that I have done anything wrong.”

Theodore snorted and shook his head. “Of course you would not,” he said coldly, ignoring the way his mother hushed him, clearly wanting him to lower his voice. “You did not get what you wanted from me and instead, you decided to get it regardless of what I had said about it all. Is that not so?”

His mother lifted her chin and looked straight into his eyes. “I do not care about that. I care about the heirlooms.”

“You do not care,” Theodore answered, a sudden stabbing pain striking him at her

words. “That is the truth of it then, yes? You do not care about what I have decided. You would willingly go against me, even though the heirlooms are under my control. How does that show any sort of respect for me? How does that –”

“If you do not wish to shame yourself and ruin your family’s reputation, then might I suggest that you come to your senses, close your mouth, and turn to greet our guests with joviality and warmth?” Interrupting him, his mother grabbed his wrist this time and pulled herself closer to him. “Understand this, I care not for your feelings, Theodore. I wanted the heirlooms and I have them. That is all that is important to me and thus, you may as well keep your anger to yourself for it will do nothing to me.”

It was as though he had been standing by the ocean and a monstrously cold wave crashed right over him. His mother turned away and put a smile on her face that Theodore simply could not understand, a brightness in her expression that he could not fathom. How could she speak such harsh words to him in one breath and then appear so light of spirit in the moments thereafter? Numb, he forced himself to greet his guests, aware that, despite her harshness, his mother had been right in what she had said. He would only mortify himself if he did not greet his guests as he ought; it would only shame his good name if he turned away in either anger or upset. Despite all that he felt, he had to push it all away, had to hide it from all who came to greet him.

Though once the ball was at an end, Theodore was quietly determined that something would have to be done. After all she had said and done, he did not think he could be in his mother’s company any longer.

“There you are, nephew.”

Theodore groaned inwardly as his aunt, Lady Yarmouth, grabbed at his arm. “Aunt. Good evening.”

“I have come to tell you that you are being most unfair towards your mother,” his aunt declared, with the same spirited manner that he saw so often in his mother. “It is quite right for her to have the heirlooms.”

Gritting his teeth, Theodore took in a deep breath and tried to calm himself inwardly. “This is not a matter that concerns you, Aunt.”

“Oh, but it does! Especially when it concerns my sister! You must know how much she adored those jewels! Besides which, they remind her of your father and –”

Theodore cut through the space between them with one hand, his palm flat out. “Enough, Aunt.” The situation was much too raw for him to be speaking with any sense of calmness, telling him that he had to bring the conversation to a close before it went on any further. “My father gave my mother a good many jewels and she was only permitted to wear the family heirlooms on very specific occasions. I will not hear any further manipulations, for I will not be moved on the matter. I will take those jewels back the moment the ball comes to an end and that will be the end of it!”

He turned away from his now red cheeked aunt, only for two young ladies to come directly into his path.

“Lord Albury, good evening.” The first one smiled, as the second one bobbed a curtsy. “I do hope you are enjoying your ball. We certainly are, I can assure you!”

Theodore silently demanded he smile as two young ladies beamed up at him. “Yes, I am. I thank you. Though,” he continued, making up an excuse which, he prayed, would not be found out, “I must now go to dance. Pardon my hasty absence.”

The two young ladies glanced at each other with similar looks of disappointment in their eyes but they could do nothing other than nod and smile. Relieved, Theodore moved away from them and his aunt as quickly as he could, making his way to the

back of the ballroom though, in a short while, he would, in fact, need to go and dance with a Miss Henderson, if he recalled correctly. Sighing, he leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes, his arms folded. The initial shock of his mother wearing the heirlooms he had stated were not to be taken had begun to wear off, replaced instead with cold and furious anger, now fueled by his aunt's remarks. Quite what he was to do, Theodore was not yet certain but he absolutely did not want to have his mother near to him any longer. Something had to be done.

"I did hear that there has been news of a mercenary who made his way from – oh!"

Theodore's eyes opened, a little confused as to whether or not he had heard those words correctly. It was very strange indeed for a young lady to be speaking of such things, so he quickly accepted that he had not heard her correctly. "Do not let me interrupt your conversation, please."

The two ladies glanced at each other, though Theodore instantly recognized one. He pushed himself to stand straight, a growing heat in his neck reaching up to his face as he bowed towards Miss Trentworth. The first time he had been introduced to her had been the most embarrassing of visits, for he had sunk into a silence when he realized the precise reason for his mother's insistence that they call. "Miss Trentworth," he said, praying that she did not mention his visit. "Good evening."

"Good evening," she answered, bobbing a curtsy. "You are acquainted with Lady Amelia, I think."

I must be, given that she was invited. "Yes, of course." Bowing towards the lady that he did not recall in the slightest, Theodore tried to smile. "I hope that you are enjoying the evening."

"We are." There was a glance shared between the ladies as Miss Trentworth spoke, as though she did not want to tell him the entirety of the truth. "It is a magnificent

evening.” A slight head tilt told him of her curiosity. “Though it is a little surprising to see the host of the evening standing so far from the crowd!”

Theodore bit back his first response, wanting to tell her that his standing here was none of her business but recognizing that, to do so would be very rude indeed. “I am a little fatigued.”

“I can imagine!” the other young lady said, offering him a smile that spoke of understanding and sympathy, pulling back some of Theodore’s frustration. “I have never hosted a ball before but it must be exhausting.”

“Though your efforts will be well rewarded, given that everyone in the ton will be speaking not only of the success of this evening but also of the elegance and refinement present.” Miss Trentworth spread out her hands. “Your mother’s jewels, for example, are being spoken of already! They are truly magnificent, Lord Albury.”

This set Theodore’s teeth on edge. He did not mean to but he glowered hard at Miss Trentworth, as though she had said something wrong and watched as the light faded from her eyes. “The jewels you speak of are my family’s heirlooms,” he said, tightly. “My mother was not to display them this evening but she chose to do so regardless.”

Miss Trentworth blinked, then smiled though it did not send light into her expression. “I can see why she would have chosen to do so. They are beautiful and indeed, I do not think that I have ever seen anything like them before!”

“Indeed, it is little wonder that she wanted to show them to society,” Lady Amelia added, though there was a flicker of confusion in her eyes, no doubt wondering as to his strange reaction. “I quite understand.”

“As do I.”

Theodore grimaced and looked away, finding very little to say to this. When he shot a look back toward the two ladies, he saw them looking at each other, both a little wide-eyed and wondering at his strange reaction. I am behaving poorly. Taking in a deep breath, he set his shoulders back and tried to shake off his displeasure. “Might you have your dance cards available to me, ladies? I should be glad to dance with you both, though I have only three dances remaining.”

Lady Amelia shook her head. “Alas, I have my dance card quite filled already, Lord Albury, though I am grateful to you for your consideration.”

This, much to Theodore’s surprise, had Miss Trentworth sending a somewhat dark look towards her friend, though he did not understand why. When she turned her attention to him again, however, there was a sunny smile placed on her expression as though nothing was wrong. “How very kind, Lord Albury,” she said, handing him her dance card. “I have some dances remaining though if they do not suit, then I quite understand.”

“The cotillion.” Quickly writing his name down, he thrust the dance card back at her. “Now you must excuse me, for I am to dance and I do not want to miss the polka. Good evening.”

Aware that he had been somewhat abrupt in his departure, Theodore strode away from the ladies, his face growing hot. It had been the mention of his mother’s jewels which had quite ruined the conversation for him and he knew he had behaved poorly thereafter. Mayhap he had made things a little better by asking the ladies to dance, but all the same, he had not done particularly well. Sighing inwardly, Theodore lifted his chin and determinedly pushed on. He would have to do his utmost to make a good impression on the others from society for the rest of the evening, or else things would become all the worse for him what with whispers and rumors about his behavior. He could only hope that Miss Trentworth and Lady Amelia were not inclined towards gossiping, else the damage had already been done.

And it was all, Theodore considered, his mother's fault.

“How was your dance with Lord Albury?”

Joceline snorted as her friend grinned at her. “My dear Eugenia, you know very well that he was not at all in good spirits last evening!”

“I know.” Miss Sherwood giggled. “But I must tell you that it was Lady Amelia who told me that you were dancing with him. That is why I ask you, for we both watched you very carefully but I did not have the opportunity to speak with you thereafter.”

This made Joceline grin, though she clicked her tongue and shook her head at the very same time. “Lady Amelia was very crafty last evening, for as Lord Albury asked us both to dance, she claimed that her dance card was quite full and she was unable to do so even though I knew very well that she had two dances remaining!” She laughed softly, recalling the wicked glint in Lady Amelia’s eye and the slight lift of her eyebrow when she had looked towards Joceline. “I had no other choice but to offer Lord Albury my dance card, even though I did not feel particularly inclined towards his company.”

“And the dance?”

Joceline shrugged as they continued to walk through Hyde Park together, her mother somewhere behind her. “He danced well but said very little, both of which I was grateful for!” Her mind went back to the moment Lord Albury had come to take her for the dance. He had smiled, yes, and he had been very gentlemanly in the way he had offered her his arm and then walked her out to the center of the ballroom but he

had, thereafter, fallen completely silent and left her with very little to say. She had been quite unable to start a conversation with him and even though it was expected that someone would say something during a dance, not a single word had been shared between them. He had only murmured his thanks to her once the dance was completed before subsequently leading her back to her mother.

“A disagreeable fellow, then.”

Considering this, Joceline shook her head. “No, I do not think so though I would never state outright that I have the measure of him!”

Her friend smiled at her. “No? Then what would you say of him?”

Joceline let herself think a little longer before she answered, careful in her response. “I think that there was something about his mother’s jewels and her wearing of them to the ball that upset him. When I made a remark about how magnificent they were –”

“They truly were,” Miss Sherwood interrupted, her voice softening now as a sense of awe filled her words. “I do not think I have ever seen the like before. To have so many large emeralds all in one necklace – and in the earrings too – quite stole my breath away!”

“As it did mine,” Joceline admitted, “though, as I was saying, when I mentioned it to Lord Albury in the hope that it would bring a little more to our conversation, his expression darkened like a thunder cloud. He was displeased at his mother’s display of wealth though I cannot understand why.”

Miss Sherwood shook her head. “Nor I. I would have thought that a gentleman such as he would have done everything he could to show off his wealth.”

Recalling how Lord Albury had behaved when he and his mother had come to call

upon her and her mother, Joceline considered a little more, though she did not voice any of her thoughts. There was a tension between Lord Albury and his mother, she considered, though it was certainly not her business to consider why!

“I am looking forward to your soiree,” Miss Sherwood continued, changing the topic of conversation. “Though given what you have told me about your mother and Lady Albury, I am sure you must be a little anxious.”

With a laugh, Joceline shook her head. “No, indeed I am not. If my mother wishes to focus all of her attentions on this soiree to make it the most excellent evening thus far in society, then I am glad for it, for it means that she does not think about what I am doing.”

Miss Sherwood chuckled. “So she will not notice that we are going to meet with the others to discuss what we have all been reading, no?”

“I doubt it,” Joceline answered, glancing back over her shoulder to see her mother now in deep conversation with two other ladies. No doubt she was speaking of the soiree and how magnificent it would be. “I am already looking forward to our conversation! Come, let us go and find them.”

It did not take them more than a few minutes to once more be in the company of the other bluestockings. Joceline enjoyed her conversations, telling Lady Isobella about her now completed novel and how eager she was to find another book to read. Though, she had considered finding something more factual, mayhap.

“I have been reading a little more on the war that is happening at present, though my brother is most disinclined towards my reading of it.” Lady Amelia rolled her eyes. “That does not prevent me, of course.”

Joceline frowned. “I do not know if that is what I should wish to read, though I am

eager to understand all that is going on, of course.”

“Then what shall you consider?” Lady Isobella tipped her head just a little. “I have heard that there have been some fascinating new animals discovered of late, in parts of the world that I have never even heard of before!”

“That would be most interesting,” Joceline agreed, smiling at her friend. “Shall we go to the library tomorrow? I might be able to find something there.”

This was met with eager agreement from all of her friends and, with a small smile, Joceline leaned towards Lady Amelia. “Though you must tell us all about what has been happening with the war.” Her smile faded. “There is none who speak of it to me and even my own father does not appear to be in any way interested. And yet I think that we ought to know precisely all that is taking place, if we are to be considered loyal to our country! Indeed, I think it shocking that we should be at war with France and yet not fully understand the reasons behind it nor what drives the French to attack our men!” She lifted her chin just a little. “I will admit that I find the matter very troubling indeed and should not like to do extensive reading on the subject, though I know you do, Amelia.” Her friend nodded. “However, even though I will not do a great deal of in-depth study, I should like to understand it a good deal better. I think it is only right that I do so.”

The other ladies made murmurs of agreement, only for a somewhat astonished exclamation to reach Joceline’s ears. She turned around bodily, looking straight into the eyes of a seemingly most astonished Lord Albury and an equally surprised companion. A flush of embarrassment threatened to crawl its way up Joceline’s spine but she ignored it quickly, lifting her chin and looking directly at the gentlemen as though to question their very presence here with them.

“Good afternoon, Miss Trentworth.” Lord Albury, hastily recovering himself, inclined his head just a little. “Lady Amelia, Miss Sherwood, Lady Isobella and Lady

Rosalyn. Good afternoon to you all.”

Joceline, somewhat taken aback that the gentleman had not only recognized but correctly identified them all, said nothing, turning her attention to the gentleman beside Lord Albury given that he had not yet been introduced. He was blinking rapidly though there came a hint of a smile at the edge of his lips.

“Good afternoon,” Lady Rosalyn said, quietly. “Good afternoon to you also, Lord Castleton. Is your wife present with you today?”

The gentleman nodded. “Yes, she is. Though she is caught up in conversation with a few acquaintances and thus, I was able to escape with Lord Albury for a time. I am sure she would be very glad to see you again, Lady Rosalyn. She is just over there.”

With a nod and a smile, Lady Rosalyn quickly excused herself, taking Lady Isabella with her to ensure she did not walk out into the park alone. Joceline was left standing in front of Lord Albury and this still unIntroduced Lord Castleton, with Lady Amelia and Miss Sherwood still with her and it was not until a few beats of silence came between them that Lord Albury seemed to remember himself and his duty.

“Oh, forgive me.” Quickly, he made the introductions, though Joceline could not help but notice the way his eyes flicked towards her and then pulled away again with haste. It happened not only once but on two separate occasions, making her wonder as to his purpose in doing so. Was it because he had overheard her speaking of the war in such a clear way? Mayhap he had not expected such conversation from young ladies.

“A remarkable conversation, I must say,” Lord Castleton began, making Joceline’s heart twist, uncertain as to whether or not he was mocking them. “You quite put me to shame, I think.”

“Oh?” Miss Sherwood’s eyes were a little sharp, clearly just as unsure as Joceline. “In what way, might I ask?”

Lord Castleton nodded, seemingly eager to do so. “Because I know very little about the war with France and here you all are, stating that it is almost disloyal to stand in ignorance!”

Watching him as he spoke, Joceline became increasingly convinced that Lord Castleton was genuine in all he said. There was no mocking glance toward Lord Albury, no slight quirk of his lips as he spoke and, slowly, Joceline began to release the twirling tension within her.

“I find the subject interesting, certainly,” Lady Amelia said, clearly and with great confidence, displaying quite proudly that she was, in fact, a bluestocking. “I know a good deal but there is still much for me to understand.”

“And as I am sure you overheard me say, I am very eager indeed to understand it as best I can, though I do not desire to do any great study on the subject. That is a little too weighty for my mind, I confess.”

Lord Albury’s eyebrow lifted. “You prefer novels, I think.”

Joceline scowled at him, the lightness in his tone irritating her. “I will not pretend that I do not enjoy escaping into an excellent, well written story, Lord Albury, but as I was only just saying to my friends, I think I desire now to read something that is not simply a story. I was told that there have been some excellent discoveries in the animal kingdom of late and that is something that captures my interest.” Letting her scowl fade, she arched one eyebrow, seeing how his eyes had rounded as she had spoken. “In fact, we were now planning a visit to the library so that we might find more books to read and to learn from.”

Lord Albury blinked, then looked away, one hand rubbing over his chin. There came a small but weighty silence and Joceline's heart began to thud in her chest. It was not the first time that she had spoken so clearly, not the first time that she had made it more than apparent that she was a bluestocking but there was something about this conversation, something about this gentleman that made her feel ill at ease.

"I think that is good," Lord Castleton said, casting a glance towards Lord Albury and then looking back to Joceline. "My wife is a great reader also."

"A bluestocking, then?" Lord Albury frowned. "You are all bluestockings?"

With a firm nod, Joceline held his gaze without so much as blinking. "Yes, we are." She said nothing more than this, gave no further explanation but instead, waited for his response. To her eyes, it appeared as though Lord Albury had not been expecting her to speak so confidently, for he quickly dropped his gaze and then looked away, his hand rubbing at his chin again. Lord Castleton opened his mouth, shot a look at his friend and then snapped it closed again, a small smile playing around the edges of his mouth. Could it be that he found Lord Albury's reaction somewhat mirthful? Joceline's heart quickened just a little as Lord Albury lifted his gaze to hers again, not because of any interest in the gentleman certainly but because of the uncertainty over what he would say.

"That is... interesting."

Joceline's shoulders dropped, her heart quickly returning to a calm, steady beat. Lord Albury had said nothing by such a remark, seemingly choosing not to tell her whether he thought well of her or not. There was a hesitation there, certainly, but that might well have come from his lack of awareness as to what he ought to say.

"I think it a fine thing, as I have said," Lord Castleton said, seeming now to rescue his friend from the situation. "My dear wife enjoys reading all manner of things and I

have never prevented her from choosing whatever books she pleases.”

This made Joceline’s lips curve into a genuine smile. “I think I should like to meet your wife, Lord Castleton.”

“As should I.”

The gentleman beamed at them both, his chest lifting a little as though it was puffed up with pride – though not for himself, Joceline considered, but rather for his wife. She began to think well of Lord Castleton, though for whatever reason, her gaze kept sliding towards Lord Albury. A touch of red was in his cheeks but he said nothing more to any of them, a slight frown pulling at his brows as though he was considering all that had been said. Joceline was surprised at herself, at the clear longing within her to know what it was he thought of her bluestocking ways. Why, she had no reason to care as to whether or not he approved of her! And had she not just finished telling her friend all about his strange behavior the night before? There was no reason for her to have even the smallest of interest in him!

“Then shall I take you now?” Lord Castleton asked, as Joceline pulled all thought away from the Earl. “Lady Rosalyn is already there, is she not?”

“Yes, let us go,” Joceline said decisively, before her friend could speak. “An excellent suggestion, Lord Castleton. I should be delighted to meet your wife, especially since it seems that she too might be as understanding as you when it comes to our bluestocking ways!”

Lord Castleton nodded fervently. “Oh, indeed she is! Let me take you to her now.”

Joceline made to follow him, only for Lord Albury to clear his throat. “I shall excuse myself, I think.”

Though this did not surprise Joceline, it made her stomach dip low as though, in saying such a thing, he had disappointed her though that, Joceline told herself, was a foolish thing to think.

“But of course,” Lord Castleton said, with a nod. “Come, Miss Trentworth, Lady Amelia. My wife is just over here.”

With only a glance towards Lord Albury, Joceline followed after him, her head held high. Whether Lord Albury approved of her learning and reading, she did not care, she told herself, though inwardly, there was a lingering sense of frustration. How much she wanted to be accepted by society! How much she wanted to be seen for who she was without fear of judgment! A slow growing sense of despair settled within her, as she walked alongside Lord Castleton. He appeared to be delighted with his wife and her love of reading, though she did not think that there would be very many gentlemen like that. Her parents expected her to make a match, though her father had made it clear enough that she was to find happiness in that if she could.

If I can, she thought, an ache in her chest. And what if I cannot? The ache grew all the heavier. What then? What is to become of me?

“I do not much like Lady Melford.”

Theodore rolled his eyes and picked up his glass of port. “There is no need for you to attend their soiree this evening, then.”

“Do not be so ridiculous,” his mother answered, sharply. “You know as well as I that I cannot be absent.”

Given that, as yet, he had not decided what he ought to do as regarded his mother’s presence in his home, Theodore found every moment with her near enough unbearable. He had spoken to Lord Castleton about the heirlooms and his mother’s lack of respect for his decision but his friend had been very careful indeed, choosing not to offer any sort of advice but instead, listening and asking questions so that Theodore might unburden himself a little.

“I saw you in the company of her daughter,” the lady continued, as Theodore took another swig of his port. “You were talking together in the park a few days ago.”

Theodore shrugged.

“I do not think highly of her either,” his mother continued in a superior voice, sniffing disdainfully. “I have heard that she is a bluestocking! Can you imagine the shame of that?”

“If you do not like the lady, then why did you insist that we call?” Theodore asked,

angrily, even though he already knew the answer. “You wanted to impress her, did you not? To show that you are all the better than she, no doubt because you know – as I do now – that her husband is very wealthy indeed!”

His mother’s eyes sharpened. “That matter not.”

“Then why did you try to prove to her just how much wealth and standing you had? Why throw a ridiculously ostentatious ball if it was not in an attempt to have the ton – Lady Melford included – think better of you? You want them to look up to you, to admire you and the like, do you not? Whilst you, at the very same time, pretend to be eager for their friendship and companionship when that is not at all what you want.” Now that he had begun to speak, Theodore could not seem to stop. Sitting up straight, he pointed one finger at his mother. “You think that they will be overcome with admiration at the jewels you wear and mayhap some of them are, but the truth is, those jewels do not belong to you. You should never have sent for them, as you did. You should never have undermined me, for in doing so, you have gained nothing but my frustration, my anger, and my utter disinclination towards you.”

There came a slow flush of heat rushing through his mother’s face as she looked at him, her eyes flashing but her lips thin. Theodore did not even think to apologize for what he had said, feeling almost a sense of relief that he had spoken as he had done.

“As I think I made very clear before, my son,” she said, icily, “I care nothing for your thoughts and feelings when it comes to these heirlooms. To my mind, I have every right to them for your father gave me permission to wear them when he was alive. My sister feels the same way as I do.”

“I care not for what my aunt thinks! I know very well that my father permitted you to wear those jewels on occasion and I now do the same. I have chosen to keep them safe and secure, so that I might place them upon my bride on the day we wed, just as I ought,” Theodore answered, his hands clasping tightly, his jaw working as he fought

to control his fury. “You did not think about my reasons for doing such a thing, nor did you willingly acquiesce to what I had said, knowing full well that you had more than enough jewels and precious things to keep you contented. You are selfish, Mother. Selfish to the core.”

This did not strike at her with any sort of fierceness, however, for the lady only shrugged and looked away.

“Excuse me.” Rising quickly from his chair, Theodore made his way from the room, more than ready to be free from her company. “I must go to prepare for the soiree.”

Being away from her made the tightness in his chest fade and, taking in a deep breath, Theodore paused for a moment and then closed his eyes. When he opened them, he caught the butler stepping out of the drawing room and into the hallway, going about his business as he ought. “Smithers, wait a moment.”

The butler inclined his head. “Yes, my lord?”

“The heirlooms that my mother wore to the ball some days ago,” Theodore continued, frowning. “At present, they are stored safely in my study desk. However, I should like you to move them from the locked drawer to the safety box in the wall.”

The butler did not so much as blink. “Of course, my lord. Will I leave it open for you so that you might see them there yourself before you lock and close it?”

Thinking for a moment, Theodore nodded. “Yes. Do that. I will go to change for the soiree and then return to the study to make certain all is well before I lock it.”

The gentleman nodded. “At once, Lord Albury.”

With a nod, Theodore turned away and made his way towards his bedchamber,

already feeling a good deal more at ease. He would have to think about what he was to do with his mother's lack of respect but at least reclaiming the heirlooms for himself was a good thing. With another deep breath, he settled himself a little more and then called for his valet. He was going to enjoy this soiree, he told himself, whether his mother was present or not.

And I will see Miss Trentworth again.

That gave Theodore pause. He had not responded well when she had told him that she was a bluestocking, for he had been mostly astonished that she had spoken as she did. It had been clear and determined and without any hint of shame, so clearly she had no embarrassment in being known as such a thing. He had not come across a bluestocking before, though he had known full well what society thought of them and what he too, apparently, ought to think. When he had been faced with a learned lady, however, he had not felt any sort of repulsion or the like but rather a grudging respect that she would not only be such a thing but be willing to state it without shame.

I think that I ought to state clearly to her that I do not feel any sort of dislike towards her because she is a bluestocking, he thought, as the valet came to help him dress. I want her to know that I am not at all turned away because of that. He had seen the way her eyes had lit up when Lord Castleton had spoken as he had done, how glad she had been to find someone sympathetic and understanding – and he had grown angry at himself that he had not responded in the same way. This evening, though, he would have a chance to make amends. This evening, he could speak with her and mayhap, she might smile at him in the same way she had done towards Lord Castleton.

And, as strangely as it seemed, that was one thing that Theodore knew he wanted.

The soiree was, Theodore had to admit, an enjoyable one. He had stepped into the room without his mother, for she had not been ready to depart when he had sent for

her given that her sister had come to call unexpectedly. Thus, he had come to the house and then sent the carriage back to fetch her. The company was excellent, the conversations diverting and the entertainment, delightful. Soon, there would be cards set up for anyone who wished to play, whilst others would go to the music room for songs or to perform on the pianoforte. Theodore was, at this moment, struggling to know which he would prefer to do!

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the arrival of Miss Trentworth in the drawing room, arm in arm with a friend. He had greeted her as he had come into the house, of course, but he had not had an opportunity yet to speak with her. Grasping the opportunity, he excused himself and came towards her, inclining his head quickly.

“Good evening, Miss Trentworth, Lady Rosalyn.”

The two ladies glanced at each other but smiled their welcome. “Good evening, Lord Albury,” Lady Rosalyn said, as Miss Trentworth murmured a greeting. “I do hope you are well?”

“I am.” Getting directly to the point, Theodore looked straight into Miss Trentworth’s face. “Miss Trentworth, when we spoke in the park a few days ago, I do not feel as though I responded well to your... statement.”

A slight rounding of her eyes told Theodore of her surprise at his statement, though she said nothing.

“I should like to take this opportunity to clarify that my response to that information is not a negative one,” he said quickly, seeing how her eyes rounded all the more. “I apologize if that is the impression I gave, for it was not intentional. I was surprised, that is all.”

Miss Trentworth blinked and then, after a few moments, sent a warm smile in his

direction. "Lord Albury, I must say that I am somewhat astonished to hear you speak so though, at the very same time, I am very grateful to you for not only your willingness to come and speak to me about this, but also for your response towards me. I am sure that it is not a commonplace happening for you to be presented with a young lady declaring to you that they are a bluestocking!"

Theodore chuckled, feeling as though a wall between them had suddenly broken into smithereens between them. "If I am to be entirely truthful, Miss Trentworth, I will admit that it was the first time that has ever taken place!"

"Then I am not surprised that you found yourself a touch confused," Lady Rosalyn said, gently. "Though I know that we all are grateful indeed for gentlemen such as yourself, who have such a good opinion of bluestockings."

This shamed Theodore a little, for he was not entirely certain that he did have as good an opinion as the lady suggested. "I thank you," was all he said, however, unwilling to say anything more than that.

"I do value your willingness to come and talk to us," Miss Trentworth echoed, as Lady Rosalyn was greeted by another acquaintance, pulling her a little away from Theodore and Miss Trentworth. "It is not every gentleman who would do such a thing."

Theodore opened his mouth to say that he did not mind in the least, only to catch sight of his mother walking into the drawing room. The words he was going to say died on his lips as he saw not only the earrings flashing in her ears but also the emerald necklace that now adorned her neck. His heart began to hammer furiously, anger burning through his veins as he fought his instant response, aware that Miss Trentworth was speaking but struggling to comprehend what she was saying.

How? How did she find them?

Closing his eyes, Theodore could not help the groan which broke from his lips, realizing that he had quite forgotten to go and close the safe, as he had told the butler he would do. No doubt his mother had gone in search of the heirlooms, expecting them to be in the locked drawer of his study but had found them, instead, in the open safe. Quite what she had intended to do if they had still been in the locked drawer of his study, Theodore did not know, but he had every expectation that she would have found a way to gain access to them. That was why he had wanted them in the safe, knowing that there was no possible way for her to gain access to them that way. Was that why she had not been ready to leave when he had sent for her? Had her intention always been to go in search of the heirlooms?

“Lord Albury? Are you quite all right?”

Theodore swallowed hard and looked back at Miss Trentworth with an effort, aware that his gaze wanted to do nothing more than to fix itself furiously upon his mother. “Miss Trentworth, forgive me. I have only just now seen my mother’s arrival at the soiree and I was not certain she would be attending.”

“Oh.” Miss Trentworth frowned. “The invitation did extend to her also, I am sure.”

“I mean only that she was feeling a little... fatigued. But,” Theodore continued, gritting his teeth for a moment in an attempt to contain all that he felt, “it seems as though she has rallied and will now be able to join us all.”

Miss Trentworth smiled. “That is good.” Her smile dimmed a little as Theodore glanced at his mother again, his jaw set tight. “Are you quite certain all is well?”

Theodore cleared his throat, clasped his hands behind his back, and tried to smile, a warning in his mind that he was on the verge of behaving poorly in front of the lady again. “Yes, of course. You must forgive me, Miss Trentworth, for becoming so distracted.”

Her smile was warm and, for the first time, Theodore noticed how there were hints of blue in her green eyes. This, in turn, pulled his thoughts away from his mother, a sense of appreciation in her gentle expression. An explosion of warmth in his chest made his heart quicken and he swallowed hard, not certain what it was that he was feeling.

“I should go to speak with some of the other guests.” Miss Trentworth’s smile lingered, as though she knew what it was that he was feeling. “Thank you again for coming to speak with me about this, Lord Albury. You have made me very happy this evening, truly.”

“Thank you, Miss Trentworth.” Theodore was not certain what precisely it was he was thanking her for but it appeared to be the only thing that he could think to say. With another smile, the lady turned away and walked from him, and Theodore’s eyes followed after her... only for them to catch sight of the flashing emeralds.

Fury descended upon him in a cloud, his hands curling into tight fists as he saw his mother throw her head back and laugh, all the while flickering her fingers towards the necklace as if to draw as much attention toward them as she could.

“My friend.”

Theodore felt a hand on his arm, a familiar voice in his ear.

“Your anger is obvious for everyone to see. Please, take a moment.”

Closing his eyes so he did not see his mother’s face, Theodore clenched his jaw tight.

“I know this must be more than a little infuriating but there is nothing that can be done this evening,” Lord Castleton continued, speaking in a low voice. “You must speak of it to her once you are alone.”

“I am going to do more than speak,” Theodore answered, his voice a hoarse whisper. “I am going to demand that she leaves London.” Opening his eyes, he saw his friend’s startled expression but shook his head. “What else is it that I am to do, Castleton? Again and again, she defies me and pours shame upon my head.”

Lord Castleton opened his mouth and then shut it again, looking towards Lady Albury for a moment. “I cannot tell you what to do. The truth is, I have very little thought as to what would be the right thing to do. My only advice is to be cautious.” He held Theodore’s gaze firmly. “You do not know what she will do if you try to bring any consequences down upon her. She is good at garnering sympathy from others and, no doubt, you will be the one who appears to be in error if you go about this the wrong way.”

His friend’s words made sense and, with a slow breath, Theodore nodded and then closed his eyes to get himself back under control. Yes, it was now time for him to consider what he had to do about his mother’s continual disrespect towards him but this was not the time nor the place. He had to make certain that, for the time being, he showed none of his true emotion and, if he could, try to enjoy the remainder of the evening.

“Thank you for your help, my friend,” he murmured, as Lord Castleton nodded. “I have regained my composure.”

“That is good,” Lord Castleton said, slapping Theodore on his shoulder. “I am sure that this evening will be —”

A scream broke through his response, making Theodore’s heart thump wildly. Silence fell across the room as another sound – a cry of seeming desperation – now flooded through the room. Theodore and Lord Castleton stepped forward as one, only for Lady Albury’s voice to break through the room.

“My necklace! My necklace has been stolen!”

“My necklace! My necklace has been stolen!”

Shock reverberated through the room and hit Joceline right between the eyes. Catching her breath, she moved quickly forward, seeing her mother’s white face as their eyes met.

“What do you mean, stolen?” It was Lord Albury who now took control of the situation, striding forward and grasping his mother’s hand. “What are you talking about?”

Lady Albury let out a half-gasp, half-sob as Joceline came to stand beside her mother, aware that she would need her support. This would now ruin her mother’s soiree, Joceline was sure, for the rumors and whispers would start almost immediately. Whether Lady Albury’s necklace truly had been stolen, then the twisting words would already be wreathed around this soiree for the days and weeks to come.

“Oh, Albury!” As Joceline watched, Lady Albury practically collapsed into her son’s arms. “The necklace! The heirloom! It has been stolen!”

“How can it have been stolen, Mother?” he asked, as Joceline felt her mother’s hand settle on hers, gripping it tightly as a small shudder ran through them both. “It does not make sense for it was clasped about your neck, was it not?”

“I am sure that no one here would have stolen your necklace, Lady Albury.” Aware now that her mother was in too much of a shock to speak clearly, Joceline kept her

tone steady but gentle. “Would there be any possibility of it slipping accidentally from your neck? Mayhap it has fallen somewhere and can be found.”

“No, no, you foolish girl!” the lady exclaimed, sending another wave of shock – followed swiftly by embarrassment – through Joceline. “The necklace was an heirloom! It was made to the highest standards and certainly cannot have simply fallen from my neck! You are ridiculous indeed to suggest such a thing.”

Joceline blinked, swallowed, and looked away, feeling the heat rising in her cheeks. Everyone in the room was rapt with attention, listening to every word spoken which meant that every guest had heard her being called a ‘foolish girl’.

“Mother, you might well be upset but there is no reason for you to speak in such a way to Miss Trentworth.” Lord Albury cast Joceline a very quick glance but there was a glittering in his eyes that Joceline could not fully comprehend. Was it that he thought her suggestion foolish, just as his mother did, though he had not said that aloud to her? Or was it fear... or some other emotion? Her throat grew tight but she kept her head held high, doing her best to continue as best she could.

“Might I suggest that we search regardless?” she asked, trying to smile. “I am certain we can find it.”

Lady Albury opened her mouth to retort, a sharpness in her eyes that spoke of pure anger but Lord Albury quickly caught her hand and then spoke. “Thank you, Miss Trentworth. That is certainly a wise suggestion and should be undertaken with the greatest of speed, before any other conclusion is reached.”

Joceline glanced to her mother who quickly came to stand beside her, a tiny touch of red on each cheek though, Joceline hoped, that came from a growing strength. “I think my mother will be able to arrange that.”

“I shall.” With a nod to Joceline, Lady Melford continued. “Might I suggest that the guests all remain in either the drawing room or the music room for the next few minutes? The staff will need to be summoned and a thorough search conducted.”

“I can do that, Mama,” Joceline murmured, as Lady Melford glanced at her. “Lady Albury will need to rest.”

A tiny nod told Joceline that she was free to do so and, with a quick look towards Lord Albury himself, Joceline made her way from the room. There came a few footsteps behind her and, with a breath of relief, Joceline took Miss Sherwood’s hand for a moment.

“Thank you, Eugenia.”

“I thought you might need a little help.” Miss Sherwood clicked her tongue. “This is most extraordinary. I am so very sorry that it has happened.”

“I must find the necklace,” Joceline answered, aware of the swirling in her stomach. “That is the only solution.” Snapping her fingers, she beckoned the butler to her once she had caught his attention. “The servants must search all the rooms the guests have been in.”

Miss Sherwood touched her arm. “They must search every room, no?”

A little confused, Joceline turned to her friend. “All of the rooms? Do you mean the entire house? Why should I do such a thing?”

After a pause, Miss Sherwood explained herself. “We do not know what has happened to the necklace. We believe that it has fallen from her neck but what if... what if there was something untoward?”

Joceline said nothing, a little upset over what her friend was suggesting.

Miss Sherwood hesitated, then continued. “Do you understand what I am saying?” She looked long at Joceline but still, she did not respond. “It may be that this necklace has been stolen and we do not know by whom. Therefore, if someone has taken it, they may have hidden it within the house.”

A nudge of relief pushed against Joceline’s heart. She means one of the guests, not one of the servants here.

As though she knew all of Joceline’s thoughts, Miss Sherwood spoke on with her explanation. “I do not mean to suggest that your servants are at all guilty, however. I know that you expect their loyalty, as do we all!”

Joceline winced, aware of her own bias. “But there is still a chance that one might have done so.”

“I would be surprised if a servant attempted to do such a thing. My suggestion is that, if it truly has been stolen, then another guest has found a way to take it and, in their jealousy, placed it somewhere in the house in the hope of fetching it later in the evening.”

Understanding her friend perfectly now, Joceline nodded slowly, her nerves beginning to jangle. “Yes, I see exactly what you mean and you are quite right. I should conduct a search of the entire house, though how long that will take I do not know.” She bit her lip. “I cannot keep the guests here for hours.”

Miss Sherwood considered this, then light came into her eyes. “Then why do you not continue the entertainment? Allow the evening to progress as it should whilst you search the house – along with the servants and myself, of course.”

Appreciating her friend's clear thinking, Joceline's determination centered and she spoke directly and firmly to the butler. Within a few minutes, she had organized the servants to search the house, sending three at a time to search different rooms – including her own, though that felt a little shameful. She certainly had not taken the necklace, had no knowledge as to where it was, but all the same, she had to be fair. When it came to it, she would have to be honest and say that every room of her house had been searched, and that included her own bedchamber.

The moment she had finished directing the servants, however, her mother came out of the room, hurrying to her. Her eyes were wide with concern and she was wringing her hands, her cheeks flushed hot now. “Joceline, whatever shall we do? Lady Albury is telling everyone that there is a thief in our house! She is suggesting that one of our servants has taken the necklace.”

At that moment, Joceline felt herself aligned with her mother, no longer an adversary as they had been for the last few weeks. Her father was not present and therefore it was down to her to come alongside her mother and find a solution to this difficulty. Their family's reputation was at stake and that held great seriousness. “With Eugenia's help, I have organized a search of the house. I am quite sure that nobody has stolen the necklace and that we will be able to prove it to Lady Albury once it is found.” Joceline spoke with more determination than she truly felt, for she feared the consequences if the necklace could not be found. Yet, as she looked back into her mother's fearful eyes. Joceline told herself that she had to trust that all would be well, even if only for her mother's sake. To show worry and fear now would only alarm Lady Melford further.

“Did you say that you have sent the servants to search the house in its entirety?” Lady Melford frowned. “Even our own rooms? What purpose is there in that?”

“Because I think it best to say we have conducted a thorough search.” Seeing her mother's displeasure, Joceline spread out her hands. “I am not suggesting for a

moment that I agree with Lady Albury that one of our servants has taken her necklace. But all the same, I think it's right that we make sure every room has been looked at. If it has been taken, then it might have been hidden somewhere to be taken up later – and that could even have been by one of our guests, though I dare not suggest who it might be.”

At this, Lady Melford’s face grew dark with clear anger, though to Joceline’s relief, it was not directed towards her. “Now that I think of it, it may very well be that Lady Albury herself has deliberately lost the necklace to bring shame upon us and to ruin our *soirée*!” Flushing and heedless to Miss Sherwood’s presence, Lady Melford continued with sharp, angry words. “That would be just the sort of thing she would do for it is precisely the sort of character she possessed. She is determined to prove herself greater than I, even though my husband was wealthier than hers ever was!” She threw up her hands. “This is something she would do to push herself to the fore again. You are quite right, Joceline. We must search every room of the house for she could easily have hidden it somewhere to then discover it again. That way she can claim that you or I or some other in our household has stolen the necklace from her and in that way, destroy our reputation.”

Joceline sent a quick glance to Miss Sherwood, but her friend was staring wide-eyed at Lady Melford. A little embarrassed that her mother had spoken with such ferocity and yet all the same understanding where it came from, Joceline could only nod.

Lady Melford lifted her chin. “What you have done is very good, Joceline. Continue with the search and inform me the moment you have discovered anything.”

Joceline nodded. “I shall. Might I suggest, Mama, that the evening entertainment continues regardless of the search? That way the guests will, I hope, forget a little bit about the seriousness of this necklace being missing and might continue to enjoy themselves. And it would be a shame for all the money you have spent on the entertainments to be wasted! Once the necklace is discovered and returned to Lady

Albury, all will be well.”

“An excellent suggestion.” Seemingly now a good deal surer of herself, perhaps fuelled by the anger directed towards Lady Albury, Lady Melford gave Joceline a firm nod. “I shall return to the guests and make sure that they all understand that nothing is amiss. Let us pray that the search is successful.”

Watching her mother leave, Joceline let out a long slow breath, helping to calm her quickening heart. Although she had not shown it to her mother, her fear still lingered, clawing up at her chest and into her throat. Something her mother had said brought with it a fresh understanding of the consequences that could follow if their search was unsuccessful.

If the necklace is not found, then I am ruined forever. Lady Albury will make sure of it.

“We will find it.” With a gentle squeeze of her hand to Joceline’s arm, Miss Sherwood gave her a small smile as if she knew her thoughts. “Come, let us help with the search.”

“Joceline.”

Joceline turned to see Miss Sherwood beckoning her from the doorway of the parlor. “What is it, Eugenia?”

“I think we have found it.”

Relief billowed in Joceline’s chest and she hurried towards Miss Sherwood, only for her friend to hold up one hand, palm out towards her, stopping her at her steps. A little confused, Joceline frowned. “Is something wrong?”

Miss Sherwood hesitated, the light in her eyes flickering. “There is one thing I must tell you. Yes, we have found the necklace, but... it was found in your bedchamber, Joceline.”

It was not relief that spread through her this time, but shock and then worry. Worry that this would soon be spread all through the house, the servants whispering that the emerald necklace had been found within her room. Worry that her reputation, even with the necklace found, would be shattered once the truth was out. “I... I did not take it.”

“Of course you did not!” Miss Sherwood grasped her hand. “I know you had absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with it, but all the same, the necklace has been found in your room.”

“Who found it?”

Miss Sherwood stepped to one side and indicated a maid standing just to her right. The girl was standing with her hands clasped in front of her, though her eyes were wide and her face pale, as though she feared that she might get into difficulty, even though she had done nothing wrong.

“You found it, Bessie?” Joceline stepped closer to the girl, who quickly nodded. “Where? Where was it in my room?”

The girl blinked rapidly. “It was sitting on your bed, my lady, as though someone had just placed it there.”

Joceline trembled with a sudden confusion, mingled with fear. This had been done deliberately, she was sure. There was no reason for that necklace to be in her room, no reason for it to be placed just so. Perhaps it was as her mother had suggested, perhaps Lady Albury had done such a thing to discredit Joceline and her family

name, pushing herself to the fore as she did so.

“The maid came straight to me with the necklace.” Miss Sherwood smiled tightly. “She has not told anyone else.”

“And you will not tell anyone else.” Joceline's heart hammered furiously as the maid nodded quickly. This was her only chance to save her reputation. Perhaps Lady Albury - or whoever had planted the necklace on her bed- intended for the search to go about in an entirely different way. Perhaps they had hoped that it would be discovered by another guest, and therefore, Joceline would be ruined utterly. At least Joceline recognized that now, she had the opportunity to save herself! All that was required was the maid's silence.

“Bessie, if I hear even a whisper of rumor about this, then I shall know it was you who has spoken of it. Understand that if I hear such a thing, the consequences will be your dismissal with no suitable references given.” It was not that she wished to speak harshly, more that she did so with such great firmness so that there could be no misunderstanding. The servants were often inclined to gossip, but Joceline could not have that. Not now. There was too much at stake.

“I understand” The maid nodded fervently. “I won't say a word, my lady, I swear it.”

“Where is the necklace?”

At this, Miss Sherwood brought out the necklace from where she had kept it behind her back, Handing it to Joceline. Joceline gazed down at it, amazed at its beauty, taking in the colors of the emeralds and seeing how they sparkled in the light. Her heart was still beating madly, but at least now there was a safe conclusion to this entire drama. Lady Albury would receive her necklace back and the evening could continue just as it ought. There would be no loss of reputation, no rumors whispered about her, her mother, or her family name, which meant there was, therefore nothing

to concern herself with any longer. With a brief smile to Miss Sherwood, Joycelyn looked down at the necklace again. "I will return it at once." Reaching out, she took Miss Sherwood's hand and pressed it. "Thank you for your help. This could not have been recovered without you."

"I am glad that it has been found, though it remains a mystery as to why it was placed in your bed chamber." Miss Sherwood frowned and then shook her head. "Though that must be something for another time I think."

"Indeed," Joceline murmured, still gazing down at the necklace. "Come then, let us bring this entire drama to its happy conclusion."

Walking into the drawing room with the necklace in her hands, Joceline kept her head held high and allowed a smile to spread across her face. Lady Albury, however, did not appear to be so delighted. In fact, she practically snatched the necklace out of Joceline's hands without so much as a word of thanks. There was thinness about her lips with a sharpness in her eyes, that, to Joceline's mind, confirmed her own mother's suspicions.

"You found it, then." It was Lord Albury who came close to his mother and, much to Joceline's surprise, took the necklace from his mother's fingers without so much as a glance in her direction. Instead, he kept his eyes pinned to Joceline's, as if there was something he wanted to see in her face but could not quite make out. "My grateful thanks, Miss Trentworth. This necklace is an heirloom, and alas, I think that this will be the last time it will be seen in society for a time. Evidently, I must have the clasp repaired, given that it fell from my mother's neck and was lost."

Lady Albury drew herself up. "I still think that..." She trailed off as her son sent her a hard look. Clearing her throat lightly instead, she gave Joceline a thin-lipped smile. "I am grateful it has been returned to me, Miss Trentworth." Tipping her head, a gleam entered her eyes as Lady Melford came to stand beside Joceline. "Might I ask where

it was discovered?"

Joceline's heart beat hard, but she put a smile on her face. "It was found in the parlor Lady Albury, near to the door."

Rather than bring any smile to Lady Albury's face, there came instead a darkness, casting shadows into her eyes. "That is very strange, for I did not set foot in the parlor this evening."

A few murmurs from around the room made Joceline's face grow hot. She had not thought what she would say to Lady Albury should such a question be asked. Her relief on finding the necklace had been so great, it had not even come into her mind.

"My daughter has told you it was found near to the door, Lady Albury." It was Joceline's mother who spoke now, a briskness to her tone that told everyone listening she was not about to have anything untoward implied about her daughter. "No doubt the necklace slipped from your neck when you were walking in the hallway and mayhap it was inadvertently kicked towards the door. These long gowns of ours can hide so much, can they not?" With what Joseline knew to be a false smile on her face, Lady Melford turned and spread her arms wide to the watching crowd of guests. "Now that the necklace has been discovered and all is well, might I suggest that we continue with the evening? There are still some performers to join us within the hour and I am sure you will all wish to see their entertainments. In the meantime, there are plenty of refreshments and I think the card tables might be opened now. What say you all to that?"

This brought few exclamations of delight and Joceline smiled in relief, linking arms with her mother in a show of solidarity. For a moment, her eyes caught upon Lord Albury's, a little surprised to see that he was frowning heavily. Did he not believe her? Her foolish mistake about where she had found the necklace had, mayhap, brought him too much doubt. Keeping her smile fixed in place, though she did not

truly feel it any longer, Joceline turned alongside her mother and made her way out of the drawing room. She would need to speak with her about the necklace and where it had been found later on in the evening, but for the moment, everything had fallen back into place.

Glancing around the room, however, Joceline's worry remained. Someone in this room had placed Lady Albury's necklace in Joceline's bed chamber, in full view so that it would clearly and easily be discovered. She had no clear knowledge as to who it might have been, though her only suspicion lingered solely on Lady Albury. Could the rivalry between Lady Albury and her mother be enough to push Lady Albury into doing something so awful? Would she really seek to ruin Joceline's reputation?

And if she would, Joceline realized how careful she would have to be around her and her son from now on.

“So, what is it you have decided to do?”

Theodore let out a slow breath as he sat opposite Lord Castleton in his study. “This morning, I informed my mother that I expected her to remove to the Dower house once we returned from London. I made it quite clear that I have no further interest in being in her company and even though I am not yet wed I expect her to move there as soon as possible. I do not want her in my day-to-day life any longer, not after she showed me such disrespect.”

Lord Castleton frowned. “And yet you do not look pleased.”

“I am not.” Theodore shook his head and looked away. “My mother laughed at me and stated that she would do no such thing. Again, she reiterated that she had every right to these heirlooms; that because my father gave them to her when he was alive, she has every claim to them now. I told her plainly again that I have kept them for my future bride, but she is determined to have them to herself until that day comes.”

His friend’s eyebrows lifted. “Then what are you to do?”

With a small shrug, Theodor spread out his hands. “The only thing I can do. I must show her that I have strength yet. I will not continue to permit her to disrespect me as she does. Whether she desires it or not, all of her things will be removed to the dower house once we return, and I will take control of my house again.” His scowl darkened. “However, I am now well aware that my mother will make things very difficult for me in the interim. She will blame me and will continually attempt to push

as much guilt onto my shoulders as possible, all in the hopes that I will relent and turn from my intentions.”

“But you will not.” The decisiveness of his friend’s voice surprised Theodore, who silently believed that as yet he had not shown enough strength as regarded his mother and her demands. It lifted his spirits a little to hear that his friend seemingly believed in him.

“I am at the point where everything she says or does in an attempt to make me relent only pushes my will all the harder. No, I shall not give in. Within one month of our return from London, I fully expect her to be living in the Dower House and the matter will be settled.” With a determined nod, Theodore reminded himself of his intentions. “I cannot let her continue just as she pleases.”

His friend nodded. “And the necklace?”

Theodore glanced at the velvet-lined box that sat on his study desk, where the heirlooms were now encased. “I have it here. I did not give it back to her last evening, even though she begged me on more than one occasion to do so. The earrings I made sure I took back from her also. Last night was the last time she shall ever have them in her possession.” Walking towards the desk, he picked up the box and opened it, as though to be sure that everything was there. The emeralds glinted gently up at him, reassuring him that all was well. A sudden thought came and he picked it up carefully, his fingers running over the clasp.

“Is there something that troubles you?” Lord Castleton ambled towards him though he stayed a few steps away. “Are you wondering, mayhap how it fell from your mother's neck?”

Theodore glanced at his friend, then nodded. “That is precisely what I am wondering. I did not take a careful look at it last evening, nor even today, but the clasp to me

appears to be quite strong. There is no weakness there. There is nothing that would make it slip from my mother's neck as we now believe it did." He hesitated. "Might it be that my belief was misplaced?"

"What do you mean?" Lord Castleton frowned and leaned towards the necklace, looking down at the clasp as Theodor held it. "You think there was something untoward in the disappearance of the necklace?" His eyebrows lifted as he looked back at Theodore, who gave a small, slow nod. "Are you suggesting that Lady Melford or her daughter were in some way involved?"

Theodore quickly shook his head. "No, indeed not. I think that my mother had something to do with its disappearance, though I cannot say as to what that was, nor what her motivations were." His lips twisted. "Perhaps it was that the necklace was never meant to be found, though why she would deliberately lose the heirlooms I cannot imagine."

Lord Castleton grimaced. "Nor can I, though there is still the possibility that the necklace just dropped from her neck. The clasp is strong, yes, but it may not have been fastened properly."

Theodore sharpened his eyes onto the clasp, silently disagreeing. "That might be, though I would have expected her lady's maid to have taken the utmost care when it came to placing it around my mother's neck, no doubt aware of just how valuable it was." His stomach knotted. "Nor could I imagine that it fell from her without my mother noticing."

His friend hummed his agreement, rubbing one hand over his chin. "What are you going to do about this mystery, then? Are you going to pursue it, or are you going to leave things as they are?"

Considering this, Theodore bunched his lips for a moment, only to then shrug. "There

is no need for me to pursue it. The heirlooms are now safe and I must make sure they are protected from my mother. She is not to have them again and I will make certain of it.”

With a wry smile, Lord Castleton gestured to the emerald necklace. “I think that is wise. If she is to live in the dower house, then you will have no difficulty whatsoever in keeping the heirlooms from her and making sure they belong solely to your future bride.” Reaching out one hand, he brushed it across one of the emeralds, the largest one in the necklace, holding it in his hand for a moment. “Though...” A frown rippled across his forehead and he leaned closer to the jewel, giving Theodore pause as he watched his friend’s expression darken. Silence fell between them for some minutes, but Lord Castletown continued to study the emeralds. In fact, he took them directly out of Theodore's hands and brought them closer to his face, looking at each one in turn. Unable to bear the silence any longer, Theodore gestured to the necklace.

“What is it? Is there something wrong?”

Lord Castleton glanced, his face a little pale now. “I do not want to say unequivocally that there is, but my eyes tell me these jewels may not be...” He trailed off, leaving Theodore in no doubt as to what his friend was trying to say. With a gasp, he lurched forward, grasping a hold of the necklace and pulling the jewels into his hands. Fear ran through him, going cold all over as he recognised what it was his friend had been trying to say. With a shake of his head, he gazed down at the jewels again, trying to ascertain how such a thing could have happened. “That cannot be... it cannot be.” Whispering those words over and over, half to himself, he began to see the truth clearly, his heart tumbling over upon itself. This was not the family heirloom. This was not the real emeralds. Yes, they sparkled and glittered as emeralds ought, but they were not the emeralds. They were paste. They were fake. They had every appearance of the emeralds, but they were not, in fact, the original jewels. Somehow, in some way, the necklace itself had been stolen and replaced instead with a fake.

“How did I not see?” Rubbing one hand over his eyes, his face hot, he gazed down at the jewels again. “How is it that I did not see these were paste? I know the emeralds very well indeed and yet...” He mumbled to himself, trying to ascertain how he could have missed such an important detail. It was only when Lord Castleton put one hand on his shoulder that Theodore started and looked up at his friend.

“You are not to blame for this.” Lord Castleton spoke decisively. “It is not as though you had time to sit and study the jewels, is it? It is not as if you even suspected that they might be fake! All you thought was that the jewels had been lost and then found again. There was no reason for you to expect that they had been stolen.”

Handing the necklace back to his friend, Theodore pushed both hands through his hair, panic gripping him. “I was so relieved that the jewels had been found, and in truth, delighted I was able to then take them and keep them on my person instead of returning them to my mother, that it did not give them more than a cursory glance. Even now, as they sit in that box, I was preparing to place them back in the safe, believing them to be real! I should have made certain all was well. I should have looked to make sure that everything was just as it ought to be.”

“You are not responsible,” Lord Castleton gripped Theodore’s shoulder, his gaze steady, “It is not as though you have done anything wrong.” There was a slight pause, his fingers gripping a little more tightly. “This must have been planned well in advance, my friend. Somebody knew that your mother was to wear these jewels last evening.”

Slowly, Theodore tried to gather himself, his mind screaming at him, his heart pounding furiously as wave after wave of anger, upset and embarrassment crashed into him, one after the other. He had no thought as to what he was to do, no consideration of what steps he ought now to take. There was nothing but buzzing in his ears, his eyes seeing nothing but fog all around him. The family heirlooms, the jewels which had been passed on from generation to generation, were gone.

And he was the one responsible.

“I shall be known as the gentleman who lost the emerald heirlooms,” he whispered, as Lord Castleton thrust a brandy into his hand. “All the generations after me will know that I was the one who brought shame to our family name.”

“Nonsense.”

Lord Castleton’s clear, calm voice broke through Theodore’s confusion, making him stare back at his friend.

“You do not truly think that you will not recover them, do you?” Lord Castleton’s eyebrows lifted. “Of course you shall! It is only a matter of time. I am quite certain you will be able to discover the truth in the end.”

“Alas, I do not have the same confidence.”

“And why not?” Lord Castleton demanded, his eyebrows lifting high. “You know every guest present last evening. You know where they were found, you know whose home we were in.”

A dark thought struck Theodore. “And I know that my mother was there. “

Lord Castleton’s eyes rounded just a little. “Again, you think that she might have done this?”

“It is as you said,” Theodore answered, quickly. “Someone must have known that she would be wearing these jewels to the soiree. Someone must have prepared this necklace in advance, knowing the heirlooms well enough to make a near identical copy.”

“And that person would be your mother,” Lord Castleton finished, his tone steady.

“I might well be wrong, however,” Theodore admitted, though inwardly he felt himself convinced that it would be so. “I shall go and speak to her at this very moment, and from her reaction I hope to ascertain the truth.” Striding out of the room – and leaving Lord Castleton to follow him with the necklace in his hands, Theodore made his way directly to the drawing room, expecting to find his mother there. Pushing the door open, he narrowed his eyes at her, seeing her eyes widen as she took them both in.

“Mother.” Theodore stopped directly in front of her, his eyes holding tight to hers. “Did you know about this?”

Lady Albury blinked, her gaze going from Theodore to Lord Castleton and back again.

“If you did, then I shall discover it,” Theodore told her, anger thudding through his veins with every heartbeat. “I will know if it was you, Mother, so do not think that you can hide it from me.”

Lady Albury pushed herself up in her chair, lifting her chin a fraction. “Albury, I do not know what it is you are talking about. Might you be a little clearer with me, if you please?”

“The necklace.” Theodore pointed to it as Lord Castleton held it up, as if it were some sort of exhibit requiring her study. “Did you do this? Were you a part of it? I know that you wanted the heirlooms but I never expected –”

“Theodore!”

His mother’s voice ripped through the room, stopping Theodore in his tracks.

“You will explain to me what it is you are demanding to know and desist from pressing things upon me that I simply cannot know,” she said, loudly enough so that her voice filled the room. “Tell me clearly, Theodore. Now.”

The way that she spoke told Theodore that she was not, in fact, aware of what he was speaking of. He had not discerned any flicker of awareness in her eyes nor a hint of a quirk about her mouth as she pretended not to understand. Though she had used anything and everything she could to coerce him into doing as she wanted, Theodore had always been able to see through her feigned emotions... though that had not exactly prevented him from being compelled all the same. Now, however, she did not appear to have any true understanding as to what he was saying, making him begin to question whether she truly had been behind the necklace theft.

“This necklace,” he said, speaking clearly but firmly. “I must know if you have stolen it.”

Confusion threw itself into his mother’s frown, her mouth opening and then closing again as she tried to understand. “Stolen it?” she asked, her voice lifting a little higher. “How can I have stolen it when you have it in your hands?”

“Because this,” Theodore answered, taking the necklace from Lord Castleton and bringing it towards, tossing it into her lap, “is not the necklace you wore to the soiree, Mother.” He watched as she picked it up, heard her intake of breath as she realized what he ought to have done much sooner than this. “These emeralds are paste and nothing more. What you have in your hand is a fake.”

The scream that ripped from Lady Albury’s throat made Theodore jump. She leaped up, one hand going to her throat, her eyes huge, her face paling as she threw the necklace onto the couch beside her, as though she could not even stand to be near it.

“Paste?” she screamed, backing away from it and coming towards Theodore, her

shock evident in every single movement she made. “How? How can it be? When did it – and how did it...?”

The way that she responded told Theodore in no uncertain terms that his mother had no knowledge whatsoever of the switch that had been made. She was, in truth, quite horrified, torn apart, even by what she had discovered. Despite his awareness, Theodore was then forced to guide his mother back to another seat whilst Lord Castleton poured a half measure of brandy for her. Still murmuring her sorrows over the jewels, Lady Albury closed her eyes and gripped her brandy glass as though it were the only thing offered to her that might bring a little solace.

“It was not her, then,” Lord Castleton murmured, as Theodore nodded, scowling as he did so. “Then what shall you do?”

“There is only one thing I can do,” Theodore answered, firmly. “I shall go and speak to Lady Melford and her daughter.”

“To accuse them?”

Theodore swallowed but did not shake his head. Now, given that he could not believe that his mother was in any way involved, he had to then think about who might have taken it.

And he simply could not dismiss the possibility that either Lady Melford or Miss Trentworth had, in some way and for their own purposes, been involved.

Joceline sighed to herself as she meandered around the drawing room. Her mother had insisted that she needed new gloves before they attended dinner that evening and had taken the carriage to purchase said gloves. Joceline had chosen not to join her. The dinner party with Lord and Lady Billstrom was sure to be an excellent one but Joceline was in no mind to attend. Instead, she thought only about the soiree, the necklace, and all that had taken place.

In her heart, Joceline feared that her mother had been quite correct in all that she had said about Lady Albury. This rivalry between her mother and the lady meant that Joceline could quite easily be caught in the middle, and if Lady Albury was determined to ruin her so that the family name would be destroyed, then what hope did Joceline have? Could she truly escape a lady so determined, so filled with trickery and deceit? Or was there such little hope that Joceline would, one day soon, find herself without excuse or understanding, finding her reputation broken by all that had been said and done?

“My lady, I am sorry but –”

Joceline turned sharply as the butler’s voice filled the room, having not heard him even knock. What astonished her all the more, however, was the sudden arrival of Lord Albury who, much to her horror, pushed past the butler without warning and strode towards her. The dark shadows in his eyes made her heart thump furiously in her chest, fearful now that the maid had spoken about where she had found the necklace and, subsequently, the rumors had begun.

“Miss Trentworth. I apologize for stepping in without an announcement but this matter cannot wait.”

She blinked. “Lord Albury, good afternoon. As you can see, I am alone at present, for my mother –”

“I am afraid I have no time for propriety. Call a maid if you wish but I will continue.” The gentleman waited, his chin lifting and Joceline, her heart now in her throat, scurried across the room to ring the bell. She waited there, making sure to keep as much space between herself and Lord Albury as she could, her worry biting down upon her, hard.

“You will not wish for the maid to hear what I have to say, Miss Trentworth, so I shall begin before she arrives,” Lord Albury began, succinctly. “I must know what you did with my mother’s necklace.”

Confusion built in Joceline’s mind. “I beg your pardon?”

“What did you do with it?” He began to advance towards her and Joceline’s hands curled tightly, suddenly a trifle afraid. “I know that something happened. You may as well tell me the truth, Miss Trentworth, for it is already out!”

Joceline drew herself up, her shoulders back, her head held high. Taking the slight twist of fear, she narrowed her eyes, determined now to stand against his fierce anger. “How dare you come into my house and talk to me in such a manner?” The way her words rang around the room seemed to give Lord Albury pause. He stopped coming closer to her, blinking for a moment though the frown on his forehead continued to linger.

“You come in here unannounced and, as soon as you hear that I am alone and without company, ought you not to have stepped back? I am astonished to hear that a

gentleman of the ton such as yourself appears to be so willing to step out of good manners and into impropriety! You come here with anger in your voice and your expression, throwing words at me that I have no understanding of whatsoever and expect me, seemingly, to answer you without hesitation!” She tossed her head, aware of her light curls bouncing and praying that it would show him evidence of her dismissal of him. “I confess to be most astonished at your manner, Lord Albury!”

A slow flush began to creep up his neck and went into his face. The gentleman then clasped his hands behind his back, took a step away from her, and coughed once, now appearing to be a little ashamed of himself.

“You are quite right, Miss Trentworth.”

The way that he immediately accepted his wrongdoing and apologized to her made Joceline’s defenses lower instantly. Her shoulders began to lower, the tension in her body began to fade.

“I have come here in a most improper manner. I beg your forgiveness.” He bowed, one hand to his heart. “The matter at hand is most concerning and I have come to you with that frustration, upset, and confusion in my heart.”

The door opened and the maid stepped inside, her eyes darting to Joceline before pulling to the floor.

“Sit there,” Joceline directed, before coming closer to Lord Albury and watching the maid take her seat. “Now, Lord Albury, if you wish to speak with me about this matter at hand, then why do we not sit together? Only for a few minutes, you understand, and I would prefer that we spoke quietly for the last thing I desire is for rumors to be spread throughout this house.”

“I understand.” Lord Albury sat down but it was on the edge of his chair, his hands

clasped together, his elbows on his knees. “Now, Miss Trentworth, if I am to come directly to the point, I must ask you again about my mother’s necklace.”

“You asked me what I had done with it,” Joceline answered, aware of the way her nerves were jumping at the darkness about his eyes. “But I do not understand your question for you saw what I did, Lord Albury. When it was found, I brought it back to the room and handed it to your mother. You yourself took it from her thereafter.”

Lord Albury shook his head vehemently. “That is not what I am talking about. I am speaking about what you did with the necklace before you returned it.”

Joceline did not know what to say. The gentleman was speaking in a way that she simply did not understand. “I... I took it from the maid,” she said, slowly, as Lord Albury’s gaze steadied on her face. “She found it.”

“In the parlor.”

Her stomach dipped. “As I told you.”

“And that is all.” Lord Albury tipped his head just a little. “That is all that you did. All that took place.”

“Yes.” Resisting the urge to twist her fingers together, Joceline steadied herself. “Lord Albury, it feels very much as though you want me to say something but I do not know what it is! Please, if there is something that you want me to explain or express, then I beg you to be clearer in your conversation.”

Lord Albury nodded slowly but his eyes darkened all the more, until rather than being as blue as the sky, they were inky pools gazing back at her. The silence that curled around them both made her want to scream with frustration and anxiety, though she resisted the urge to do such a thing. Instead, she set her hands lightly in her lap and

kept her shoulders lowered, looking back at him with as much intensity as she could muster.

Finally, he relented.

“This morning, I was to put the necklace into the safe, for it is a family heirloom and will one day belong to my wife,” he told her, his tone steady. “However, it has come to my attention that the necklace is not, in fact, my heirloom.”

The confusion in Joceline’s mind grew to such dizzying heights that she had to fight the desire to rub at her eyes. “I do not know what you mean.”

“Paste.” The word was practically spat at her, making Joceline’s heart leap up high, her breath snatching inward. “They are paste, Miss Trentworth!”

Joceline could not help but stare at him, trying to understand how such a thing could have happened. As she gazed back into Lord Albury’s eyes, she slowly began to recognize that the reason he had barrelled into her house, the reason that he spoke now with such upset was because he thought that she had something to do with it all!

“I am astonished to hear this,” she said, aware that her breathing was a little shallow. “How could they be paste?”

Lord Albury frowned heavily. “That is what I am come to ask you, Miss Trentworth.”

“Well, I certainly cannot tell you!” she exclaimed, throwing up her hands. “When I was handed the necklace, I brought it directly to you.” Becoming nothing but defensive, she lifted her chin. “You can speak to Miss Sherwood, if you wish. I am sure that she will be able to tell you all.”

Lord Albury shook his head. “Miss Sherwood cannot be relied upon.”

This made Joceline's eyebrows fly upwards. "Because she is a bluestocking like me?"

"Because she is your friend," he stated, sharply. "I have already made it clear that I do not think poorly of you because of your love of reading and the like. I am quite sure that, were I to speak to Miss Sherwood, she would tell me the very same story that you have given to me just now. There would be no whisper of wrongdoing because she is loyal to you."

"There would be no whisper of wrongdoing because there was none!" Joceline exclaimed, becoming a little angry now. "Lord Albury, it was not I who found the necklace. It was the maid. The servants were busy searching the house and it was one of them who found it! She then told Miss Sherwood, since she was nearby and together, they came to find me." Seeing his eyebrows knot together, Joceline curled her hand into a fist. "If you wish, I can send for that maid and you can speak with her."

"I may well do that."

Oh no. Joceline paled in an instant, realizing that she had, in her foolishness, said something she ought not to have done. The maid had not found the necklace in the parlor, as she had told them all. It had been found in her bedchamber, though if she told him that, then his suspicions towards her would grow even more, she was sure of it!

"Though," she said quickly, "you will no doubt think that the maid will also be loyal to me and therefore, will give you the very same story as myself. Is that not so?"

This made Lord Albury scowl, though Joceline felt herself relieved that he appeared to have taken what she had said seriously.

“I suppose that is true,” he grunted, as Joceline steadied herself, ready now to end this conversation. “I cannot trust anyone, it seems.”

Joceline arched one eyebrow. “Might I ask, Lord Albury, whether or not you were able to ascertain that the necklace was, in fact, the real one before your mother wore it to the soiree?”

Lord Albury opened his mouth only to pause and then snap it closed again. The dark expression on his face told her that no, he had not done such a thing.

“If you cannot, then I am very surprised indeed that you thought to come to my mother’s townhouse and state, almost unequivocally, that you believe I had something to do with this affair,” she said, speaking firmly and decisively. “You have no real reason to believe that I had anything to do with this necklace. Lord Albury, all I did was arrange for the servants to search the house and, thereafter, to bring the necklace to you.”

A flush of red crept into Lord Albury’s cheeks and he looked away, perhaps now a little less sure of himself.

“No,” he said, suddenly, making her jump. “That cannot be so. I had possession of the heirloom before my mother took the necklace and the earrings without my knowledge. She took them knowing that I had forbidden her from taking them. They were to be returned to my estate but I can assure you that the earrings are genuine. I looked at them earlier today once I became aware of what had happened with the necklace.” He leaned forward but there was not the same darkness in his eyes as had been there before. “There must have been something that took place when my mother lost her necklace. The exchange must have taken place then, though I do not yet know by whom or how it was done.”

“The heirloom was worn by your mother without your consent?” Joceline could not

help but ask, a little relieved that he did not appear to be as furiously angry as he had been before. “Could it not be that –” She stopped quickly, heat in her own cheeks as she realized what she had been about to say. In her foolishness, she had been about to suggest that the lady herself might have had something to do with it, given that she had been forbidden from wearing them.

Lord Albury’s eyebrows drew closer together again. “Surprisingly enough, Miss Trentworth, I had the same thought. Though it appears that she did not. I have had to send her to recover in her bedchamber, such was her shock.”

“Then you suspect one of the guests?” Joceline asked, trying to push away his suspicions. “Surely it would have taken someone with a full awareness of the necklace to have done such a thing, for the paste jewels would have had to been prepared in advance.”

Lord Albury’s expression lifted just a little. “That is, again, something that I have already considered, thanks to my discussion with Lord Castleton,” he said, a little more quietly now. “Though my suspicions are many, Miss Trentworth.”

And still pushed towards myself or my mother, Joceline considered, a knot in her stomach. If she hid the truth from him about where the necklace had been found, then when it was discovered, or if it was discovered, then would she not be all the more under his consideration? She opened her mouth to tell him the truth, only to shut it again as Lord Albury rose to his feet, evidently intending now to end the conversation.

“I shall take my leave, Miss Trentworth. I do hope that you will inform your mother about all that I have told you here this evening.”

Panic tore through her and Joceline, getting to her feet, put out one hand and caught his, pulling herself closer to him, her breathing tight. “And I do hope, Lord Albury,

that you do not intend to tell the ton that your necklace has been stolen? You do not, I hope, intend to tell everyone about what you have discovered?"

Lord Albury's eyes flickered, his gaze dropping to where her hand caught his but Joceline did not release him. Her fear was too great, her worry too profound. If he told society what he had told her, then her reputation and her mother's reputation would be completely and utterly broken. The ton would, without any evidence, believe that they had been involved in the theft and all hope of her ever finding a suitable gentleman to wed would be gone.

"You expect me to keep this to myself, Miss Trentworth? How ever am I to find the truth and my necklace if I stay silent?"

"Think of what will happen if you share it with all and sundry!" Joceline exclaimed, refusing to let his hand go. "You will be ruining any hope that I have of a suitable match. You will bring my father's good name into disrepute and all without any evidence that we have done anything wrong whatsoever! That cannot be fair, surely?"

It took a few moments but eventually, Lord Albury let out a slow breath and then nodded, letting Joceline release her tight grip upon his fingers. She did not care one jot that she had grasped his hand so, even though it was more than a little improper. The realization that she could lose everything were he to say a word to the gossipmongers of London had forced her into action, and she was glad that she now had his understanding.

"I shall be very careful," he said, as she stepped back. "Forgive me for my lack of thought, Miss Trentworth. That was a little negligent."

She could only nod, feeling suddenly fatigued.

"I shall take my leave of you now."

Her eyes caught his again. “I did not steal your necklace, Lord Albury. I shall repeat myself over and over again if I must until you believe me. I swear to you that it is the truth.”

He did not say a word to her. He did not say that yes, he believed her or no, he did not. Instead, all Lord Albury did was search her face with his blue eyes as she held her breath, desperate for him to see the truth in her expression... until, finally, he turned and walked out of the door, leaving her alone and with her mind whirling with a thousand terrifying thoughts.

10

“What are you going to do?”

Theodore leaned back against the wall of the drawing room he stood in, watching a few of the other guests. “I am not yet sure.”

“You will have to find a way to get the list of the guests,” Lord Castleton said, handing him a whisky. “That will be the first thing to do.”

“I already have it,” Theodore muttered, swirling his whisky around. “Lady Melford sent me a strongly written letter along with a list of the guests present that evening.”

Lord Castleton looked astonished. “Did she? Did you write to her to tell her about what had happened?”

Theodore winced. “No, I did not. I did something... else.”

His friend frowned. “Then what did you do?”

Taking a sip of his whisky, Theodore let out a small sigh. “I acted foolishly, I will admit. I strode into Lady Melford’s townhouse and spoke directly to Miss Trentworth.” Seeing his friend’s eyes widen, he closed his for just a moment. “There was no one else present and I am well aware that it was improper.”

A series of small, strangled exclamations escaped from Lord Castleton’s throat but Theodore only sipped his whisky, aware that he deserved every word of chagrin that

was now bound to follow. He had acted in a most ridiculous manner, letting his anger, upset and confusion push him into behaving in a way that he would never have done otherwise.

“Do you want to be wed to Miss Trentworth?”

“Wed?” Theodore’s head whipped around. “Of course I do not! Why should you ask me such a thing?”

Lord Castleton rolled his eyes. “Because that is precisely what will happen if you continue to do such foolish things. What would have happened if Lady Melford had walked into the room and seen you together?”

“There was a maid present also,” Theodore mumbled, mortified. “Though I see your point. You can be assured; I will not do such a thing again.”

His friend snorted. “It is a little too late for such promises. You ought never to have done such a thing in the first place! I know that you are deeply angry and worried about this heirloom but Miss Trentworth would not have taken your presence well, I imagine.”

Again, Theodore could only nod and agree with all that his friend had said.

“And she, in turn, then told her mother all that you had said and that is why you received such a firm letter,” Lord Castleton finished, as if he were reprimanding a child. “Please tell me that you did not accuse Miss Trentworth of anything?”

“Not directly,” Theodore answered, quickly, as Lord Castleton let out a low groan. “I did not once state that I believed she had stolen the necklace. All I said was that I wanted to know what she had done with the necklace. I wanted an explanation as to what had exactly happened when the necklace had been returned to my mother.”

Though when I asked her that, I meant to ask her outright what she had done with the emeralds, Theodore admitted to himself, his regret ever increasing. “Though you must understand, Castleton, I cannot help but think that the lady or her mother might have had something to do with the disappearance of my emeralds! After all, Lady Melford is a rival of my mother’s, that is plain enough. Therefore, I cannot simply dismiss the idea. That would not be wise.”

With a click of his tongue, Lord Castleton made it clear what it was he thought of this statement.

“Miss Trentworth did say that whoever had this made knew precisely what the necklace looked like,” Theodore continued, a little lamely. “She recognized that it would have had to have been prepared well in advance, with the expectation that my mother would wear it that evening.”

Lord Castleton nodded. “That is a relief, at least.”

“A relief?”

“That she was willing to speak with you,” Lord Castleton responded, with a wry smile. “Had it been any other young lady, I think you would have been thrown from the house and thereafter, given the cut direct!”

This made Theodore consider, his jaw tight as he thought about the lady. She had been upset with him for how he had spoken to her, perhaps a little afraid at first given the way he had strode towards her across the room towards him, and that had given him pause. Thereafter, she had responded to him with determination and that had made him step back. Her sharp but clear words had made him realize how poorly he had behaved – and yes, he had to admit, Lord Castleton was right. Any other young lady might have had her servants throw him from the house and might even have dragged his reputation into the mud thereafter, but she had not done so. Instead, she

had seen his suspicions and had clearly stated she had not been in any way involved, going on to make some very wise and considered statements thereafter. She had thought, as he had, that his mother might well be involved, even though she did not fully understand the situation as regarded the heirlooms. She had also ascertained that there had been careful planning and prior preparation, revealing to him her quick mind and steady thinking.

A fresh wall of shame rose before him and Theodore winced as it crashed down over his shoulders, making him feel the weight of his actions. “I did not speak well. I will admit that.”

“Does this mean that you think her entirely innocent, then?”

Theodore opened his mouth to say yes, only to close it again. Seeing his friend frown, he let out a small sigh. “I am sorry. I know that you want me to say that yes, I was wrong and that she could have had nothing whatsoever to do with it, but what if the connection between her mother and mine is what ties this situation together? I will admit that she promised me outright she had no cause to take the necklace and indeed, she did seem surprised – bewildered, even – when I told her about the paste jewels but then again, I can only presume that what she expressed was genuine. It might not have been so.”

“Lord Albury?”

Heat roared up his spine and into his neck as he turned to see none other than the very lady he had been speaking of looking up at him, a slight lift at the corners of her mouth though her eyes were glinting gently. Had she overheard him? And if she had, what was she going to say to him?

“Miss Trentworth.” Theodore bowed quickly, aware of the sweat breaking out across his forehead. “Good evening.”

“Good evening,” she said, gesturing to her friend. “You remember Lady Isobella, yes?”

“Yes, of course.” Theodore glanced to Lord Castleton, who smiled at both the young ladies. “Good evening, Lady Isobella.”

“Good evening.”

After this, there came a long beat of silence during which Theodore’s stomach twisted this way and that, wondering what it was that Miss Trentworth was going to say. What was her purpose in coming to speak with him? Lord Castleton was right, he recognized, in stating that she was most extraordinary in her response to him. As he considered this, as the silence continued to grow, he noticed the shifting colors in Miss Trentworth’s eyes and, for whatever reason, that seemed to still him. The greens merged into the blues, only for the blues to then swirl back into green. His gaze traveled to the curve of her cheek, then the soft pink of her lips.

“I wanted to offer you my help.” Miss Trentworth looked to her friend and smiled. “Our help.”

“Help?” Theodore repeated, a little confused. “What do you mean?”

Miss Trentworth looked back at him. “You know that we are bluestockings, Lord Albury. We have made that clear. Therefore, we would like to use our knowledge and the like to assist you with this mystery,”

Theodore, a little confused, frowned. “You mean with the necklace?”

She nodded. “Yes. Though...” Pressing her lips together, she lifted her chin and looked back at him directly. “There is something that I must say to you. You will be a little frustrated, I am sure, but the reason I tell you this is because I want there to be

trust between us.”

This did not sound particularly good to Theodore and he said nothing, looking back at Miss Trentworth and wondering why it was she appeared so anxious all of a sudden. Was there something about the necklace that she had not yet told him?

“I hope you will understand my hesitation in sharing this with you. Indeed, I have not even told my own mother about this!” Miss Trentworth let her gaze drift to Lord Castleton. “And after speaking with your wife, Lord Castleton, I know that you are a gentleman who can be trusted. You will not gossip about what I have now to say.”

This made Lord Castleton smile. “My wife has spoken highly of me, it seems. She always thinks the very best of me and it is not always deserved. But in this case, it is quite true.” He put one hand to his heart. “I shall not say a word to anyone about whatever it is you wish to share.”

“I thank you.” Miss Trentworth’s throat bobbed. “Now, Lord Albury, before I begin, I must tell you that the reason I kept this from not only you but from the rest of the guests was solely because of my concern.”

“Your concern?” Theodore asked, frowning. “I do not understand.”

Her smile lifted only a little, then faded. “You shall. You see, I – ah, Miss Sherwood. Thank you for joining us.” The color in her cheeks rose just a fraction and then faded. “I know, Lord Albury, that you said to me before that you did not think you could trust Miss Sherwood’s word given that she was my friend but I think it wise that she is here, all the same.”

Theodore practically felt Lord Castleton’s eyes boring a hole into him, though he only cleared his throat and nodded. Yes, he realized that he ought not to have mayhap stated such a thing, outright. He could think it, certainly, but to have said it aloud

might not have been the best idea.

“As I have told you, the maid was the one who found your necklace.” Miss Trentworth gestured to Miss Sherwood. “In turn, she handed it to Miss Sherwood.”

“And I took it directly to Miss Trentworth, who was in another room altogether,” Miss Sherwood stated, plainly. “That is all that took place.”

Theodore frowned. “I am already aware of this.”

Miss Trentworth’s eyes closed briefly. “Yes, Lord Albury, but what you do not know is that we did not find the necklace in the parlor, as was said.”

Theodore’s eyebrows shot upwards.

“To my great distress and confusion, it was found in my bedchamber,” she continued, speaking clearly and calmly though there was a flicker of something in her eyes. Fear, mayhap? “Laid on my bed, in actuality. Though quite what it was doing there and who put it there, I cannot imagine.”

At that moment, Theodore wanted to raise his hand, shake one finger and Lord Castleton, and whisper, ‘I told you so’ into his ear. He had been right, it seemed! He had a lingering suspicion that Lady Melford and her daughter had, in some way, been involved with the disappearance of the necklace and now he knew it for certain!

Though why would she admit to it now?

The quiet thought in his mind grasped a hold of him, making Theodore scowl. He wanted to rail at the lady, wanted to tell her that he knew she had been involved, that he had not had any cause to feel guilty or upset by his behavior, but that nudge to his heart silenced him.

“This will be upsetting for you to hear, I am sure,” Miss Trentworth finished, with a glance to Miss Sherwood, who nodded. “But I did not tell the truth because, quite frankly, I did not see a need to do so.”

Because you had stolen the necklace, Theodore thought to himself, fiercely, and then the exchange has been discovered, meaning you now must absolve yourself of blame!

“Of course you did not!” Lord Castleton remarked, making Theodore’s heart slam hard into his chest at his friend’s clear trust in Miss Trentworth and her words. “To your mind, the necklace had been found and there was no need to state where it had been discovered.”

Relief poured into Miss Trentworth’s face, her shoulders dropping, her eyes widening just a little and a quick breath escaping from her as she nodded.

“I was present when the maid found the necklace.” Miss Sherwood spoke directly to Theodore. “I can assure you that Miss Trentworth was nowhere near her bedchamber at that time.”

Theodore’s jaw jutted forward. “That does not mean –”

“There seems very little reason for Miss Trentworth to have told you about this if she was not entirely innocent,” Lord Castleton interrupted before Theodore could say more as if he were trying to protect Theodore from saying anything he would regret. “I can well understand why a young lady would desire to save her reputation! Especially if she considered that the necklace had, in fact, already been found.”

“And it was Miss Trentworth herself who told the servants to search all the rooms in the house,” Miss Sherwood put in, her eyes narrowing a fraction as though she knew that Theodore did not truly believe Miss Trentworth innocent. “It would be very strange indeed for a lady to do so when she knew that the necklace was not only

placed in her room but sitting on her bed!”

A streak of what felt like lightning ran up Theodore’s spine. “On your bed?” he repeated, as Miss Trentworth nodded. “Are you telling me the truth, here?”

“I am indeed.” Miss Trentworth’s lips pulled to one side and she flung out both hands either side of her. “For whatever reason, the necklace was found on my bed, placed there as though whoever it was that had taken it wanted for it to be easily seen!” She swallowed again, her eyes still away from his. “I did not tell you of this, Lord Albury, for I have been somewhat afraid that the reason it was placed there was because the person responsible wanted me to be ruined. They wanted my reputation quite pulled away from me, wanted me to be shamed in front of all the ton . I was afraid.” Her eyes pulled back to his. “I was terrified, in fact. What if someone discovered the truth of where the necklace had been found? There would have been many people blaming me, thinking that I was a thief! I could not let that be known.”

“And yet,” Theodore muttered, half talking to himself, half to the lady, “you told me about it.”

Miss Trentworth nodded. “I had no choice. In coming to offer you my help, Lord Albury, I am doing so with as much determination to aid myself as to help you but I was all too aware that I needed to be honest. Though whether you choose to believe me is entirely your own decision.”

Lord Castleton shifted his stance a little and, in doing so, nudged Theodore heavily. “You are very wise, I think. And you have great courage in coming to speak to us as you have done. Little wonder that you are offering your help, Miss Trentworth! The worry as to who might have sought to ruin your reputation must be a difficult one to bear.”

Theodore, all too aware that his friend had nudged him to force a response from him,

grimaced. Yes, he could see the sense in what Lord Castleton said; he could understand why his friend was so willing to believe Miss Trentworth but, at the very same time, he did not give her the same belief. Not fully, at least. He did not know if she could be trusted! He did not know if these explanations were all that they appeared to be. What if the lady was merely seeking to defend herself from his suspicions and, using her wiles, her lies, and her green, sparkling eyes to have him believe her?

“I will think on all that you have said, Miss Trentworth,” he said, a little curtly. “Including the offer of help from you all.”

Miss Trentworth’s shoulders lowered instantly, her brows pulling together and her gaze, after a moment, tumbling to the floor. Guilt tried to press its way into Theodore’s heart but he ignored it, telling himself that he was quite right to be thinking of her in this way. He had to be careful and cautious, did he not? Just as his mother was so very tricky and deceitful, could not Miss Trentworth be the very same? The guilt he had been trying to press back roared upon him as he let his mind turn to this and he swallowed hard, disliking what he had thought but yet still refusing to let go of it. Yes, Miss Trentworth gave the appearance of being considerate, kind, and certainly at times, a somewhat outspoken bluestocking, but he did not know her well enough to be fully aware of her character. As she lifted her gaze to his, Theodore’s heart leaped up in his chest but he hurriedly turned his head away... though Lord Castleton was scowling at him.

“We should take our leave,” Theodore continued, as Lord Castleton’s eyes grew darker with every word that left Theodore’s mouth. “We shall speak again very soon, Miss Trentworth. Good evening.”

The murmurs of ‘good evening’ followed after Theodore as he made his way from them all without another word. Lord Castleton, seemingly a little reluctant, came with him, though Theodore could not help but overhear the incredibly heavy sigh that

followed.

“I cannot simply accept her help without considering it all first!” he exclaimed, his gaze fixing now on Lord Castleton. “You clearly see her innocent whereas I do not.”

“It makes sense to my mind, all that she has said,” came the reply. “She came to tell you to truth for fear that you would view her as guilty otherwise!”

“She could be hiding the truth even behind that !”

“And what guilty creature would tell the servants to search the very room she knew the necklace to be in?” Lord Castleton continued, clearly ignoring him. “If I was someone who had planned to take the necklace, then I would certainly not have demanded that the servants search my own room also! Nor would I have been foolish enough to leave it on the bed for everyone to see! Besides which,” he continued, speaking so quickly that Theodore could not get a word in, “you forget that the lady had no prior knowledge of your mother’s necklace! She had not seen it before, had she? She had not recognised it to be of value so why would you think that she sought it for herself?”

“Because of her mother.” With a slightly hard look towards Lord Castleton, Theodore made his position quite clear. “Her mother and mine have a rivalry, just as my mother has with other ladies in the ton , so I know full well that she is not the only one! However, it might well be that this rivalry was enough to push Lady Melford into action and, thus, her daughter became involved also.”

Lord Castleton rolled his eyes. “Or they could be entirely innocent,” he stated, sounding a trifle frustrated, “and you entirely mistaken.”

Theodore shook his head, refusing to let go of Miss Trentworth’s involvement entirely. Yes, it might be that she did not have anything to do with it but there was

still something about her that niggled away at him.

Though quite what that was, Theodore could not make out.

Joceline looked around the room. “Ladies, thank you all for joining me.”

“We were all glad to!” Miss Sherwood smiled warmly at her. “It seems to me to be an excellent notion to have all of us bluestockings together.”

After she had learned the truth about the necklace from Lord Albury, Joceline was determined to do something about it. Once the shock had worn off a little, she had recognized how he did not trust her completely and, in that, saw the need to prove herself innocent. This, along with her offer of aid towards Lord Albury, was precisely what she needed. Having just completed her explanation of what had happened thus far to both Lady Rosalyn and Lady Amelia – for Miss Sherwood and Lady Isobella had already been told all of it – Joceline reached to serve the tea. “Now you know what has happened and the worry that I have.”

“I can imagine that this must be very difficult for you,” Lady Rosalyn murmured, as the other ladies glanced at each other. “Why would someone lay the necklace on your bed?”

“They wanted her to take the blame for the theft, mayhap? Or the exchanging of the heirloom for the paste jewels?” Lady Amelia shook her head. “This is dreadful. I am especially disappointed that Lord Albury seems to believe that you are in some way guilty! That does not make any sense. I thought he would be more sensible than that.”

Joceline took in a deep breath and nodded. “Indeed. But though he does not hold me responsible entirely, there is still a part of him that distrusts me. I say this with

certainly for though he did not say a word to me in that regard, I could see from his manner towards me and from the way that Lord Castleton pushed him at certain moments to keep him from saying what he was thinking. That is why I offered my help – offered our help, in the hope that you will all be willing to come alongside me in this.”

The response to her request was immediate. All the ladies spoke as one, a slight hubbub of noise breaking across the room as Joceline smiled, grateful to her friends for their willingness and determination to help her.

“What is it that you want us to do?” Lady Amelia wanted to know. “How can we be of aid to you, my dear friend?”

“I do not know precisely,” Joceline answered, serving the tea cups one at a time. “But if Lord Albury thinks that I am the one behind the stealing of his necklace, then I must find a way to prove him wrong. And the only way I can do that is to work with him and show him the truth.”

“Which means you must first find the truth.”

Joceline nodded in Lady Rosalyn’s direction. “Exactly.”

“There is so much that we could investigate!” Lady Isobella exclaimed, her eyes bright. “First of all, we can search for the person responsible for making the necklace in the first place! Lord Albury might not be able to do so with the same ease, for he will simply throw open the door of a shop and demand to know whether or not they made such a thing... and I highly doubt he will get any answers that way!”

This made Joceline chuckle, fully aware that what her friend said was quite true, though she knew that it was not because of anger that Lord Albury behaved in that manner. He was upset, and it was more than just the necklace itself. Something about

his mother having taken the heirloom without his consent had bitten at him, hard, and as Joceline considered, she wondered if there was a part of him that blamed himself for the loss of his necklace. Sitting down with her cup of tea, she mulled over Lord Albury's reaction to her telling him the truth about where the necklace had been found. There had been shock in his expression, of that she was quite certain, but he had not said anything to her for some time. The way that he had watched her, however, with that steadiness in his eyes that was, at the very same time, filled with questions, had left her with no uncertainty as to what he thought of her. He was not sure of her, it seemed though part of her could understand that, given the strangeness of the connection between her mother and his. If, as she suspected, he understood that his mother had a good deal of animosity towards Lady Melford, then would he not suspect that it had been she involved in the theft of the necklace? Perhaps in some hope of gaining back some standing or simply to take Lady Albury down in her own estimation? A small, sad smile touched the corners of her mouth. The truth was, having Lord Albury tell her that he thought her bluestocking ways to be nothing of consequence had been greatly refreshing and there had been both surprise and a little stirring of interest in her heart. Now, however, that was over. Of that, she had no doubt.

Which is a great pity, she thought to herself, sipping her tea. For there might have been –

“Joceline?”

She looked up, seeing Lady Isabella smiling at her. “Yes?”

“You were lost in thought, which is quite understandable given the weight you must have on your mind,” Miss Sherwood said, with a smile. “We were suggesting that we meet together as often as we can while, at the same time, each of us seeking to investigate what we can, where we can.”

Joceline's eyebrows lifted. "That is a wise thought, I must say."

"I can speak to my friends and acquaintances and ask them where they would go to purchase paste jewelry," Lady Amelia suggested. "Rosalyn thought that she might find out a little more about the necklace itself though that would require careful study."

"There must be something written about it, if it is an heirloom," Lady Rosalyn interjected. "I can find the information, however, I am sure. There are so many circulating libraries here and, of course, the great London Library that I am sure I will be able to find something."

With a nod, Joceline set her teacup down. "I thank you. I will have to speak to the maid again in detail, to find out exactly what happened. I will have to question the staff in general, I think, to see if they saw any of the guests coming near to my bed chamber."

"Though do be careful," Miss Sherwood warned. "We all know just how terribly the servants whisper." Holding Joceline's gaze, she paused for a moment. "Might I ask if you are going to speak with Lord Albury again?"

"I have every intention to, yes," Joceline answered. "Though whether he will accept my offer of help, I cannot say."

Lady Amelia put out her hands either side and shrugged. "Even if he does not, that will not prevent you from finding out the truth, will it?"

"No, it will not," Joceline said, decisively. "Thank you all for coming to join me in this."

"Though," Lady Rosalyn said, slowly, "we did wonder if there is something we ought

to say which might... explain our meetings.”

Joceline frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Only that the ton is aware of everything,” Lady Isobella said, with a sigh. “Someone will notice that we are meeting together very regularly, even more than close friends might. We cannot exactly state that we are seeking to solve the mystery of the missing necklace but nor do we want society to start whispering about it all! You know as well as I that rumors could abound within a few moments!”

Considering this, Joceline winced. “You are quite right. There could be all manner of things said about us.”

“We could be seen as wallflowers, disinclined towards company and shunning society,” Lady Amelia murmured, with a roll of her eyes. “There might be a suggestion that we think ourselves above others in society and that is why we are so singular in our meetings.”

“You are quite right,” Joceline agreed, her heart heavy as she thought of all that the ton might say of them. “So, what shall we do?”

The ladies looked around at each other and Joceline said nothing, waiting for one of them to make a suggestion. She did not know what it was they could do, aware that they would need to be rather secretive but at the same time, afraid that the ton might begin to whisper about them all which would not be in the least bit satisfactory.

“I have it!” Miss Sherwood’s eyes flared wide, a broad smile settling on her face. “We shall simply say we meet to discuss books!”

Delight flung itself at Joceline’s heart. “An excellent idea!”

“Yes, indeed!” Lady Amelia clapped her hands. “The gentlemen have their clubs, do they not? Then we shall have our own!”

“The Bluestocking Book Club!” Joceline exclaimed, the name coming to her in an instant. “What say you all to that?”

The rousing chorus from the other ladies made Joceline’s heart lift high, her spirits going with it. She had nothing to fear, she told herself. Here and now, even when she was concerned about her reputation and what would become of her in the midst of all of this, she had her friends around her. Her friends understood exactly who she was, what her passions were, and how much she adored every single moment of learning she could garner for herself. Her friends, loyal and determined to stick close to her – what had she to trouble her? With them all by her side, she could believe without hesitation that the truth about the necklace would be discovered and all would be well.

“I think it is an excellent name,” Lady Isobella smiled. “We shall tell all who ask that we are joining together as the Bluestocking Book Club.” She hid a smile. “My mother will not be particularly pleased that I am declaring myself so but I do not give a fig about that! I am determined to be known for who I am, just as you all are.”

“Precisely,” Lady Amelia agreed, as Lady Rosalyn beamed at Joceline. “And, even in naming ourselves this, we shall keep others away from us, for I do not think that there will be many other young ladies who will be eager to so blatantly declare themselves to be a bluestocking by joining us!”

This made Joceline laugh, though it was a little rueful given that she knew just how true that statement was. “That is indeed exactly what shall happen! Though I am glad we shall be able to declare it to society.” Her smile slipped a little. “My mother, given that she now has this rivalry with Lady Albury – though she is not the only one – appears to care very little about society knowing me as a bluestocking. It seems as

though she has forgotten about it almost entirely, even though I know she has not.”

“A distraction is not always a bad thing,” Miss Sherwood said, gently, seeming to know what Joceline felt. Yes, it was good that Lady Melford had forgotten about Joceline’s bluestocking interests but at the same time, Joceline would have preferred her mother still showed an interest in her all the same. At the present moment, all her mother seemed to be speaking of was Lady Albury though, given the upset, Joceline could not blame her for that.

“Then we are to go forward as the Bluestocking Book Club?” Lady Rosalyn asked as every other lady nodded. “We are contented with that?”

“I am,” Joceline said, as the others agreed. “We shall masquerade as a book club whilst, under our guise, seeking to discover the truth about this necklace and free me from Lord Albury’s suspicions!”

As though he knew he had been spoken about, a knock came to the door. When the maid entered, she held out a calling card to Joceline and, as she read the name, Joceline felt her heart slam hard in her chest.

She blinked, then looked to her friends. “Lord Albury has come to call.”

Lady Rosalyn was the first to speak. “Send him in at once! Let him hear all that we have to say.”

“Careful there,” Miss Sherwood said, gently. “We do not want to push him in a direction he does not wish to go. I can understand that our desire is to prove to him that we are all solely devoted to Joceline and to her innocence being proven but we must be cautious.”

Joceline nodded slowly, looking down at the calling card and wishing she had more

than a few moments to come up with her decision. "I shall speak with him in the parlor," she said, rising to her feet. "With you also, Miss Sherwood? And the maid too, of course."

Her friends all nodded their understanding and Miss Sherwood came to join her in an instant. Handing the card back to the maid and instructing her to take the gentleman to the parlor, Joceline quit the drawing room and walked to the parlor, resisting the urge to grasp Miss Sherwood's hand such was her sudden, rising anxiety.

"All will be well," she heard Miss Sherwood say, as they stepped into the empty parlor. "Even if he believes you guilty, what does that matter? You will be able to prove it soon enough."

Joceline could not give her friend an answer for at that moment, the door opened and Lord Albury stepped into the room. He glanced first to Miss Sherwood and then looked to Joceline, quickly bowing low before coming into the room all the more.

"Please, sit down, Lord Albury." Joceline gestured to a chair, hoping that she sounded welcoming and not in the least bit nervous, but Lord Albury shook his head.

"I shall not take up more than a few minutes of your time, Miss Trentworth," he said, his eyes affixing to hers with an intensity that seemed to steal her breath from her. "I have listened to all that you have had to say and spoken at length to Lord Castleton." He took in a breath, clasping his hands behind his back. "I have determined that to turn down any sort of help would, indeed, be very foolish. My only concern at this present moment is to find the necklace so that I might then restore it to my family. That is the only goal I have in mind, the only thing that I am determined to do."

Joceline exchanged a glance with Miss Sherwood, all too aware that as yet, he had not said anything about whether he thought her guilty or entirely innocent.

“I should very much like to accept your offer of help, if it is still given,” he said, clearly, his chin lifted and his shoulders pulled back. “Though if it is not, then –”

“Of course it is!” Joceline exclaimed, both thrilled and astonished that he had been so determined to ask for her help that he had come to call upon her at the house! “I should be glad to help you.”

“We all would,” Miss Sherwood said, with a smile of her own, though there was a gleam in her eyes as she spoke. “Though you do understand, do you not, that we seek to do all of this for Joceline’s sake, Lord Albury? We can see that you think she might have been involved in the theft of your necklace and we are quite determined to prove to you that she has nothing whatsoever to do with it.”

Joceline, who had not been expecting her friend to say any such thing as this, ducked her head and looked at the floor but Lord Albury, when he spoke, sounded truly genuine.

“I can understand that and I commend your loyalty to your friend. You all know her a good deal better than I, and as my friend Lord Castleton has said, many things about this situation would seem to point away from any involvement on your part, Miss Trentworth.”

Lifting her head sharply, Joceline looked straight into Lord Albury’s eyes. “Is that true, Lord Albury? Or are you saying such a thing to placate me?”

Her direct question seemed to surprise him, given the way he flushed but he did not, to his credit, look away. “I may be seeking to placate you, Miss Trentworth, but I am also speaking the truth. I have spent almost all of last evening, through the night, and into this morning thinking about it all. Lord Castleton came to call this morning and I was able to discuss the matter with him. You will not be surprised, mayhap, to know that he is entirely of the belief that you are innocent in it all, Miss Trentworth.”

She smiled, thinking well of the gentleman. "I am very glad to hear it. Though I should like to hear those words from your lips also, Lord Albury."

Again, her frankness appeared to disconcert him, for he looked away and then rubbed one hand over the back of his neck. No response was given to her and Joceline's heart dropped to the floor, a pain tightening around her chest.

"There is still a small part of you that believes Joceline has done something," Miss Sherwood said, softly. "Is that not so?"

Lord Albury shook his head. "I am doing my utmost to find the truth and to gain clarity to do so as I seek it."

That was not the answer that she wanted but Joceline told herself she had to be contented with that. The truth would out soon enough and when the time came for him to see it, there would be, she hoped, a profuse apology from him. "Very well, Lord Albury. Even though you cling to a faint thought that I am involved in this, I will offer you my help and the assistance of the other bluestockings, so that I might prove to you that you are entirely wrong. I also want to find your necklace, so that you will be able to see the truth for yourself! That is the only thing I desire."

"Then I am grateful." Lord Albury came a little closer to her, his eyes searching hers and making a streak of energy rush down her spine. "I am sorry that I cling to this, Miss Trentworth. You have been entirely honest with me, have you not? Therefore, I hope you will see my desire in being perfectly truthful with you also."

She nodded, a little surprised by the faint warmth in her body that now lingered. Lord Albury was a gentleman that she ought to be stepping back from, that she should be keeping at arms length, should she not? So why was there now this strange desire to step closer to him and, as she had done before, catch his hand in hers?

“We shall have to discuss the matter again, perhaps in more detail.” Lord Albury’s eyes flashed to Miss Sherwood though he directed his question towards Joceline. “Might you be willing to walk with me in the park one afternoon? We could discuss the matter then.”

“A walk?” Joceline repeated, something catching in the back of her throat. “You and I?”

The Earl nodded, though a hint of red brushed against his cheeks. “Yes, Miss Trentworth. I thought that might be something we could do together, unless I am mistaken in my thinking and you have told all of this to your mother?”

Not fully understanding his remarks, it took Joceline a moment to gather herself. A flurry of warmth in her stomach betrayed her and she curled her hands into fists for just a moment, trying to understand him. “You think that if we walk together, she will not overhear.”

“Because I thought that, at the moment, you had not discussed this idea of assisting me with the discovery of the necklace,” he said, slowly, a slight frown pressing down on his forehead. “You said last evening that you had kept this all from your mother but I presumed that –”

“Yes, yes, of course.” Heat began to rise in Joceline’s face as she flushed hot, feeling utterly foolish. There had been, for a brief moment, the thought that the Earl had wanted to walk with her in the park because of his interest in her though now, of course, she saw that such a thought was entirely mistaken. Why had she even permitted herself to think such a thing? It was not as though she had any interest in the Earl and certainly he did not think highly of her! “That is a wise thought, Lord Albury. Mayhap my friends and I shall all walk in the park together and we might unexpectedly come upon you. That way, there will be no notion of us meeting together.” Her smile was tight. “After all, the last thing we want is for society to have

the wrong impression in all of this.”

“Quite.”

His short, clipped response made Joceline’s heart sink low and the embarrassment in her chest grew even greater. With a nod, she looked to her friend. “Miss Sherwood, do you think the others would be amenable to that suggestion?”

“Of course.” Instantly defensive, Miss Sherwood stood straight and pinned her gaze to Lord Albury. “We are, as you know, Lord Albury, already quite determined to stand by Joceline and reveal the truth to both you and to her. Therefore, we shall do whatever is needed – and I hope that, once you learn that you are mistaken, you will offer a sincere and determined apology to my friend, for this doubting of her innocence is a heavy weight to bear.”

For whatever reason, Lord Albury’s eyebrows shot up as if he had never once thought of such a thing. His eyes, still rounded, turned to Joceline, and though he said nothing, the surprise was evident in his expression. Joceline held his gaze steadily, wondering if he truly believed that she had been able to brush aside his suspicions without a second thought!

“I – I shall, of course, apologize,” he said, after a few seconds of silence. “And indeed, Miss Trentworth, I realize now that I have never given much thought to how all of this must be weighing upon you. That has now given me some more to think upon.”

“I am glad to hear it,” Joceline replied, spiritedly. “I shall, Lord Albury, demand a perfect apology from you when the time comes. Indeed, you may have to give it to me over and over again until I am quite satisfied.”

“Is that so?” A tiny hint of a smile pressed at his lips, a flash in his eyes that seemed

to warm Joceline through. Inclining his head, he ran his fingers over his chin and then turned away, the heat in Joceline's frame quickly fading. "Then I quite agree to do so." He nodded. "Until tomorrow. I look forward to speaking with you then, Miss Trentworth."

Joceline watched the gentleman leave and, once the door was closed, flopped back into a chair, one hand at her forehead. "Goodness! That was unexpected."

"But it is good, is it not?" Miss Sherwood asked, her voice bright with seeming enthusiasm. "He wants our help, Joceline! That is an excellent thing."

"Unless he merely wants me close to him so he can catch me with the necklace," Joceline muttered, still rather uncomfortable with the strange happenings within her heart when it came to Lord Albury. "I do not like that he still thinks I might be guilty."

Miss Sherwood waved a hand. "That will pass, and quickly too," she said, unequivocally. "He will have no reason to doubt you very soon, I am sure. With all of us together, the truth cannot escape us for long."

"I must hope so." Pushing herself up out of her chair, Joceline made for the door. "Come now, let us go and tell the other members of the Bluestocking Book Club about these developments." She smiled as she spoke, the name of the book club lifting her heart. "You are quite right, Eugenia. Together, we are certain to find the truth."

"Yes, we shall," her friend said, coming after her. "And you will be proven entirely innocent – and Lord Albury shall have no choice but to grovel at your feet in apology."

Laughing at the picture her friend presented, Joceline made her way back to the

drawing-room though, as she walked, she could not quite forget the small smile that had touched Lord Albury's lips when she had spoken about his soon-to-be-required apology. It had sent light into his eyes and transformed his expression... and much to her frustration, had set her heart quite awry.

12

“Y ou are to walk with her? Here?”

Theodore nodded, looking all about him as Lord Castleton and Lady Castleton walked beside him. “Yes. That was the arrangement.”

“So, you have taken what I suggested seriously, then?” Lord Castleton looked a little surprised as Theodore nodded. “Goodness. I am a little astonished.”

“You are?” Theodore looked at his friend as Lord Castleton nodded. “Why is that?”

Lord Castleton winced, though he smiled with it. “Well, I suppose that -”

“He thought you quite determined to blame Miss Trentworth for the necklace,” Lady Castleton put in, squeezing her husband’s arm lightly and smiling up at him as she spoke. “Though he is a good deal less convinced and I confess that I agree with him.”

Theodore, who had expected that his friend would share all of this with his wife, smiled lightly. “You are a lady of good judgment, I think, so I shall certainly take your considerations to my mind, Lady Castleton.” He let out a small sigh. “I am well aware that there is a good deal of evidence that would suggest she has nothing whatsoever to do with it but still, there is a pressing niggle in my mind that says she might still have been involved. Her mother dislikes mine and any daughter ought to be loyal to their mother, yes?”

“Of course, but bear in mind that Lady Melford is not the only lady who dislikes your

mother,” Lord Castleton said plainly, though Lady Castleton let out a small exclamation as though she was both shocked and displeased with her husband speaking in such a plain manner. “There will be others at the soiree who had just as much displeasure within their hearts upon seeing Lady Albury’s arrival.” Patting his wife’s hand, Lord Castleton said something comforting to his wife, though Theodore did not pay too much attention. That was true, certainly, though it was not something he had given a great deal of consideration to at present. Mayhap he had been a little too fixated on Lady Albury and Miss Trentworth.

“Lord Albury?”

He turned his head to see Lady Castleton nodding in one direction, her eyes following. “I think Miss Trentworth is approaching you.”

Much to his displeasure, Theodore’s heart leaped in a most unexpected way. He had not once taken any great note of Miss Trentworth, he told himself, though now that he watched her come near him, he could not help but recall how he had, in fact, considered the beauty of her eyes on at least two separate occasions. Surely it could not have been the thought of her eyes that made his heart leap so! Any such emotion in that regard was utterly foolish and Theodore, pushing it aside, tried to concentrate solely on the matter at hand.

“Miss Trentworth.” He inclined his head. “And Lady Rosalyn, a pleasure to see you both.”

“And you also,” they both murmured, though Lady Rosalyn quickly made her way towards Lady Castleton, with the two ladies falling into quick conversation. Theodore swallowed thickly, surprised that he felt himself a little nervous now, even though there was nothing whatsoever to bring him any sort of anxiety! He was left facing Miss Trentworth, almost unwillingly bringing his eyes to hers and, in doing so, feeling his heart leap up all over again in the strangest fashion.

“Miss Trentworth.” He demanded that his lips curve into a smile, relieved that that Lord Castleton had not yet moved away but stayed beside him. “I do hope you have had a pleasant afternoon.”

She smiled lightly at him. “I have, yes. Though there is much now for us to discuss, is there not?”

Theodore nodded and, seeing Lady Castleton and Lady Rosalyn begin to meander, arm in arm, along the path, turned so that they might all follow after them. “Are you permitted to walk with us, Miss Trentworth?”

She glanced up at him, then looked over her shoulder. “So long as I do not stray too far from my mother, all shall be quite well.”

Without a word, Theodore began to follow after Lady Castleton and Lady Rosalyn though, much to his concern and slight frustration, Lord Castleton hurried to catch up with his wife, slipping his arm through hers so they might walk together. That left himself and Miss Trentworth almost alone, their conversation unheard by others, and, strangely enough, that sent Theodore’s heart into a quickened pace.

“The other bluestockings and I spoke at length yesterday afternoon,” she began, making her way directly to the point of their meeting. “They are all quite determined to find your necklace, Lord Albury, just as I am.”

“Because they are determined to prove that you were not in the least bit involved,” he murmured, as a smile danced across her lips. “You have loyal friends, Miss Trentworth.”

Her expression softened, a gentleness about her eyes as she tipped her head up to look at him. “Yes,” she said, quietly. “I do. I am glad to see that you recognize that, Lord Albury.”

“And they all speak well of your character,” he admitted, a trifle heavily. “You are too astute for me to pretend that I do not still have a vague suspicion, Miss Trentworth, but I can assure you that it is only a mild one.”

Much to his surprise, she laughed at this, a quiet, tinkling sound that made his eyebrows lift in surprise. “Do you think that it makes me feel any better?” she asked, as he frowned. “To have any suspicion upon me, Lord Albury, is a heavy weight to bear but bear it I must, it seems! I cannot force you to believe that I have done nothing wrong but I must hope that, in time, your suspicion will fade completely, even if we do not find the necklace.” Taking a deep breath, she set her shoulders and looked away from him again. “I must ask you something, Lord Albury, and I pray that you will not take it badly.”

“Oh?”

She caught his eye and then turned her head a little so they could no longer look at one another. “Whether you wish for my help or not, my friends and I will continue in our investigation, so that I might prove myself to be innocent. In that, however, I must ask you whether or not there are any other ladies in the ton that have the same... contention that is between your mother and mine.” A tiny dot of red came into her cheeks and began to grow as Theodore watched, their steps slow but steady. He had to admit that he was a little surprised by her question but also the bold manner in which she asked it. It was direct though, he told himself, he ought not to be surprised by that given what he knew of her.

“I suppose that there will be, yes,” he admitted, though he shook his head as he spoke. “The difficulty is, Miss Trentworth, in being able to tell you as to who these ladies are, for my mother has a very strong desire to make herself as great in society as she can be.” He winced as he admitted this, finding it a little difficult to speak what he knew to be the truth. “My mother is determined to be the greatest of all ladies, even though her husband – my father – was no great gentleman. He was an Earl, as I

am now, but we did not have the greatest wealth in all of London, not by any means! There are many above us by way of title and standing, but my mother appears to desire to have greatness in any form she can have it. That means she will do whatever she can to push herself to the fore – and the heirlooms are one way to do it.”

The lady looked at him for a long moment. “You said before that your mother wore the heirlooms without your consent.”

“And my awareness,” Theodore admitted, surprised at how much he was willing to tell the lady, even though they were not exactly well acquainted. “That is why I took the necklace from her when you returned it the night of the soiree. I wanted to keep it safe and secure, doing what I had stated from the beginning.”

“I see.” The lady hesitated, then spoke again, her voice a good deal gentler now. “I am sorry for all of this, Lord Albury. There must have been difficulty enough with the heirlooms already and then to discover the necklace exchanged for paste when you thought it secure must be a heavy burden.”

Theodore’s heart warmed as he smiled briefly. “I thank you for your understanding, Miss Trentworth.” After a moment’s pause, he offered her his arm and, much to his inner delight, she accepted it without question. At that moment, Theodore felt his lingering suspicions begin to fade all the more. Could he really, truly believe that she had taken his mother’s necklace? The sudden, almost instant camaraderie between them felt strange but Theodore welcomed it all the same, a little surprised that he felt so. It was the first long conversation they had shared, he supposed, ever since the incident with the necklace. It seemed as though she held no ill will towards him which, Theodore had to admit, was both surprising and appreciated.

“We will find it, I am sure,” she said, sounding more confident than Theodore felt. “I am here to tell you that the bluestockings and I are going to investigate as best we can. I have asked you about the particular ladies that are rivals, as my mother is. That

way, I can consider each in turn. Lady Amelia is to ask her friends where they might go to purchase paste jewelry – for the replica was made to a very high standard. Lady Rosalyn is to go to various libraries and read as much as she can about the heirloom itself, though I am sure she will also come to speak to you about it, and Miss Sherwood is going to assist me in my investigations.”

Theodore blinked, a little overwhelmed by all that the ladies had thought to do. While he was busy worrying about Miss Trentworth and her involvement in the affair, she had been organizing her friends to do a great deal more! “Goodness, Miss Trentworth!”

“What is it?” Her eyes widened as she looked back at him, clearly a little concerned that she had said something to upset him. “Do you not think it is enough?”

“No, you quite misunderstand me!” Theodore exclaimed, feeling her fingers tighten just a little on his arm. “Miss Trentworth, I am more than a little impressed by your determination! The way you have planned what is to happen, the way you all work together to find out what you can... I am both amazed and appreciative of your clear decisions and forward thinking.”

The way she smiled at him, the light that shot up into her eyes, and the delicate pink which rose in her cheeks made Theodore’s heart roar. How strange it was that in this one meeting, his thoughts towards her – his feelings, even – had altered so quickly! He looked away, fearful of what she might see in his expression if he permitted her, fearful even of what he felt.

“I am only grateful that you have accepted our offer of help, Lord Albury,” she said with a smile in her voice. “Will you ask your mother about any particular rivals of note? I know it may be an awkward conversation but it will help a great deal.”

“I shall,” he promised, looking at her again and seeing that smile still lingering there.

“And I will send a note to you with their names the very moment I hear from her.”

There came a moment of silence between them, just a breath and nothing more. As Theodore held her gaze, his heart thudded violently and snatched at his breath, forcing him to turn his head away sharply.

“We should return to your mother, I think.” Miss Sherwood broke the silence and Theodore quickly dropped his arm, releasing Miss Trentworth from his side as her friend drew near. “We have walked a little farther than we ought, I think.”

Miss Trentworth looked over her shoulder, let out a small sigh but gave her friend a resigned smile. “I think you are right.” When her attention once more returned to him, Theodore did not know where to look, a buzzing in his ears that both confused and disconcerted him. “Thank you, Lord Albury. I look forward to hearing from you very soon.”

He bowed. “Of course.”

Without another word, Miss Trentworth and Miss Sherwood walked away, arm in arm and, as they walked, a lilting laughter ran back towards Theodore.

He did not smile. Something had happened in that one moment between them, something that he did not like and was certainly unsure of. This had been a most illuminating afternoon and, strangely enough, the necklace now appeared to hold a little less importance for him.

Though quite why that could be, Theodore was entirely unsure.

“I presume that the conversation went well?” Lord Castleton touched Theodore’s shoulder and he started, pulled out of his thoughts. “You appear to be in a good deal of thought, my friend.”

With a small nod, Theodore offered a wry smile. “Indeed, though I will say that Miss Trentworth has a clear plan and intention for what must happen next.”

“That is an excellent thing!” Lady Castleton exclaimed, coming to stand beside her husband. “I am sure that you will soon have no suspicions about her whatsoever.”

Theodore chuckled. “You may be correct in that.”

“Really?” Lord Castleton’s eyebrows lifted, though he grinned thereafter. “I am very glad to hear it! You will have solutions to all your concerns very soon with her assistance, I am sure.”

With a nod and a smile, Theodore continued to walk along the path again though, inwardly, he silently wondered whether being in company with Miss Trentworth might soon bring him more questions than answers.

“A note has arrived for you, Miss Trentworth.”

Joceline took the note from the butler, glancing to her mother who was now tapping her foot on the floor impatiently. “Forgive me, Mama.” There came a tiny frisson of excitement as she opened the note, seeing the list of names given to her by Lord Albury. It was, she decided, the anticipation that came with the beginning of her investigations rather than anything else.

“Joceline, we are going to be late for the ball! Do hurry up.”

Joceline chose not to state the obvious, which was that it was quite acceptable to be tardy to a ball and indeed, if they had turned up on time, that would have been the unusual thing. “It is a note from Lord Albury,” she explained, seeing her mother’s eyebrows lift. “I asked him if there are other ladies who have a particular... dislike for Lady Albury and he has written to me with their names.”

“Joceline!” Lady Melford hurried forward and took the note from Joceline’s fingers. “Why ever would you do such a thing?”

“Because,” Joceline said, trying to hide her frustration at her mother snatching the letter in such a way, “because I am doing my utmost to help him find out who switched the necklace.” It had been on Joceline’s mind whether or not to share with her mother all that had taken place, including the Bluestocking Book Club but she had chosen to do so. Yes, her mother had not been particularly pleased about the club itself but Joceline had reminded her of the importance of declaring them both

innocent. That had been enough to persuade her.

“Goodness.” Lady Melford’s eyes widened. “There are at least twenty names here!”

With a small sigh, Joceline took the letter back from her mother with gentle fingers, though thankfully, Lady Melford appeared to be quite contented for her to do so. “Yes, there are.”

“It does not surprise me,” Lady Melford stated, with a toss of her head. “I knew very well that Lady Albury is the most disagreeable, contentious lady in all of London! In truth, I am astonished that this list is so short!”

Joceline, choosing not to continue on such a conversation, gestured to the carriage. “Might you be willing to assist me with this perhaps tomorrow morning? I should like to be able to confirm with Lord Albury who was present at our soiree, just as soon as possible.”

Her mother nodded, opened her mouth, closed it again, and then tilted her head. “I think it might be best to do it this evening, Joceline. We can be a little later to the ball, I am sure.”

Joceline stared at her mother for a few moments, though Lady Melford did not see it, given the way she took the letter and marched down the hallway towards the parlor. A little surprised but with a small curve of a smile at her mouth, Joceline made to follow after her, only for a maid to step out of the shadows.

“My lady, might I ask you for a moment?”

“Of course.” Seeing that it was the maid who had found the necklace, Joceline came a little closer, watching as the maid bit at her bottom lip and looked away, her eyes darting this way and that. “Is there something wrong, Bessie?” Recalling what it was

that she had said by way of warning Bessie to keep where she had found the necklace to herself, Joceline pressed her lips together for a moment. “Have you said something that you ought not to have done?”

“No, my lady!” Bessie exclaimed, though her voice was only a little louder than a whisper. “I am loyal to you, I swear it.”

“I am glad to hear it and grateful for your devotion,” Joceline answered, hoping that she had not sounded in any way fearsome. “Then please, do tell me what it is that troubles you so.”

The maid nodded but let out a shaking breath, her hands gripping tightly together. “I know that there has been upset about that necklace, my lady. I do not mean to speak out of turn but I overheard something below stairs.”

Joceline’s heart quickened its pace. If Bessie was coming to tell her something she had heard from another servant, then that was astonishing indeed. “What was it?”

Bessie closed her eyes. “Two footmen were speaking, my lady. One said to the other that he was sure he had seen a lady in the house at the time of the soiree who was not dressed in any finery but who certainly was not a servant! They were speaking of the necklace, you see, though it was not to gossip.”

“I do not think that it was,” Joceline reassured her. “Have no concern in that, Bessie. I know that the servants will speak of all that has gone on here.”

Her maid glanced up at her and nodded, seeming now to be a little more reassured. “Thank you, my lady. It seemed strange to me, which is why I thought to come to speak to you.”

“Indeed it is,” Joceline murmured, frowning. “Why would there be a lady in this

house if she was not a guest?"

"She might have come in the servants' door," Bessie said, quickly. "There was so much going on that we might have missed her coming in and going out again."

In an instant, all that Joceline had thought previously was thrown into disarray. She had thought that one of the guests might have been responsible but now, with this from Bessie, she realized that it could well have been someone else, someone who came into the house when the servants were busy with the soiree and she with the guests.

"I – I hope I have done the right thing in speaking to you."

Joceline nodded fervently. "Of course you have, Bessie. I shall not speak to the footmen, have no concern in that regard."

Relief poured into Bessie's face and she let out a heavy breath. It was clear to Joceline that she had taken a great risk in speaking to her as she had done, for had Joceline chosen to go and speak with the footmen, then the servants as a whole would know that Bessie had come to her. She might have been maligned by the other servants and that was something that Joceline herself certainly did not want.

"There is no need for me to do so," Joceline continued, in the hope that this would further reassure the maid. "Thank you, Bessie. I shall make sure you are rewarded for this."

The maid murmured a thank you and then scurried away, leaving Joceline perplexed. With one hand pressed to her forehead, she closed her eyes and tried to think clearly.

It was someone else, she thought to herself, frowning. Not one of the guests. How could they have taken the necklace from Lady Albury's neck without her awareness?

“I have them all!” Her mother hurried out of the parlor, a piece of paper in her hand. “Look, there are only two who were present at our soiree, one Lady Marselle and another Lady Falkirk. Both were present with their husbands, though Lady Falkirk is wed to a Duke so I am surprised that she would think herself in contention with a mere Countess!”

“I do not think it is one’s standing that matters to Lady Albury,” Joceline answered, taking the piece of paper from her mother and reading over the names again, wondering if any of the others would have stolen into the house. “She thinks only of the wealth she can show to others, the extravagance that must be more than any other.”

Lady Melford drew herself up. “I am glad that you can see that, Joceline. I must confess that I am a little concerned about the time you are spending with Lord Albury. If he is anything like his mother, then he is not good company.”

“He is not like her in the least.”

The surprise that etched itself into her mother’s eyes also pressed into Joceline’s heart, hearing herself speak fervently about Lord Albury without having had any real intention to do so. Swallowing hard, she tried to smile. “What I mean to say is that he is just as frustrated at her behavior as you are,” she said, turning to gesture to the door. “Shall we take our leave now, Mother? We ought not to be too tardy!”

“Indeed,” her mother answered, though this was said slowly and with a long, lingering look upon Joceline, as if she suspected that there was something more to the fervency with which Joceline had spoken. “Come then. Let us go.”

Handing the piece of paper to the ever helpful butler and instructing him to set it in her bedchamber, Joceline hurried after her mother and into the carriage. She had to find her friends, had to tell them what the maid had told her and, thereafter, speak to

Lord Albury. Though quite what they were to do now, Joceline did not know. Suddenly, everything appeared to be a little more indistinct rather than becoming clearer, as she had hoped. For the first time, a flicker of doubt came into her mind; doubt that they would be able to find the truth. Sighing, she sat back in the carriage and closed her eyes as it began to pull away from the house.

I cannot give up, she told herself, silently. I have to find the answers. There is nothing else I can do but search until the truth is revealed.

It was the following afternoon before Joceline was able to tell her friends all that she had learned. The ball had been a great success and she had danced every dance, including one with Lord Albury, though they had not had much opportunity to speak. Now, however, she was seated with her friends in St James' Park, all of them eager to share what they had discovered.

"Do you mean to say that someone else entered your house and stole the necklace?" Lady Rosalyn asked, her eyes widening as Joceline nodded. "Then it does not matter which of the ladies present at your soiree were displeased with Lady Albury, for it could not have been one of them!"

"That might be so, though we cannot say so outright," Lady Isobella said, slowly, her brows knotting together. "Mayhap there were two of them working together to make sure that the necklace was taken from Lady Albury's neck and then switched with the paste necklace instead."

"It is all very confusing," Joceline answered, with a heavy sigh. "Amelia, did you discover anything?"

Lady Amelia nodded. "I did. I have spoken to a good number of my acquaintances, under the guise of desiring some paste jewellery of my own. I have discovered that, though some differ, the majority of my acquaintances would go to Hamilton and

Sons, an establishment here in London.”

This brought Joceline a little relief. “Then we can make our way there.”

“And do what?” Lady Amelia asked, a small frown on her forehead. “Do you think there would be a way to find out the previous customers? I am not sure we could simply ask for a list of them but –”

“If we go together, then we will be able to, yes,” Joceline said, firmly. “We must. If a name there is one of the ladies who is against Lady Albury, then we might have something to pursue!”

“I have found some interesting information about the heirloom,” Lady Rosalyn added, her gaze darting from face to face. “I do not know if Lord Albury himself is aware of this, but the heirlooms were passed from one family to his many decades ago.”

Joceline’s eyes flared. “Who did they belong to originally?”

Lady Rosalyn’s lips twisted. “Alas, it did not say though I intend to keep searching. The story goes that the heirlooms were sold to the Earl of Albury, for the family he bought them from was becoming impoverished.”

“Goodness.” Joceline frowned. “Then there could be a desire to recover them, could there not?”

Her friends all nodded, though there was the same heaviness in the expressions of her friends that Joceline herself felt in her chest. With the news from Bessie, Joceline felt as though she were pushing her way through a thick darkness, seeing only a flicker of light here and there.

“We shall be able to discover more, I am sure,” Miss Sherwood said, gently. “What we have learned thus far is valuable.”

Joceline nodded, trying to garner some encouragement from Miss Sherwood. “You are quite right.”

“And we now know what we must do,” Lady Isobella added, with a smile. “We are to make our way to Hamilton and Sons, are we not?”

A little bolstered, Joceline smiled back at her friend. “Yes, we are.” With a small shake, she spread out her hands. “Let us think of what we know in the hope that it will help us still further.”

Her friends glanced at each other before Miss Sherwood began.

“We know that someone came into the house the night of your soiree, coming in, most likely, through the servants’ entrance and thus, not being noticed by either the servants or by the guests.”

“We know that the necklace was switched and that the person responsible put the paste jewelry into your bed-chamber,” Lady Isobella added, frowning. “Though we do not know why.”

“And we know that the person responsible must have planned all of this well in advance,” Lady Amelia put in. “They must have had every detail about the emerald necklace in their mind and been able to have it made so it appeared identical!”

“Which,” Joceline murmured, “would speak of someone who not only has a connection to Lady Albury, but someone who has known her for a very long time indeed.” As she spoke, her breath caught in her chest, her eyes widening as she looked back at her friends. “Is that not so? It must be someone who has known Lady

Albury for a long time, for she would not often have worn the necklace, given the significance and the value of it!”

Miss Sherwood sat forward in her chair. “I think you are right, Joceline! It must be someone who has long been acquainted with Lady Albury – though quite why they would then place the necklace on your bed, I cannot imagine!”

“Nor can I,” Joceline agreed, as her other friends nodded their understanding of all she had said. “But I must now speak to Lord Albury about it all. Mayhap he will be able to help.”

Lady Rosalyn’s eyes widened. “He will know which of her friends – if you can call them that – has known her for the longest time. Goodness, Joceline, it may be that you will find the culprit this very day!”

Joceline nodded slowly, her brow furrowing as she thought of what would become of her if she did find out the truth. Her connection to Lord Albury would be at an end, though he would know for certain that she was innocent, at least. Why did she find that thought troublesome? Why did she seem hesitant to accept that? There could not be a desire to linger on in his company, could there? After all, only some ten days ago, he had been demanding to know what she had done with the necklace, believing her to be the one who had stolen it! But now... now things were beginning to change between them and Joceline had to admit that she found the idea of stepping away from him a trifle unsettling. “I must speak with him,” she said, slowly, looking down at her hands. “And just as soon as I can.”

14

“Come.” Theodore glanced up from his papers as the butler came in. “Yes?”

“My lord.” The butler appeared a little uneasy, glancing at the door before he came a little closer to him. “My lord, there is a young lady here who has come to call.”

“A young lady?” Theodore repeated, setting his quill down. “And her mother or father, I presume?”

The butler shook his head. “No, my lord. Though she did say it was on an urgent matter and she would not be more than a few minutes standing with you.”

Theodore took the card from the butler, his eyebrows lifting as he saw the name. He knew that Miss Trentworth was a little unorthodox given that she was a bluestocking but to call upon a gentleman without a chaperone was more than that! It was deeply improper, for if anyone was to find them alone together, then a good deal of difficulty might follow thereafter.

“Send her in.”

Surprising himself by the eagerness and fervency with which he spoke, Theodore rose to his feet. “Send one of the maids in also. And leave the door wide open. I know why she is here and it is on a very grave matter indeed, so you are not to breathe a word of her presence here this afternoon to anyone. Not even the housekeeper.” Knowing full well that he could trust the butler implicitly, he gestured to the door. “Show her in. And make sure whichever maid you choose is also one who will stay

quiet.”

The butler nodded and then disappeared, leaving Theodore to prepare for Miss Trentworth’s arrival. Though he was surprised at her coming unannounced and unchaperoned, there was also a sense of happiness within him that he would, once more, be in her company – and without anyone to interrupt them! Ever since he had accepted her offer of help, there had been a slow-growing change in their connection, especially when he had seen just how little she held against him despite his suspicions and poor behavior. Knowing that she was a bluestocking actually brought within him a sense of admiration rather than criticism and the more time they spent together, the more Theodore appeared to desire it.

Though once we find the necklace, then what shall become of our relationship such as it is? That thought brought a frown to his face and Theodore turned his head away, looking out of the window rather than gazing expectantly at the door. He ought not to care as to whether or not Miss Trentworth had a close connection to him... but his heart appeared to be demanding otherwise.

“Thank you for letting me speak with you, Lord Albury.”

“Miss Trentworth.” Theodore took in her flushed cheeks, the sparkle in her eyes, and the small smile dancing about her lips and felt his heart turn over in his chest. She was, he had to admit, quite lovely in her own way. Recalling how they had danced together, how he had been able to take her in his arms, Theodore felt his face heat and, hastily, directed Miss Trentworth to a chair. “Sit down, please. Shall I send for tea?”

It was a foolish suggestion given that the lady ought not to be here alone in the first place and Theodore was not in the least bit confused when she refused.

“No, I thank you. I will not be long.” She pressed her lips together, her green eyes

fastened to his. “I know that coming to call without a chaperone is most untoward and I do hope that both yourself and your mother will not think poorly of me for it.”

“My mother is gone to visit Lady Yarmouth – her sister and my aunt – and shall stay there for dinner,” Theodore reassured her, “and I quite understand. If there is something urgent to be said then there is every need for you to be here.”

At this, Miss Trentworth’s shoulders dropped and she smiled a little easier. “I appreciate that understanding, Lord Albury, for I have come with some news and with some questions.”

He spread out his hands. “I should be glad to hear both!” When she leaned forward in her seat, clearly eager to tell him all, Theodore’s heart ricocheted in his chest and he was forced to drop his gaze from hers for fear that something more – something more obvious – would show in his expression.

“I was speaking with the other ladies and we have determined that we ought to speak to Hamilton and Sons, for that is the establishment that many of the ton use when they require some paste jewelry.”

Theodore’s eyebrows lifted. “Is that so?”

Miss Trentworth nodded. “In addition, though we have previously discussed that the person who switched the necklace would have had to have seen it on more than one occasion, we did not appear to make the connection that it would have to have been a long-established relationship.”

A little uncertain as to what she was saying, Theodore frowned. “What do you mean by that?”

“Only to say that the person responsible would have had to have known your mother

for a very long period of time, where they would have seen the necklace regularly.” Her eyes searched his. “I presume that the necklace was not often worn?”

Theodore shook his head, beginning to understand what it was that the lady meant. “My father permitted my mother to wear them on occasion but it was not a regular occurrence.”

“So, then,” Miss Trentworth continued, getting to her feet and beginning to pace up and down the room as she thought aloud. “We can ascertain that the person who switched the necklace must have been at most of these events, yes?”

A dull thud of his heart made Theodore close his eyes, a sudden thought coming to him. No. Surely it could not be?

“Lord Albury?”

Opening his eyes, he looked at her. “I have had a thought, Miss Trentworth, that is all.”

She quickly stopped her pacing. “Oh?”

“I cannot... that is to say, it is not worth expressing it at the moment,” he said, slowly, as her lips pressed tight together. “It is only that... well, someone has come to my mind but I cannot understand why they would do such a thing, nor why they would then place the necklace into your bedchamber! That does not make any particular sense and thus, I do not feel confident in sharing the name as yet.”

“Oh.” Miss Trentworth nodded but looked away. “I understand, Lord Albury, truly. Though might I ask if there is a way to determine whether or not your suspicion is right?”

Theodore hesitated, looking back at her and, after a moment, rising to his feet so that he too might meander around the room. It appeared to help his myriad of thoughts settle just a little, though there came with that a growing tightness in his chest.

“Yes, there is,” he said, slowly. “If you are to go to Hamilton and Sons, then I presume that, somehow, you are to find a list of names of those who have ordered paste jewels of late?”

She came closer to him. “Yes, we are. Quite how we are to go about that, we have not yet decided but the intention is there.”

“Good.” Running one hand over his chin, he looked away again, aware that her increasing nearness was distracting him from his thoughts. “Might you be willing to share that list with me, once you possess it?”

She stepped closer still. “Of course, Lord Albury. There is nothing that I would keep from you.”

As he turned to look into her eyes, the tightness in his chest disappeared in an instant, though his heart began to beat at a furious pace. “Thank you, Miss Trentworth,” he managed to say, fearful that she would hear the slight huskiness of his voice, a hoarseness that had only just come on. “I – I am sorry that I have ever thought you guilty of this theft.” It was not something he had meant to say in this conversation but, in hearing her fervency and in seeing the hope in her eyes, he realized just how foolish he had been in thinking her responsible. “I can see now that I have been entirely mistaken.”

For a few moments, Miss Trentworth did not say a single word. Her eyes were a little rounded at the edges, her lips in a flat line as though she was trying to ascertain whether he truly meant such a thing. Theodore could do nothing but look into her face and pray that she believed him.

“Well, Lord Albury, this is a little unexpected!” Again, she took a step closer to him, a hint of a smile gracing the corners of her mouth and, to his surprise, a teasing note in her voice. “Though did we not state that, when the time came for you to admit that you were wrong in your belief, you would make me a most profuse apology? And that, indeed, you would make multiple apologies until I was satisfied?”

The smile on her face grew and Theodore could not help but return it though, within him, there came a squirreling, nervous sensation, a little concerned that this was what she desired from him. “I believe that I did agree to that, yes.”

“Then will you do it?” she asked, a glint in her eye that did nothing to help Theodore ascertain whether she was being genuine in her request.

He swallowed. “If – if you wish it from me, Miss Trentworth, then I shall do so until you are satisfied.” Taking in a breath, he lifted his chin. “Indeed, I shall go on my knees before you and beg for your forgiveness, if you wish it.” Without giving her time to respond, he made to kneel only for Miss Trentworth to let out a shout of laughter and catch his forearm, making sure to keep him on his feet.

“I hardly think that you need to do such a thing, Lord Albury!” she laughed, though her hand remained where it was. “I was only teasing you, for I can tell from your expression that you are sincere.” Her laughter faded though her eyes still shone with light. “That means a great deal to me. I am grateful that you now see that I am telling you the truth.”

“I ought never to have doubted you.” Her fingers were still around his arm, near to his wrist, and ever so slowly, it felt as if his entire body was slowly being consumed with fire. “I was already angry about the heirlooms and, as I have said, my mother wearing them without my awareness. When I realized they had been stolen, my only thought was how to retrieve them, feeling myself shamed and –”

“Shamed?” Miss Trentworth sounded surprised, looking up at him with wide eyes that reminded him of the very emeralds he had lost. “Why? You had nothing to do with their loss.”

Theodore opened his mouth and then closed it again, a little surprised at just how much he wanted to be honest with her. A tentative frown danced across his forehead, seeing her waiting for his response and, after another few moments of consideration, he gave it.

“The heirlooms were given to me by my father. They have been passed down from generation to generation and he instilled in me just how much value they had – not only in monetary worth but to our family name.”

Miss Trentworth’s lips pursed, making Theodore hesitate.

“Is something wrong?”

“Oh, no, not at all.” She flushed red and dropped her hand from his arm, sending a surge of frustration through Theodore, aware that he wanted to do nothing more now than to reach out and take her hand in his again. “Forgive me, it was only that I was sure that Lady Rosalyn told me something about the necklace but mayhap she was mistaken.”

Theodore reached out one hand, unable to resist the desire to catch her fingers in his for only a moment, heedless now to the fact that, aside from the maid, they were quite alone. “What is it? Please, you must know by now that I trust you.”

This brought him a small, almost tender smile. “You are quite right, Lord Albury.” Her shoulders lifted as she took in a long breath. “It was Lady Rosalyn who told me that from what she had read – and she was unsure if you were aware of this – the heirlooms were sold to the Earl of Albury, though that was some decades ago, it

seems.”

Shock crashed into Theodore’s chest.

“I do not know who the family was that sold it,” Miss Trentworth continued, seemingly unaware of just how much of a difficulty this was bringing Theodore. “Lady Rosalyn said she could not find out from what she had read, though she did say that the information provided stated it was because of financial difficulty.”

There was such an ache in his throat that no amount of swallowing seemed to rid him of it. The quickness of his breath and the cold hand that seemed to grab at his heart meant that Theodore had to turn away for fear that he would lose his composure directly in front of her.

“I – I have astonished you.” Her hand was at his elbow now, though Theodore sat down heavily, not willing to gaze back into her eyes. “I did not know that you would be so astonished by this.”

Theodore closed his eyes. “I was never told this. I was only informed that the heirlooms belonged to my family and had done for generations upon generations.” He scrubbed at his eyes, then opened them to see her concerned face close to his as she sat down next to him. “Perhaps my father did not know of it.”

“Mayhap he did not.” Miss Trentworth settled her hand on his. “I do apologize, Lord Albury. I should have taken greater care in speaking as I did.”

Theodore shook his head, turning his hand over so he could grasp hers tightly. “You did nothing wrong, Miss Trentworth. Nothing wrong at all.”

There followed a long silence as Theodore did his best to sort his thoughts, one after another, into some sort of coherent order. Miss Trentworth stayed silent, sitting

beside him but waiting for him to speak. The heirlooms had not always been in his family, as he had been told. It seemed that they had been purchased from another family, a family who might now want them back.

His breath hitched. “Could it be that someone from that family has now determined to take the heirlooms back?”

Miss Trentworth’s eyes widened. “That is a wise thought, Lord Albury and not one that I had fully considered. It could very well be so... but you would have to find out who it was that sold them in the first place.”

Theodore nodded. “I will speak to my mother,” he said, setting his other hand on top of their joined ones, a sense of determination now pushing aside his shock. “We are close to discovering the truth, Miss Trentworth, I am sure of it.”

She beamed at him then, her eyes suddenly alive with light and colour, her beauty astonishing him. “I am so very glad that you feel that way, Lord Albury, for it is in my heart also!”

Kiss her.

The voice in his head made him snatch in a breath and, rather than do as he had been told, Theodore released her hands and then got to his feet, pushing one hand through his hair. Wherever had such a thought come from? And why had it come upon him so swiftly and without explanation?

“I... I should take my leave.”

There was a tremor in Miss Trentworth’s voice and when he turned to look at her, there was only a small smile darting across her lips before fading again. His reaction had unsettled her but he dared not so much as step close to her again, nor could he

explain himself – not when he did not fully understand what was happening to him. “Thank you for coming, Miss Trentworth.” He managed a vague smile but then stepped back so she might make for the door. “You have taken something of a risk in coming to speak with me, I know, but it is appreciated.”

She only nodded and then, with a single glance at him, made for the door.

“You will tell me of what you discover at Hamilton and Sons, will you not?” An urgent desire to keep her close to him enveloped Theodore and he found himself calling after her, wanting her to stay even a few moments longer.

“Of course I shall.” Miss Trentworth gave him another look over her shoulder but her smile was no longer as vivid or as bright. “Thank you, Lord Albury.”

He opened his mouth to say something more but she was gone, the door now closing behind her. Dropping his chin to his chest, Theodore let out a low groan, frustrated not only with himself but with how the conversation had ended. Pursuing her after he had made it clear he thought she ought to take her leave must have been greatly confusing for the lady, though Theodore himself was also struggling with confusion. Ever since he had walked with her in the park, ever since he had begun to trust her words, something else had begun to develop in him. Something that he did not, as yet, want to let go of.

But to cling onto it would only make it grow, would it not? And if it did, then what was he to do with it?

“Now, remind me what it is we are to do.”

Joceline smiled at her friends. “Lady Amelia and Lady Rosalyn are to distract the staff whilst myself and Miss Sherwood go in search of their ledger. It is bound to have the names of those who have ordered from them within the last few months.”

“While I stand and keep watch in case you are in danger of being caught,” Lady Isobella said, as Joceline nodded. “I will come to warn you if that is to happen.”

A mixture of nervousness and anticipation rolled around in Joceline’s stomach. “Thank you, my friend. Now,” she said, looking around at the others. “Are we quite prepared?”

With a nod and a smile, each lady turned and walked into Hamilton and Sons, leaving Joceline to follow them. After her conversation with Lord Albury, Joceline felt the weight of responsibility on her shoulders all the more keenly. Evidently, he had thought of someone who might be responsible for this dreadful situation, and now, in looking at these names, Joceline might be able to assist him with it all. She did not know whether the ledger would detail what each person had ordered from Hamilton and Sons but, if it did, then she would not only have the name of the person who had purchased it but, most likely, be able to connect them in some way to Lady Albury.

“You have not spoken much about your conversation with Lord Albury.” As they stepped into the shop, Miss Sherwood caught Joceline’s attention. “It was three days ago now, was it not? And still, you have said very little.”

Joceline sent a sidelong glance towards her friend. “There was very little to tell you, aside from the fact that he did think that this would be very helpful. Once we have the names, it may be that he will recognize one who has been long connected to his family. We can proceed from there.”

“I am well aware of all of that,” Miss Sherwood answered, though her words were gentle rather than fierce. “What I mean to ask is whether you felt the visit... helpful for you .”

When Joceline frowned, Miss Sherwood let out a quiet laugh and put one hand to her forehead for a moment. “Goodness, I am not explaining myself well at all! You must forgive me, for I am trying to ask you something without speaking so directly that I embarrass either you or me!” She closed her eyes for a moment. “Joceline, what I am trying to say is that I have noticed an interest in Lord Albury that, to my mind, appears to go a little further than this hope of finding the necklace. When you danced with him, there was a smile on your face that I have never seen before and whenever you speak of him now, a pink comes into your cheeks, though I am not certain you are aware of it.”

Horried, Joceline pressed both hands to her cheeks. “Does it?”

Miss Sherwood chuckled. “My dear friend, you need not look so horried! To be drawn towards a gentleman is not something I will criticize, for it is quite natural a thing!”

“Drawn to him?” Joceline repeated, trying to make light of the conversation so she would not have to think about it with any real seriousness. “My dear Eugenia, I am not in the least bit captivated by him. My only hope in all of this is to free myself from these trappings by finding the necklace.”

“Even though Lord Albury no longer has any suspicions towards you?” her friend

asked, gently. “You could simply state that now you know he does not doubt you any longer, you are leaving the matter solely to him.”

That made Joceline’s stomach drop low. “You know I could do no such thing! I have given him my word and for my honor, I cannot step back from him now.” Nor do I want to.

“Tell me truthfully,” Miss Sherwood said, coming to stand directly in front of Joceline, her eyes a little narrowed. “Do you have any feelings towards Lord Albury? Do you have a flickering interest in him? Do you long to be close to him, to be in his company just as often as you can be?”

Joceline swallowed hard, not quite certain how to answer. Thus far, she had noticed her interest in the gentleman but she had also determined to set that aside, for the necklace was of the utmost importance. Though calling upon him when she had been without a chaperone had been a little daring, Joceline had chosen to do so regardless, thinking of the matter as urgent... and what had transpired was the awareness of her heart beginning to yearn for him. When his hand had touched hers, she had wanted to lean into him, had wanted to pull herself close but had refrained, both astonished and confused by the depth of feeling that presented itself to her. “It has all come upon me rather quickly,” she said eventually, seeing Miss Sherwood’s eyebrows rise. “I confess that I am surprised that you saw this before I was able to even fully consider it!”

Miss Sherwood smiled. “You are my friend. I can tell when there is something that has caught your interest.”

“And you think that Lord Albury has caught my interest?”

With a laugh, her friend nodded. “I think that he has! Though I do hope you will not shy away from it. Even if this necklace is never discovered, what you have found in

your heart for Lord Albury is of even greater importance, I think.”

Joceline had no time to respond, for there came a loud exclamation as Lady Amelia let out what Joceline knew was meant to be a cry of delight.

“Oh, good gracious! Is this not the most beautiful thing you have ever seen?”

Miss Sherwood tilted her head and Joceline, with a nod, followed after her. The two shopkeepers had made their way directly to Lady Amelia, perhaps concerned that something had upset her, which meant that Joceline and Miss Sherwood could now go and search for the ledger.

There was a desk to the front of the establishment though, Joceline noted, no ledger to be seen. Glancing around, she took in a door to her right, a door which was a little ajar and, after a glance to Miss Sherwood, and then to Lady Isobella who came to stand near the desk, Joceline pushed open the door and then stepped inside.

The room was small, with fabric draped on almost every surface. Large scissors were lying on a table at the back of the room and Joceline hurried towards it, with Miss Sherwood going to the other side. Lifting this and that, she looked for anything that might resemble a ledger but could see nothing.

“Joceline! Over here!”

Excitedly, Joceline rushed towards Miss Sherwood, who had picked up a small book from a shelf near to where she stood. “Have you found it?”

“I think so.” Opening it, Miss Sherwood began to run her finger down the list of names as Joceline came to stand as close as she could, craning her neck. No names stood out to her and, a little frustrated, Joceline turned the page.

“We have many months to look through,” Miss Sherwood murmured, sounding a little concerned. “I do not know if we will have enough time.”

“Let us do what we can,” Joceline answered, looking down the second page. “There must be something within the last few months that speaks of emeralds! Why do you not look in this column and I shall look here.” She gestured first to the column that listed the items ordered, and then to the names. “We shall find something. We must.”

Silence fell as both Joceline and Miss Sherwood looked through the ledger. At one point, Joceline moved them to the table she had been searching at the first to make things easier for them, but still they found no recognizable names.

And then, just as Joceline’s eye caught on something, Lady Isobella’s voice came from the door.

“They are returning to the desk. Hurry!”

Miss Sherwood made to close the ledger but Joceline prevented her, her finger now pointing at the name on one of the columns. Following it across to what had been ordered, her eyes flared wide, astonishment crashing into her chest. “There,” she breathed, as Miss Sherwood frowned. “There. A necklace.”

“But it does not say emeralds and besides which, that name is not one that Lord Albury gave us,” Miss Sherwood whispered, closing the ledger forcibly and then pulling it away from Joceline. “Come now. We must hurry!”

Before Joceline could protest, she was pulled back towards the door and in moments, found herself back beside Lady Isobella with Miss Sherwood beside her. The two shopkeepers smiled warmly as they drew near, clearly not suspecting that anything untoward had taken place.

Joceline barely noticed. The name she had read, the one emblazoned on the ledger, told her precisely who it was that had taken the necklace and yet, it was a name that she could hardly begin to believe. The other ladies laughed and spoke around her, the shopkeepers seeming delighted at whatever purchase Lady Amelia had chosen to make, but Joceline remained silent, staring blankly ahead as the name rose again and again in her mind.

It did not make sense... did it? Her chest grew tight as she began to put the different pieces together, a sudden, desperate urge to make her way to the library and to search until she discovered the truth.

“I – I must go.” Grabbing Miss Sherwood’s hand, she looked straight into her eyes. “I think I know who has done this, who has taken the necklace and sought to blame it on my family. But I must now go to the London Library and search until I can find an answer.”

Miss Sherwood’s eyes rounded. “You know? Are you sure?”

Joceline pressed her lips together but then nodded. “I am. Will you come with me?”

With a nod, her friend quickly murmured something to Lady Isobella before hurrying after Joceline. Together, they stepped out of the shop and hurried to Joceline’s waiting carriage, her heart thundering now with hope, fear, and expectation.

Might it be that she had discovered the answer to this mystery? And if it was who she suspected, then just what would Lord Albury say when she told him?

16

There she is.

“I can tell that you are looking directly at Miss Trentworth and, more than that, you are delighted by her arrival.”

Theodore tried to wipe the smile off his face but it seemed to stick tight, making Lord Castleton chuckle.

“I thought you suspected her!” he exclaimed, as Theodore winced. “I thought that you were quite sure she was involved! And now here we are, a fortnight later and your heart has utterly betrayed you.”

Deciding that it was of no merit to pretend, Theodore glanced at his friend, unwilling to take his gaze from Miss Trentworth. He could not lie to Lord Castleton, could not lie even to himself! Her arrival had made his heart leap up, his spirits lift in an instant and a broad smile to settle on his face.

He was delighted to see her.

“I think Miss Trentworth a very... interesting young lady.”

Lord Castleton rolled his eyes. “Is that all?”

No, it is not, Theodore thought silently, throwing a rueful grin at his friend. But I shall say nothing more than that.

“If you are interested in her, as you say, then why do you not ask to court her? I am sure that her father would be more than amenable.”

“I –” Theodore realized that he could not answer. There was no reason why he could not ask for such a thing, save for the fact that he could not be certain that Miss Trentworth would agree!

“I am sure that she would be delighted at such a request,” Lord Castleton stated, as though he had known exactly what Theodore had been thinking. “I see how her eyes search for you and I know how she will smile when your gazes finally meet.”

Theodore was about to tell his friend that he was imagining such a thing, only for the most beautiful smile to spread across Miss Trentworth’s face when she saw him. In response, Theodore found himself quite without words, able only to gaze back at her and admit silently that the only thing he wanted from this evening was to be in Miss Trentworth’s company. He heard and quickly ignored Lord Castleton’s clearing of his throat as well as the knowing smile that was shot in his direction when Miss Trentworth began to approach – all under the watchful eye of her mother.

“Lord Albury.” It sounded as though there was relief in Miss Trentworth’s voice, her hand reaching out to him only to then pull back. “It is good to see you this evening.”

“As it is to see you,” he answered, caring nothing for the fact that they had both quickly ignored Lord Castleton’s presence. “I do hope you are to dance this evening, for I should very much like to sign your dance card.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, of course. That is to say, while I should be glad to dance, I hope we might also be able to talk together for even a few minutes?”

Taking her dance card, Theodore nodded. “Of course.” He did not even hesitate, signing first the quadrille and then, the waltz. There was no need for him to deny

what he felt, not even to her. If there was a connection here, then would he not be wise to pursue it?

“I thank you.” Taking the dance card back, she moved a little closer and Theodore caught a gentle sweetness of orange and spice, making his senses spin as her emerald eyes looked into his. “It would be good to have that conversation as soon as possible, Lord Albury.”

A thrill shot through him. “You mean to say that you have discovered something? Already?”

She glanced at Lord Castleton, seemingly uneasy in his presence even though, previously, she had told him how much she trusted him. “I have. My friends and I were at Hamilton and Sons yesterday afternoon and I have spent both some of yesterday and the majority of my time today in the great London library.”

The way she spoke, the slight heaviness in her tone, and the darting gaze sent towards Lord Castleton told Theodore that there was something significant here. Something that she felt she could not say in front of anyone else. His stomach twisted and he nodded his understanding, seeing her eyes fasten to his.

“After the quadrille, mayhap I shall take a little longer to return you to your mother,” he suggested, knowing that he could not easily take her to one side and have a private conversation for fear of being seen and rumors then begun. “The quadrille is the second dance so it will not be too long.”

“Indeed.” She smiled briefly but no light came into her eyes. “Is your mother present this evening, Lord Albury?”

Theodore nodded, his jaw tightening instantaneously. “She is, though she is here with my aunt. Ever since the loss of the necklace – and my upset over it all – my mother

has been spending a good deal more time with her sister, though I think it may well be to avoid my anger and take some of her guilt from her.”

Miss Trentworth nodded, biting her lip gently as she looked all around her. Eventually, she returned her gaze to his. “After the quadrille,” she said, in a low voice. “Then I shall tell you all.”

Theodore watched as she walked away, his heart a mixture of confusion and longing. He wanted to be in her company for as long as he could but, at the same time, struggled to understand why she could not speak in front of Lord Castleton.

“I do hope she does not think that I am in any way involved!”

Hearing the slight affront in Lord Castleton’s voice, Theodore put one hand on his friend’s shoulder. “I am sure she does not – and I do not think so either. It seems to me as though she does not want to say a word about her suspicions – or what she has determined – to anyone but myself. And that, I think, is very wise indeed.”

Lord Castleton’s demeanor changed in an instant, his shoulders dropping and a small flicker of relief in his eyes. “You are right, that will be why she appeared so. Though you must now be desperate to know what it is she wants to say!”

“I am,” Theodore admitted, his gaze returning to the lady’s retreat though now, he could not find her. “She has helped me a great deal already, Castleton, and I confess to feeling a good deal ashamed of myself for having ever considered her involved in any way.”

Lord Castleton smiled back at him as Theodore dropped his hand to his side again. “You need not be so,” he said, with a grin. “It seems to me that your connection with Miss Trentworth would not have grown to such an extent if it had not been for your determination to think her guilty!”

Chuckling softly, Theodore shrugged. "I suppose that might be true," he admitted, with a small smile. "And when this reaches its conclusion, I shall be all the more determined to continue with our connection... in a manner a good deal more serious than ever before."

"You are a trifle distracted, I think." Theodore smiled as warmly as he could, seeing Miss Trentworth's eyes darting this way and that. "There is much you wish to say, mayhap."

She looked at him. "I do but I am, in truth, a little afraid of what you will think when I tell you."

"Afraid?" Theodore's eyebrows rose. "My dear Miss Trentworth, if you have anything to tell me as regards the theft of my necklace then I can assure you that I will have nothing but relief and gratitude."

She caught the edge of her lip in her teeth for a brief second, then nodded before the dance continued and took him from her for a time. Theodore's heart rose with gladness when she was back in his arms, happy now to have her so close to him again.

"There is something that I would like to tell you also," he found himself saying, aware now that what was in his heart was not going to easily fade. "Though mayhap that will need to come thereafter."

Her lips quirked briefly. "You may not wish to even see me again once I speak with you," she said, though the small smile grew sad. "You may turn your back on me entirely!"

"Never," he said, firmly, as the dance came to a close. "You may even tell me that my dearest friend, Lord Castleton, is the one who has taken the necklace and I shall

still stay close to you!”

Miss Trentworth smiled though it did not linger long. She dropped into a curtsy at the end of the dance, as he bowed, only to hurry forward and offer her his arm, which she took at once.

“Now,” he said, beginning to promenade around the room. “We do not have long but if required, we can find a quieter place to speak. Your friends will be able to join us, I am sure. That way, we shall be quite safe when it comes to propriety.”

She nodded, though when she spoke, her voice was so soft that Theodore could barely hear her. “I thank you, Lord Albury. My mother knows we are to take a short walk around the ballroom but we must not be too long.”

“Then tell me what it is that concerns you,” he said, as gently but as decisively as he could. “You have a lot weighing upon you and I want only to take some of that from you.”

She turned to him, their steps slowing and carefully, Theodore walked them both towards the side of the ballroom, where the shadows were heavier. “I went to Hamilton and Sons with the other bluestockings, as you know.” They came to a complete stop, her hand sliding from his arm as she closed her eyes for a moment, clearly trying to prepare herself for what she had to say next. Theodore’s heart pounded, a slight sheen of sweat on his forehead as he waited, not wanting to interrupt the silence but, at the same time, desperate to know what she had to tell him.

“Miss Sherwood and I found the ledger where Hamilton and Sons keep their records,” she continued, her eyes darting away from him again. “There were not any names there of the ladies that your mother considers as rivals.”

“Oh.” Theodore frowned, his shoulders dropping. “I had hoped you would find

someone there.”

“I – I did.” Miss Trentworth licked her lips. “Lord Albury, I... I found the name of your aunt.”

Every other sound in the ballroom faded in an instant.

“I read it three times to make sure I was correct,” she continued, her voice now seeming to come from very far away. “It said ‘Lady Yarmouth’ and beside it was an order for a necklace... though it did not say emeralds.”

Closing his eyes, Theodore dragged air into his tight lungs, letting it out again with a hiss.

“Of course, this does not mean that it is she who is responsible,” Miss Trentworth continued hastily, perhaps aware of the profound effect her words were having upon him. “I would never dream of suggesting that a mere name in a ledger means that she is responsible but...”

She trailed off, her eyes rounded as Theodore turned his full attention back to her, his eyes settling on hers. “But what, Miss Trentworth?” He heard the hardness of his tone, saw the way her already wide eyes flared again, and let out a slow breath. “I do not mean to appear harsh but this has come as a great shock.”

With a nod, she pressed her lips together again, dropped her head, and closed her eyes. “I went to the library and searched and searched until I found who the necklace belonged to originally,” she said, ever so quietly and without opening her eyes. “It took some time and a good deal of assistance from the other ladies but in the end, we were given the name.”

As she finished, her eyes opened again and she looked straight back at him, making

Theodore's breath hitch. He knew before she even spoke what name it was she was to give him but yet his mind refused to accept it. Surely it could not be?

"It once belonged to Lord Yarmouth," she said, the words like solid weights, flinging down one at a time into his mind. "It was sold when the family became impoverished. From what I have learned, it was not done willingly but only because they had no choice."

A groan broke from Theodore's lips without him having had any intention of making such a sound. He dropped his head into his hands, the palms of his hands pressing into his eyes. It all made sense now. She would have been able to replicate the necklace exactly, for she had seen it on many an occasion and, if she truly desired it for herself, would have been able to plan meticulously what was going to happen. She had known that it had once belonged to her husband's family and, for that reason, she desired it solely for herself.

I would never have known of all of this without Miss Trentworth.

"Miss Trentworth – Joceline." Lifting his head, he grasped her hand and pulled her close. "My dear lady, I see now that I would never have come to understand these things were it not for your determination and your intelligence."

Astonishment caused her mouth to form a perfect circle and Theodore's eyes were drawn to it, warmth curling in his stomach though the shock remained, buzzing all through him over and over and over again.

"It all makes sense," he said, gripping her hands tightly. "You have discovered the truth, I am sure of it. And now I must bring this situation to an end."

Her fingers curled around his. "You are going to speak to your aunt?"

He nodded. "Yes. Now."

Surprise shot through her expression but she did not question him.

"Though that shall not be the end of things between you and me," he said, fervently, aware now of just how close she was to him, how easy it would be to lower his head towards hers. "There is much still for me to say and I will say it, once I have spoken to my aunt."

"Of course." Her smile wobbled but Theodore could not linger, lifting her hand and pressing a kiss to it, he took just a moment to look into her eyes. There was so much warring within him, so much that he desired to do in this one moment and yet, he had to choose only one. Either he lingered here with Miss Trentworth and hoped he would be able to set aside what she had told him so that he might have the freedom to speak of his heart, or he waited until the first matter was concluded, so he would have freedom to speak to her honestly and without anything pulling him back.

It was a clear choice. He had to have the calmness and peace in his mind and heart when it came to her. It was the very least she deserved.

"I will return," he said, reluctantly releasing her hands. "And I will have confirmation that my aunt stole the necklace, I am quite determined."

"Very well," she said, taking a step away from him. "I hope that you will find all that you are looking for."

Still desiring to remain with her, Theodore forced his steps in the other direction. It was more than a little difficult to set his back on her but the moment he set his eyes to the crowd; a fierce, hot anger began to burn through him.

It was my very own aunt who took the necklace, he thought to himself, angrily. I

have spent days worrying, fretting that I will never be able to discover which person in London it is, only for the theft to come from within my own family!

“Albury.”

A hand caught his arm and he turned, his whole body tense with fury, only to look into his mother’s eyes.

“I am to take my leave,” she said, briskly. “My sister is to take me back in her carriage. I have decided –”

“Where is she?” Theodore saw the shock lurch into his mother’s expression, seeing the widening of her eyes, the pause that came as she tried to collect herself.

“She is gone to call the carriage,” came the eventual reply. “But why –”

“We will go together in the carriage,” he gritted out, beginning to stalk towards the door. And I will have the truth by the time we return home.

Despite his mother’s near constant questions, Theodore said nothing as he not only found his aunt but thereafter, climbed into her carriage. He saw how his mother and his aunt shared a look, but it was only when the carriage began to roll towards the house that he finally chose to speak. He had spent the last few minutes taking full control of his anger, determined that he would speak calmly and clearly to them both.

“Mother.” He looked at her first. “I have come to tell you that the necklace has been discovered.”

This made her snatch in her breath, though she did not smile nor did she question how he had found it. That in itself gave Theodore pause, but he had no time with which to stop and consider.

“Or, I should say, the thief has been discovered.” At this, he swung his gaze directly towards his aunt, seeing how her eyes rounded. Again, he fell silent, only for the quiet to be broken by a sharp, uncertain laugh.

“Good gracious, nephew! You cannot think that I am the one who has taken it?”

“Think?” Theodore shook his head. “No, I do not think, Aunt. I know for certain that it was you and might I suggest that you stop yourself from attempting to deny it? That would be rather tiresome and I have little time for that.”

Again, silence fell but this time, none seemed willing to break it. Lady Yarmouth looked down at her hands and, much to Theodore’s surprise, his mother too remained silent. The carriage rumbled on but Theodore pressed his lips together, hard, forcing himself to remain quiet.

Eventually – and much to Theodore’s relief – Lady Yarmouth let out an exclamation. “This is preposterous! You cannot truly believe –”

“I have told you already that you need not deny it,” Theodore interrupted, his anger beginning to build again. “Your name was written in the ledger for Hamilton and Sons, your order for a necklace placed there. You are the only one of my mother’s acquaintances who would have known the necklace in such detail, able to provide a clear description of what it looked like.” He clasped his hands together, gripping them tight. “Do not deny it.”

Lady Yarmouth drew herself up. “The heirlooms are mine. They belong to my husband’s family. How dare you keep them for yourselves?”

Lady Albury gasped, one hand flying to her mouth as she twisted around in her seat to look better at her sister.

“My husband’s great-grandfather sold them,” Lady Yarmouth continued, spiritedly. “Foolish man that he was. How do you think I felt seeing them adorning my sister’s neck and knowing that they ought to be mine?”

“Then you admit it,” Theodore said, as his mother let out a half sob, her hand dropping back to her lap. “You tried to steal the necklace.”

Lady Yarmouth snorted, showing no sign of upset. “I took back what belongs to me. That is all.”

“ You ?” Lady Albury’s voice was a hoarse whisper, staring back at her sister. “How could you do such a thing?”

With a small shrug, Lady Yarmouth gave her a cold smile. “Very easily indeed. Do you not recall?” She glanced back to Theodore. “I came to call on the night of Lady Melford’s soiree. It was a little unexpected and, truth be told, I had hoped to make the exchange then. But I could not. You, my dear sister, thought that you would go and find the heirlooms yourself and you brought them back to your bed chamber for your maid to place around your neck.”

Lady Albury snatched in another breath. “But you told me that you thought they looked a little crooked and offered to settle them on me properly.”

Another smile on his aunt’s face sent a shiver down Theodore’s spine. “I did. And it was easy enough to make sure that the clasp did not secure itself properly. Then all I had to do was wait... and pray that the maid I sent into the house would do as she was instructed.” Her smile grew. “It seems that she did.”

“You told her to place the fake necklace on Miss Trentworth’s bed,” Theodore growled, horrified by all he was hearing. “Why would you do such a thing?”

“Miss Trentworth?” Lady Yarmouth snorted. “No, indeed not. I told her to place it on Lady Melford’s bed, in the hope that it would shame the lady.” The cold smile returned. “I knew how much my sister despised her, wanting to prove herself better than she. Though my maid did not quite manage as she ought to have done.”

Theodore closed his eyes. “You tried to aid my mother whilst stealing the family heirlooms?”

“It was a small gesture, I admit, but I did not think ill of it.”

Theodore shook his head, glad that he had discovered the truth but horrified by just how much had been revealed. “It is despicable, Aunt.”

“Say what you wish, I do not care.”

You are just like my mother, Theodore thought silently, looking at them both. “Both of you are of the same ilk: determined to get whatever you want regardless of how you might go about it. Though in this case, you have both failed utterly.” Seeing Lady Yarmouth frown and his mother’s eyes widen, Theodore spread out his hands. “The heirlooms will be returned to me at this very moment and neither of you shall ever have your hands on them again.” Seeing his aunt about to protest, he held up one hand, silencing her. “And if you refuse, Lady Yarmouth, then I shall speak not only to your husband but to the entirety of the ton. Do you believe that society will look well upon you ever again?” He leaned forward. “Are they worth it?”

Lady Yarmouth’s eyes flashed with anger but she fell silent, folding her arms across her chest as Lady Albury let out a sob. Dropping her head, she put both hands to her face and, for a moment, a nudge of sympathy pushed into Theodore’s heart.

“I am sorry for my part in this, my son,” she said, her voice muffled as the carriage drove on. “I did not ever think that such a thing would happen.”

“It is at an end now, Mother,” Theodore answered, quietly, seeing the set in Lady Yarmouth’s jaw. Though something else, I hope, is only just beginning.

EPILOGUE

“Miss Trentworth!”

Joceline lifted her head sharply from her book, her heart stopping for a moment as she heard her name being called again. When her eyes caught sight of Lord Albury coming towards her through the gardens, she snatched in a breath, her eyes widening as she looked to see if her mother was accompanying him.

She was not.

“My dear Joceline.” The gentleman bowed low and then, as Joceline rose to her feet, caught her hands in his. “I came here to apologize. Your mother permitted me a few minutes to speak with you though she will join us soon.”

“Apologize?” Joceline repeated, a little breathless given his sudden arrival. “For what?”

“For missing our waltz,” he said, gently, a light in his eyes that she had never seen before. “I wanted to return to you, wanted to make certain that we danced together again but circumstances meant I could not. I could hardly bear the thought of you standing alone, waiting for my return.”

Joceline blushed, fully aware that she had been looking about the ballroom in the hope of seeing him coming to claim her for the dance. When he had not, she had told herself that it was perfectly understandable, though part of her had been afraid that what she had told him had been too great a shock.

“It is all over,” he told her, as she caught her breath, eyes flaring. “The necklace has been returned to me.”

“Then... then it was as I thought?” she said, as he nodded. “Good gracious! Little wonder that you did not manage to return to the ball!”

He chuckled, a sense of ease and happiness about him that, to Joceline’s mind, was entirely new. “It was quite an extraordinary evening!” Still holding her hands, he took a small step closer to her. “My aunt had taken the necklace. She had arranged it all, intending to exchange it so that both my mother and I would not notice.” His smile faded. “I am sorry that she tried to have you shamed for the theft. It was her maid who made the exchange, though she was meant to leave the paste necklace in your mother’s bed chamber. It was almost as though my aunt wished to please my mother by doing so, even though she was taking the heirloom from her!”

Joceline blinked quickly, a little overwhelmed by all she was hearing. “It must be rather difficult for you to accept all of this.”

“It has been but, in truth, not only am I relieved to have recovered the necklace, which is now safe and secure, but I have also seen that throughout this difficulty, I have found something I never once expected.”

Her head lifted just a little, her heart beginning to quicken at the warmth in his eyes.

“I do not know if this is something you will understand or even feel, but for myself, the connection between us is something that I have begun to delight in,” he said, an earnestness in his eyes which practically begged her to tell him the very same. “You are astonishing, Joceline. Your intelligence, your wit, your kindness and your complete inability to hold a grudge make me marvel. There is no other lady like you in all of England, I am sure, and I count myself fortunate to know you as I do.” Taking a breath, he set his shoulders. “That being said, I should like to know you all

the better, Joceline. There is so much for me to learn about you, so much that I should like us to share, and, with that being said, I wonder if you would consider accepting my courtship.”

Joceline’s mouth fell open though she snapped it closed just as quickly. Her heart squeezed with happiness, a lightness in her spirit which she had never truly felt before.

“You do not have to accept me,” he added as if her brief silence was enough to make him afraid of her refusal. “I share with you only what I feel, for my heart is beginning to fill with a deep affection for you but I understand completely if you do not feel the same way. There is no demand or expectation, only –”

“You think you are falling in love with me?” Joceline exclaimed, a fresh happiness pouring into her as he nodded slowly. “Truly?”

The edges of his mouth began to tilt upwards. “If that is what you wish to call it, then yes. I believe that is so.”

Joceline did not wait. Pulling her hands out of his, she flung her arms about his neck, bold as ever in her actions. It took him a moment but then his arms came tightly about her waist, finally enveloping her in his arms. Their connection had been of a strange sort, Joceline had to admit, and she felt just as he did – as though there was a great deal more for her to discover about him.

“I presume that you are willing to accept me, then?”

Laughing softly, Joceline pulled back gently and looked up into his eyes. “It is as though you have spoken of my heart, Albury,” she said, softly. “It came upon me most unexpectedly but I cannot turn away from it.” Lifting her hand, she brushed it gently down the side of his cheek, seeing the flush that rose there. “And I do not want

to.”

Relief came out in a sigh as he smiled and, after only a moment’s hesitation, brought his lips to hers. Joceline leaned into the kiss, overwhelmed with delight and sheer joy at all that had come to be. The necklace had been recovered, her innocence proved and, with that, had come the beginnings of what she was sure would grow into a fierce and determined love.

I am glad they saw their way to fall in love!

Read ahead for a sneak peek of the first book in the Landon House series, *Mistaken for a Rake* . One of my favorite books!

1

“Do hurry up, Rebecca! The carriage has been waiting for some minutes and you are, again, tardy.”

Rebecca bit her lip and forced herself not to retort words she would later regret back to her father. She would have liked to have told him the reason she was a little later than he expected was that she had spent some time sorting out a strong disagreement between her twin sisters, Anna and Selina. That had been a very lengthy discussion, and thus, she had been left with very little time of her own to prepare for this afternoon's outing.

“The carriage, the carriage!” the Duke said, ushering her in. “Your sisters are waiting!”

Smoothing her skirts as she sat, Rebecca looked at her sisters enquiringly, seeing the blush on both of their faces. They knew full well that the duke had been irritated with her when the fault was entirely their own. Of course, neither of them confessed, given that their father was already irritated and they did not want to incur his wrath. A little frustrated, Rebecca turned her eyes to the window, hearing her father give instructions to the driver before he climbed into the carriage. She took a breath, letting it out slowly, dampening down her frustration.

“Now that we are quite ready,” the Duke said, the door closed behind him, “perhaps we can finally be on our way to Madame Bernadotte.” He sighed heavily. “You will have to be much more punctual from now on, Rebecca. From what I recall of London society, it is not at all acceptable to be late to soirees and dinner parties.”

“Yes, Father,” Rebecca replied monotonously. There was no excitement within her at the prospect of being a part of London society. Instead, there was the heavy burden of knowing that, most likely, she would have to guide her younger sisters through London in the hope that they would find suitable matches, for her father certainly would not do so. These last few years, her father had become more and more detached from his children, and Rebecca had been the one to step in where her father had failed.

Nothing would change now that they were in London, she was sure of it. He would expect her to do as she had always done. What hope did she have of finding a husband for herself when she had the responsibility of her twin sisters? It was just as well that the younger three remained at the estate in the care of their governess, else Rebecca did not know how she would have managed even to step outside the house!

“Rebecca?”

Turning her attention back to her father, Rebecca tried to smile. “Yes, Father?”

“Make sure that your sisters find what they require,” he said vaguely. “I have no notion of fashion plates and the like. They will be guided by you.”

Sighing inwardly and wishing that she knew what the fashion was to be this Season, she gave her father a brief nod and then returned her gaze to the window. This was going to be a very difficult Season indeed.

“Oh, I beg your pardon!”

Rebecca stumbled back, heat pouring into her cheeks as she realized that she had practically walked into another lady of the ton without realizing it. “Are you quite all right?”

The lady laughed and put one hand out towards Rebecca. “You need not worry, my dear,” she said kindly, her blue eyes sparkling. “Are you going to Madame Bernadotte’s?” She gestured to the establishment just ahead of Rebecca, her smile warm and friendly.

“Yes, yes, I am,” Rebecca replied, still a little embarrassed. “My father...” She closed her eyes, then opened them, taking in a deep breath. “Forgive me.” Dropping into a quick curtsy, she smiled back at the older lady. “If you would permit me to introduce myself, I am Lady Rebecca. My father is the Duke of Landon. He is presently inside with my two sisters, Lady Anna and Lady Selina.”

“I see,” the lady replied. “Then I do not think we should keep a duke waiting, Lady Rebecca. Shall we?”

A little surprised by the lady’s forwardness, Rebecca nodded and turned towards the door, all the more astonished when the lady followed after her.

“My son, it seems, has purchased me a pair of most expensive gloves,” the lady continued with a wry smile. “He and I have come to London to speak to my late husband’s solicitors about a few affairs. I think this gift is to encourage me to remain in London a little longer!”

Rebecca turned her head, lowering her voice as they walked inside. “I am sorry to hear of your husband’s passing.”

The lady smiled sadly, her expression now a little morose. “It was some years ago, Lady Rebecca, but I miss him still.” She sighed softly, then gave herself a small shake. “But my son, the new Lord Hayward, has done very well in taking things on at the estate.”

“I am glad to hear it,” Rebecca replied, still feeling a trifle uncomfortable about the

amount the lady was sharing when they had not been formally introduced. “I should go in search of my sisters now.”

The lady’s expression brightened. “But of course. Are you to have new gowns from Madame Bernadotte?”

Without meaning to, Rebecca allowed a heavy sigh to escape her, which, seeing the astonished look on Lady Hayward’s face, only made a blush color her cheeks.

“Forgive me,” she stammered, aware of her father’s rumbling tones coming closer to her. “I did not mean to make any expression of complaint, Lady Hayward. It is only that, given that my mother is no longer with us, I have been given the responsibility of ensuring that my sisters and I are dressed appropriately. If I am truthful, I do not know precisely what would be best.” She shrugged, heat still pouring into her face. “We have never been to London, and I do not know much about society.” Quite why she was expressing this much to a lady she had never met before in her life, Rebecca could not explain, but there was something in the lady’s expression that was so welcoming and encouraging that she felt as though she could tell her anything.

Lady Hayward tilted her head, her eyes considering. “I would be happy to assist you in this, Lady Rebecca,” she said slowly. “I am aware that we have only just met, but if you have no other friends within London as yet to aid you, then I would be glad to offer my assistance.”

“Assistance?”

Rebecca closed her eyes briefly, hearing the note of confusion in her father’s voice.

“Father,” she said quickly, turning to face the duke and seeing how his green eyes—so akin to her own—were watching Lady Hayward with something like suspicion. “This is Lady Hayward. She and I were quickly introduced as we came

into this establishment. She is, very kindly, offering to do what she can to ensure that my sisters and I choose gowns of the highest fashion.” Smiling quickly, she gestured to Lady Hayward. “Lady Hayward, forgive my improper manner. I should have introduced you properly.” Praying that the lady did not think her entirely unsuitable for being anywhere near London, she tried again. “Might I present my father, the Duke of Landon.”

Lady Hayward curtsied quickly, although she did not show any sign of awe or astonishment at being in the presence of a duke, as Rebecca had seen so many visitors do when they had come to the estate. “Good afternoon, Your Grace. I am very glad to meet you. As Lady Rebecca had just informed you, I would be glad to assist her with the ordering of suitable gowns for this Season.” She smiled, and Rebecca saw the way the frown began to lift from her father’s face. “In truth, it can be quite a burdensome task!”

Rebecca held her breath for a few moments, looking towards her father and entirely uncertain as to what his reaction might be. She prayed that he would be willing to permit Lady Hayward to do as she had offered for, whilst Rebecca had only just met the lady, she was certain that any assistance she could receive at this present juncture would be most appreciated.

The duke harrumphed for a moment, his gaze turning towards Rebecca, who continued to watch him hopefully.

“Very well,” he said, speaking slowly as though he was not quite certain that such a thing was appropriate, his brow furrowing as he looked back towards Lady Hayward. “But only if it does not delay you, Lady Hayward.”

Lady Hayward laughed and shook her head. “No, it does not,” she replied with a smile. “In truth, I would be glad for the distraction! I have very little else to occupy me at present.” Turning her head, she smiled at Rebecca, who, with relief, smiled

back. “Might you introduce me to your sisters, Lady Rebecca? I should be glad to meet them.”

“But of course,” Rebecca said quickly, putting one hand on her father’s arm. “Father, if you wish to wait, then might I suggest?—”

“I would be glad to chaperone your daughters, Your Grace, if that would be of assistance.”

Rebecca stared at Lady Hayward as she not only interrupted Rebecca but spoke with such a boldness that Rebecca herself was caught by surprise.

“As I have said, I have nothing else to occupy me at present and choosing gowns can take many hours,” Lady Hayward continued, her eyes dancing as the duke’s frown deepened at the obvious displeasure that came with knowing he would be forced to remain at Madame Bernadotte’s for some time. “My carriage is only just outside, and I would be glad to return them to the house when we are finished here.”

“How very good of you, Lady Hayward,” the duke said, inclining his head just a little. “I confess that I am somewhat out of my depth when it comes to what my daughters require.” His eyes studied the lady for a few seconds before he nodded. “It would be a great help to me if you would do as you have suggested, Lady Hayward. That would mean that I could continue with particular matters of business that require my attention.” A slight narrowing of his eyes betrayed his flickering uncertainty. “But are you quite certain that you have nothing else to occupy you this afternoon? I should not like to take advantage.”

Rebecca feared that Lady Hayward would take offense at this clear disbelief, for it was more than apparent that the Duke was not at all certain that Lady Hayward spoke the truth, but much to her relief, the lady in question did not appear at all perturbed.

“Your Grace, as I was telling your daughter only a few minutes before, my son, Lord Hayward, has purchased me a pair of gloves from Madame Bernadotte’s, which I am now to collect. Thereafter, I have nothing at all to engage me for, like you, my son has matters of business to attend to.”

“And you have no daughters?”

“I do,” Lady Hayward replied, her expression gentling as she thought of the young lady, “but she is not yet out and remains at the estate. I am here in London with my eldest son in the hope of resolving a few matters of business. I will return home soon, of course, but not before such things are settled.”

Hearing the two voices of her sisters echoing through the establishment, Rebecca turned a pleading gaze towards her father. “Might I take Lady Hayward to my sisters, Father?” she asked, but the Duke did not so much as glance at her. Rather, he fixed his gaze upon Lady Hayward, his eyes thoughtful as a look of interest drew into his expression.

“You are very kind to offer such a thing, Lady Hayward,” he said slowly, choosing each word with care. “I would be in your debt, should you be willing to bring my daughters home once their gowns have been ordered. However, I wonder if I might, thereafter, ask if you would be willing to speak with me at greater length once you have returned them to the house.” He looked at the lady steadily, and a swirl of anxiety swept through Rebecca’s frame. What was it her father was doing? And what was it he wanted? She could not imagine what he intended to say to Lady Hayward, and, from the way the smile was beginning to fade from Lady Hayward’s expression, it seemed that she could not either.

“If you wish it, Your Grace,” Lady Hayward replied, a line forming between her brows as she watched the Duke, seemingly intent on deriving his wishes a little better by studying him. “I will, of course, do as you ask.”

The Duke smiled suddenly, a light coming into his eyes that had not been there before. It was as though Lady Hayward's agreement had brought a sense of delight to him, although still, Rebecca did not know what to make of it all.

"Excellent, excellent!" the duke exclaimed before turning back to Rebecca, one hand on her shoulder. "Now, Rebecca, you shall make certain that your sisters behave with all propriety. They must make an excellent impression here in London, even within the dressmaker's!"

"Yes, Father," Rebecca murmured, her gaze sliding towards Lady Hayward, who was, she noted, watching the Duke with interest. "I will, of course, do as you ask."

"Wonderful," the Duke replied, seemingly now very relieved that he would be freed of the burden of his daughters. "I shall return to the townhouse, then. Make certain to do all that Lady Hayward asks and listen to her advice." His hand lifted from her shoulder, but the familiar weight of responsibility immediately came. "And, of course, there is no need to concern yourself with the cost of such gowns, Rebecca. Choose whatever you wish and whatever is needed and have the bill sent directly."

"Yes, Father," Rebecca murmured, dropping her head as warmth entered her cheeks. She wished he would not speak of his wealth in such terms, not when Lady Hayward was present. It was, she considered, a little uncouth and ill-considered but, given that her father was not likely to listen to any word she had to say on the matter, Rebecca remained entirely silent.

"Capital!" the Duke boomed before bidding a quick farewell to both Rebecca and Lady Hayward and then making his way to the door. A tight band released itself slowly from Rebecca's chest as she heard the bell tinkle above the door of the shop, signaling that her father had left. A small sigh left her lips as she looked at Lady Hayward, who was watching her with a good deal of curiosity.

“I should introduce you to my sisters at once,” Rebecca found herself saying, a little unnerved by the watchfulness in the lady’s expression. “I?—”

“You are often given responsibility for your sisters, I think,” Lady Hayward said quietly. “Is that not so, Lady Rebecca?”

“It is, yes,” Rebecca agreed, choosing not to hold back the truth from Lady Hayward. “My mother passed away when my youngest sister was only a babe. Since then, I have been given much of the responsibility of raising them and guiding them, although, of course, we have had governesses and the like.” She tried to smile but found she could not, feeling as though she was unburdening her very soul for what would be the first time. “The three youngest are still at my father’s estate, and, whilst I believe my father expects me to make a match this Season, I confess that I am not at all hopeful.”

“Because you must seek out what is best for your sisters,” Lady Hayward replied, clearly understanding everything Rebecca was saying without her having to express it directly. “Well, Lady Rebecca, mayhap that might change somewhat. Perhaps there is more I can do to aid you in this so that you have the opportunity yourself to find a suitable husband.”

Rebecca’s mouth lifted into a small, sad smile. “You are very kind, Lady Hayward,” she said quietly, feeling as though she had known the lady for a good deal longer than only a few short minutes. “I will gladly welcome whatever it is you wish to offer.”

Lady Haywood laughed softly, then gestured to someone or something over Rebecca’s shoulder. “Perhaps we should start with the introduction of your sisters,” she said as Rebecca turned around to see her sister, Lady Anna, standing only a short distance away, with something in her hands. “And then we must speak to Madame Bernadotte herself, to see what she requires of you all. No doubt, there will be measurements taken before we even consider what colors would best suit.”

Rebecca felt the heavy burden of responsibility lift just a little as she turned around to lead Lady Hayward towards her sisters. This afternoon, at least, she would not be solely responsible for the gowns her sisters chose, the gowns that they would wear into society. She had Lady Hayward's experience and understanding now, even though they were only very briefly acquainted. For whatever reason, Rebecca felt as though she had found a caring and concerned individual whose eagerness to help came from a place of true kindness, and for that, she found herself increasingly grateful.

"Anna," she said, seeing her other sister standing a short distance away. "And Selina, might you join us for a moment?" Waiting until both had joined them, Rebecca turned to Lady Hayward. "Lady Hayward, might I present my two sisters." She gestured to the first. "This is Lady Anna, and next to her, Lady Selina."

Lady Hayward curtsied. "I am glad to make your acquaintance."

"And this is Lady Hayward," Rebecca told her sisters, who were both looking at her with a mixture of confusion and interest. "Father has returned to the townhouse and has left Lady Hayward to assist us in choosing our gowns. We will return with her once we are finished here."

Her sisters' eyes widened in evident surprise, but Anna was the first one to speak, excited tones pouring from her mouth as she engaged Lady Hayward in conversation almost at once. She spoke about colors and gloves and ribbons, begging Lady Hayward to join her so that she might show her what she had been considering. Rebecca smiled to herself, thinking that it was very much like Anna to be so eager, whilst Selina, as she expected, stayed back just a little, watching carefully but having none of the enthusiasm of her twin sister.

"You have only just met Lady Hayward, then?" Lady Selina asked as Rebecca nodded. "And Father is quite contented to allow her to help us?"

“More than willing, I should say,” Rebecca replied with a sudden smile. “In fact, I do not think he was hesitant for barely a moment! The opportunity to return to the townhouse and to remove himself from supervising the choosing of gowns was one he could not simply ignore.” She chuckled, and, finally, Lady Selina smiled. “I think we may have found an ally in Lady Hayward, Selina.” A jolt of happiness ran through her frame, and Rebecca allowed herself to sigh with contentment. “Perhaps this Season will not be as difficult as I feared after all.”

“I do hope there will be no tardiness this evening!”

Rebecca sat up straight in her chair as her father came striding into the room, only to stop dead as he caught sight of not one but three of his daughters sitting quietly together, waiting for him to join them. He cleared his throat and nodded at them, muttering something under his breath that Rebecca could not quite make out.

Rebecca felt delighted with his reaction, but, of course, hid it well. It would not do to have her father irritated just before they left the house for what would be their very first foray into society.

“Now that you have been presented,” the Duke said, coming to stand in front of the small fire that burned in the grate, keeping the evening’s chill away from the large room, “it is time to enter society. You are, however, to be on your guard.”

Rebecca frowned. “If you are to suggest, Father, that we do not know what is expected of us in terms of behavior, then?—”

“That is not at all what I am suggesting, Rebecca, and kindly do not interrupt,” the duke said firmly, his eyes fixing to hers as she quelled her frustration. “I am well aware that my daughters know what is proper and what is improper. I fully expect this evening to go very well, indeed. What I am to say, however, is that you all must be careful of those you are introduced to. Some will be eager for your acquaintance, of course, which will be rather flattering.” His lips thinned, giving Rebecca the impression that he had been through an experience that had not pleased him. “It will

be a matter of wisdom and consideration to know whether such people are eager for your acquaintance out of an eagerness to become known to you, or if they seek it out for their own gain.”

Rebecca’s heart began to grow heavy. She had been looking forward to this evening, especially with the promise of Lady Hayward being present also. The purchasing of their gowns had gone very well indeed and, whilst Rebecca did not know what Lady Hayward and her father had discussed thereafter, she felt quite certain that the duke would be very contented indeed with their acquaintance continuing. Now, however, she feared that her father would expect her to ensure that her sisters were acquainted only with those that were of excellent character and had no underlying motives—although quite how she was meant to decipher such a thing, Rebecca had very little idea.

“Therefore, you must be on your guard,” the duke said firmly. “If, for any reason, a gentleman is eager to further his acquaintance with you, you shall give his name to me, and I shall do some investigation into his situation before any further interaction takes place.”

“Yes, Father,” the three young ladies murmured together, with Rebecca’s heart sinking all the lower. She would never be able to find a suitable match, not when her father’s demands were so stringent. What if she found someone she considered appropriate, only for her father to refuse on some small matter? She knew that the duke expected his daughters to marry well, to gentlemen of excellent title, of good family, and of substantial wealth. Now, it seemed, she had to find such a gentleman but would also be required to ensure that his character was without fault and his motivations quite pure. It felt like a near-impossible task.

The duke cleared his throat, his hands still clasped tightly behind his back, and Rebecca forced herself to give him her full attention and did not linger on any further thoughts at present.

“There is another matter that I wish to inform you of,” the duke continued as Rebecca let out a long, slow breath, a little frustrated that there appeared to be even more the duke required of them. “It is to do with Lady Hayward.”

Rebecca’s heart dropped to the floor. No doubt, then, the duke had found something disparaging about the lady and had decided that she was not a suitable acquaintance for his daughters. Perhaps that was what had been discussed yesterday afternoon when they had returned from Madame Bernadotte’s. Perhaps Lady Hayward had been thanked by the duke but asked to remove herself from their acquaintance. It was quite feasible, given all that the duke expected, and yet Rebecca felt sorrowful, having thought very highly of Lady Hayward.

“As you know, Lady Hayward is a kind and willing lady who has very little to occupy her at present,” the duke began, his voice rolling through the room. “I was grateful to her for her assistance yesterday, and I am sure that, given how highly you all spoke of her, you were grateful for her company also.”

“We were, Father,” Lady Anna replied quietly. “I believe we all thought very highly of her.”

“Good.” The duke paused for a moment and, much to Rebecca’s astonishment, began to smile. What was it he was going to reveal? She was no longer as certain as she had been about her father’s intentions, praying that he would not ask them to separate from the lady entirely.

“Lady Hayward has a son. Three, in fact,” the duke continued, now looking pleased with himself. “There are a few issues concerning the late Lord Hayward’s will, and, in addition, I believe the new Lord Hayward is struggling just a little with all that has been placed upon his shoulders.” He shrugged. “It is understandable when one takes the title to be a little overwhelmed, but there are certain matters that make things a good deal more difficult for Lord Hayward. Therefore, having discussed the matter at length with Lady Hayward, she and I have come to a mutually agreed arrangement.”

A flurry of either fear or excitement—for Rebecca could not tell which—ran down her spine as she listened intently, wondering what it could be that had been agreed upon. It was not like her father to go about such things in this way, for he did not like to ask anyone for their help or assistance in anything, being quite determined to do it without interference. And yet, in this case, it appeared as though this was precisely what he had done.

“I have no interest in attending balls, in encouraging matches and in chaperoning waltzes and the like,” the duke said with a wave of his hand and a sigh of exasperation. “Lady Hayward has no real interest in business matters, although, of course, she wishes to aid her son in any way she can. Therefore, we have both agreed to be of assistance to the other.”

Silence filled the room for a few minutes as the three ladies looked at their father expectantly, clearly ready for him to say more, but it seemed as though the duke was finished with his explanations. With a shrug, he turned and gestured to the door. “Let us hurry now. She will be waiting.”

Rebecca did not move from her chair. “What do you mean, Father?” she asked as Lady Anna and Lady Selina watched the duke with curiosity. “Lady Hayward is to assist you? In what way?”

“By chaperoning you, of course,” he said, a slight flicker crossing his brow as though he had expected them all to understand what he meant without difficulty. “She will do what I do not wish to and will guide you through society and make certain that any gentlemen who wish to acquaint themselves a little more with you are entirely suitable.”

What a gift for Lady Rebecca! She now has the lovely Lady Hayward to assist her with her debut into the ton and help her find a husband. To find out what happens next, please check out *Mistaken for a Rake* on the Kindle store! *Mistaken for a Rake*