



The Gentlewoman Author

(Gentlewoman #3)

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Category: Historical

Description: Which freedoms is a widow permitted in the year 1755? Might she write or even publish a somewhat scandalous romance? Or fall in love with a younger man? Mary Allen is about to find out.

Due to a misunderstanding, Mary publishes a novel, an action she considers highly improper. Behind a weak pseudonym, she frets over the undiscovered fact that she is an author. When she learns that her brother is forcing his young daughter, Louisa, into an arranged marriage, she recognizes the opportunity as an escape for them both. Mary sweeps her niece off to Bath where she intends to stay away from the lure of her pen and to help Louisa find a love match.

Once in Bath, Mary meets handsome, responsible, and well-heeled Daniel Fletcher, the embodiment of male perfection. She interferes to ensure he and Louisa form an attachment. As affection grows between Louisa and Daniel, she realizes her mistake. Mary wants Daniel for herself.

Chatter about Mary's book abounds in Bath. Some of its more inflammatory themes persuade a couple of young people to embark on an elopement. Daniel accompanies Mary in a quest to intercede before all is lost. On the journey, Mary grapples with her identity as a well-behaved gentlewoman. Is she brave enough to choose love over propriety?

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Chapter One

A soft click behind Rosamond startled her. Turning, she beheld Baron Heifleton wearing only shirtsleeves, unbuttoned, opened to his firmly contoured chest. She gasped, dropped her brush, hands fumbling to close her dressing gown. “My lord, we cannot...”

Candlelight flickered over the words, adding requisite heat to the story. The quill, pressed urgently between Mary Allen’s fingers, flew across the paper.

“Mrs. Allen, the—” A servant’s voice broke the silence of the room.

Mary swallowed her irritation. The pinnacle moment of the romance held vivid in her mind, so clear she was practically in the room with Rosamond and Heifleton. Any interruption and she would have to find her muse later. “No, no. Just a moment.”

She plunged the nib into ink and scribbled on until the scene disappeared from her mind and reemerged in written form. As her characters grew closer, in every sense, Mary felt a familiar yearning in her own heart. To be loved and cherished again—it was a foolish dream. But in fiction, in her stories, anything was possible.

She relished the shush of sand falling onto the completed page, drying the ink, signaling the end of the day’s work and of a rather long novel, which she would tie together and place in the trunk with the others.

“There.” Her neck tingled and ached. She sat back and rotated her head, then looked around. How long had that scene taken? Possibly hours had passed since the maid’s

intrusion. She rang the bell. When her servant appeared, she said, “Open the curtains, Nellie. Bring me tea and something with a lot of sugar.”

At the swish of the drawn window, afternoon sun illuminated the room and stabbed Mary’s eyes. She rubbed them, stretched, and organized her writing implements. Even if it were only for herself, the generous stack of ink-covered sheets brought a comfortable expanse to her chest. The feeling was as much relief as joy, for the stories plagued her until she released them. Yet, Mary had no intention of letting anyone read them. Perhaps after she died, her great nieces and nephews would find her love stories bound together in a trunk and wonder about their aunt. Let them make their conjectures—so long as she was not alive to witness their inevitable dismay. Female authors of romances were not respectable, and society often mocked, ridiculed, and shunned them. Mary would not suffer that humiliation.

“Quite a bundle from the estate.” Nellie dropped a package in front of Mary. “Heavy, too. I’ll be back with your tea.” Mary’s late husband had left her with an estate in Ireland, but it had never felt like home. Living there had been her late husband Lord Allen’s dream, not hers, and she’d not visited in nearly two years.

Mary cut the twine and pulled out the first letter. It was from the housekeeper, apologizing for the delayed mail. While cleaning the butler’s pantry, she had found a pile of letters stashed on a shelf.

Penned in a sharp, slanted hand, the return address on the second letter read: Golden Buck Publishing , Fleet Street, London.

Her heart dove into the depths of her stomach, and hot pricks of sweat erupted on her face. She fanned herself with the sealed letter, which must be a response to a long-forgotten accident. Two years past, while still in Ireland, she finished writing a novel, and to express her exuberance at the accomplishment, she pretended that publication was a possibility—was even something she wanted. She had tied the manuscript in

twine and addressed it to the Golden Buck. The preparation, however false, felt like an exclamation mark to her secret accomplishment.

Shortly thereafter, she left Ireland for Cornwall at the bequest of an old friend, Agnes, who begged Mary's aid in a match-making scheme involving Agnes's son and Mary's niece. It had ended well, but afterward, she could not bear to leave her sister Charlotte or the home of her youth. Instead of returning to her Ireland property, she used the income from the estate to rent a cottage near her sister. Mary sent word to Nellie, charging her with packing the estate and preparing it for a tenant. When Nellie beheld the manuscript on Mary's desk, tied and addressed as it was, she'd assumed her mistress intended the bundle for the post, so off it went.

For a full eight months after learning this, Mary's stomach churned anytime she thought of having her words read by another. And that was one person. Imagine if the whole world had access to the book, to wonder about the author, to speculate upon whatever experiences influenced her writing—the humiliation could not to be borne. Over the course of time and after prolonged silence from the publisher, she was comforted, knowing it an impossibility that her silly manuscript would ever manifest as printed words. Yet, here lay the answer to that prospect. It would change her—either nurture her pride with acceptance or quash her confidence with rejection. Some things were better left unknown. She held it to the still-lit candle until the edge fluttered into flame.

But it would not stand. She had to know.

She yanked it away, smothered the fire with an ink blotter, cracked the seal, and read.

25 April 1754

Dear Lady Mary,

With great pleasure we accept the submission of your manuscript, *A Woman Who Loves...*

Her heart pounded in slow notes of victory. They liked it! They wanted it. She could be an author. The paper quivered, making it impossible to read. No amount of blinking cleared the blur from her eyes, so she placed the page on her desk and found focus on the sharp discomfort of fingernails cutting into her palms. She read on.

Our apologies for allowing your manuscript to go unread for so many months. We anxiously await your response...

They would be waiting forever. She would never consent to publication. Though she loved that her words were deemed good enough to be bound between canvas and leather, the fear of being known as an author was too great. She would tuck this letter of acceptance into the trunk with her other manuscripts for the next generation to discover upon her death.

...but proceed, with many thanks for your preexisting approval and under the conviction that this provocative novel will be the talk of the country. Even now, our typesetter is fast at work preparing the press. Your romance is set for publication on June 18...

Heavy pressure forced her to swallow her breath, as if a building had toppled over her. This must be what it felt like to die. Mary grasped the locket containing her late husband's portrait, closed her eyes, and waited for the pain to ease and the tremor in her limbs to subside. Holding the talisman did not have its usual calming effect. Preexisting approval? Publication in June? That was nearly a year ago. How, how, how could this have happened?

"Nellie!" She sprang from her chair and yanked the bell pull repeatedly, calling her lady's maid, the person responsible for this...this...what was it? A disaster, or a gift?

Nellie burst into the room. “Are you hurt?” Her pink face gleamed with a sheen of sweat.

Wait! There could be no confrontation with Nellie. No one could ever know, except perhaps Charlotte. Mary tossed the letter onto the desk, blocking it from view. Her legs were jelly and would not hold her. She clutched the chair and tried to inhale. “I am fine.” She attempted a laugh. “I am simply desperate for tea.” She was as breathless as Nellie, and the room was spinning. This fantasy, this dream of being published, had become a nightmarish, haunting fact. She, alongside every other writer of her sex, was available for public censure. She would be scorned.

“You look peaked.” Nellie took a step toward Mary.

“No!”

Nellie froze. “You’re certain you don’t need a doctor?”

“Please get the tea.”

When the maid disappeared out the door, Mary collapsed into the chair and wrapped a shawl around her shoulders, trying to force the fabric to generate comfort. Publishing a novel, a love story no less, was not what a lady would do. The vulgarity! And especially for the respectable widow of a lord. She found consolation in the fact that no one remembered her brief years as Lady Mary Allen.

The book, her book, already circulated. Among the many letters the package still contained was a book-sized item wrapped in brown paper. Heat crawled up her spine, and the tiny hairs on her arms stood in curious attention. She reached in, took a corner of paper, and pulled a long strip. Pink canvas peeked out at her. Paper razored over her skin as she slid both hands into the opening and drew the wrapping away. In gold lettering, the words *A Woman Who Loves* by Lady Mary glinted in a ray of sunshine.

She picked up the book and pressed it to her chest.

What was she to do?

Over the course of a few weeks, when no one mentioned *A Woman Who Loves*, Mary began to feel comfortable again. The distance from London made it unlikely for the book to appear on shelves in Cornwall, so she went about her life with increasing confidence that her secret was safe.

She pinned a grey-trimmed bergère hat to her head. “You have done it again, Miss Taylor.” It was a masterpiece, just as Mary had imagined it would be.

The milliner made an adjustment and added a pin. “It is odd, but while trimming this confection, I could not but think of a book I just finished. The protagonist wears a very similar hat.”

Mary’s breath caught, dragging the air from her lungs. She knew the hat, had invented that hat, had described every detail in her book and then to Miss Taylor when placing the order. She pushed on her stomach, trying to draw air. “Of what book do you speak?” her voice squeaked.

“*A Woman Who Loves*. It’s the novel everyone is reading. If you like, I will lend you my copy but not to keep. It’s a favorite.” She squeezed Mary’s shoulder. “You look lovely.”

Mary pulled away, unpinned the hat, and returned it to Miss Taylor for boxing. She gathered her things, took the hatbox from the milliner, and headed for the door. Halfway out, she remembered to thank Miss Taylor. Turning around, she found the milliner with her arm outstretched as if to stop her.

“If you wait a moment, I will fetch the book.”

“Thank you, dear, but I fear we have very different tastes in literature.”

She closed the door on Miss Taylor’s incredulous stare and stood outside, appalled by her falsehood. So it began, the start of a double life in which lies rolled off her tongue, an existence wherein her priority was to protect Lady Mary, authoress, from discovery and subsequent ruin. Laughter, traitorous laughter, bubbled inside her chest and erupted. She covered her mouth. At home she would sink into the bathtub, where no one would interrupt, and soak away her quaking insides and think if anything could be done.

Across the street, the bookshop tempted, beckoned. Cornwall was not the first county to receive the latest publications, but if Miss Taylor possessed a copy, then *A Woman Who Loves* must be in the shop. Vanity enticed, snagged, and pulled her across the road to peek in the window.

In the center of the display, a book covered in rose canvas reigned in glorious distinction, the gold lettering of its title sparkling. Mary’s breath fogged the glass, and she turned her back to the window, her fingers closing around her locket.

What would Lord Allen think of this? He used to call her his perfect gentlewoman, even to his mother who had wished for a superior match for her son. And Mary was a gentlewoman, or she had been. She’d married at sixteen and been widowed at eighteen, over twenty years ago. Those short years with him were halcyon, warm with love that multiplied by the day, and they solidified her into the lady she was. To be a published author tarnished the genteel reputation she had garnered, and mocked Lord Allen’s memory.

Regardless of the sky that threatened rain, Mary would not go home. She must see Charlotte. She mounted her horse and sped away from the tiny block letters at the bottom of the pink book: *LADY MARY*. Oh! That her horse could take her far away, back to Ireland, back in time, or to a place where her actions were so irreproachable

that her identity as author would ever be concealed.

Chill wind twisted her artfully powdered hair out of its pins and sent it flying, whipping her face, but she pressed on at an impressive gallop and arrived at Charlotte's home in record time—a little proud of her speedy arrival, considering she'd just turned forty. She threw open the door with a reverberating thwack.

“Charlotte?” She made her way to the sitting room.

Her sister smiled and stood in greeting. “I did not expect to see you until later today.” They were meant to garden that afternoon, a pastime Mary participated in somewhat grudgingly. “What is the matter?” She kissed Mary's cheek. “Sit down and tell me.”

In the comfort of her elder sister's nearness, Mary repeated her conversation with Miss Taylor.

“Oh-hoo! Just this morning, Mrs. Vincent visited. She mentioned the book as well. With high praise, I might add. What did you expect? You are a published author.”

“Hush! Sophia may hear you.” Mary did not even want her trusted niece Sophia or Philip, her husband, to know of what she'd done.

“Sophia is with Philip in his studio, so I have Rachel this morning.” She nodded toward a crib in the corner of the room.

Three weeks passed since Mary received the letter from Golden Buck. Three weeks of conversation with her sister, each containing less and less anxiety until she believed none of her acquaintances would ever hear of the novel. But the day had come.

“It was enough for the story to be printed,” Mary said, “but if someone were to

guess...can you imagine? Disgrace!”

Charlotte tsked. “I see what you mean. But no one remembers you as Lady Allen, so you can remain anonymous. You have a *nom de plume*.” She said *nom de plume* the same way one might say twenty thousand pounds .

Mary had signed the book *Lady Mary* , though she’d dropped the title of “lady” upon the death of her husband. They’d been married so short a time, and the appellation never sat easily with her as a daughter of a mere country squire. Without any children, she was all but forgotten by her husband’s family. The estate in Ireland took care of her financial needs, so they had little reason to think of her. Insisting upon a title seemed pretentious.

“It does not matter if no one knows. I know, and I am deeply ashamed.” She covered her face with her shawl. What she did not admit, could never admit, even to her sister, was that a tiny part of her loved it. Loved the praise her novel was gaining. But she couldn’t give in to those emotions, couldn’t let herself fall prey to ego and vanity. A gentlewoman had neither. She did nothing to draw attention to herself and lived in the shadows, serving others. She needed to get away, travel to a place where no one knew about *A Woman Who Loves* . “I would do anything to be away from here. If my home were not let, I would go to Ireland now.”

A piercing cry erupted from the crib. “She should still be napping. Sophia will not be pleased.” Charlotte rushed to pick her up and began bouncing around the room. “I have news that may distract you from your troubles.” She shouted over the baby’s cry, her hand over Rachel’s ear. “We dined with Stephen last night, and he insists that Louisa marry. There was an uproar such as I’ve never seen. Though I am very sorry for him, widower that he is, I do not agree...”

“Charlotte, sit down and let me hold Rachel. You’re making me dizzy.” She wasn’t, but she ached to hold the child. “You can tell me what happened once you are

settled.” Mary took the baby and sat in a rocking chair, the tiny bundle warm and perfect against her chest. In a few moments, Rachel was calm, and her eyes began to droop.

“What was I saying? Oh, yes. Even if our poor brother is a widower, I do not believe he should force his daughter into marriage.” Charlotte settled into a settee.

Love was essential, and all young people deserved a felicitous marriage. Most of all, Louisa, a girl of deep feeling, required the happiness an affectionate match promised, though Mary doubted the girl was prepared for marriage.

Rachel’s little head against Mary’s chest caused a familiar heaviness to tug Mary’s insides. This joy, the enduring pleasure of children and grandchildren, was never to be hers. She was the center of one person’s world only, and she’d buried him.

“To whom is Louisa engaged?”

“I don’t know. Stephen only said he had no patience for a coming out and that an arranged marriage accomplished the purpose as well or better than any other method of finding a husband. He’s already chosen the man. It seems he’s corresponded about it for some time. A son of an old acquaintance.”

Heaven, in her divine goodness, had sent Mary an escape. Louisa’s problem offered a solution for her own predicament. Helping her niece find a match was an impeccable enterprise for a widowed aunt. “Well, I shall intervene.”

“How?”

“I want a holiday, and Louisa needs to find a husband. Bath is the perfect place for us. I have not been there since I was sixteen. Surely in Bath they have better things to do than read *A Woman Who Loves*, and they certainly won’t associate me with the

author. Louisa will fall in love, and I will be saved. By the time we return, everyone will have forgotten about the book, and life can go back to normal.”

Charlotte furrowed her brow. “If our brother can be persuaded.”

“I will coax Stephen into agreement. Leave everything to me.”

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Chapter Two

The lantern threw odd shadows on the narrow, circular staircase as Daniel Fletcher followed his father into the castle's battlements. Their steps landed in a comforting shuffle that awakened childhood memories. How many times had he scrambled up these very steps, sword in hand, ready to defend his fortress? Once atop, he pushed his knees against a parapet and gazed through the darkness, straining to see the fields around him. Tiny pricks of light from the tenant cottages shone at him. Soon, with the money he'd saved and the investments that continued to earn for him, those glowing dots would multiply. With his return home, the castle he loved so well would gain its former glory.

"Here we are. Magnificent." His father gestured at the sky.

Frigid air penetrated Daniel's superfine wool coat. "It's freezing for April." He did not expect a response from his astronomer father, who cared more for the heavens than anything on earth.

"See that? Look, there. Do you observe..." Daniel's father said into his telescope, a favorite possession his mother acquired twelve years prior to celebrate her husband's birthday. It demonstrated her love for her husband, a fact that no one doubted. If nothing else, his parents loved one another, but their love led them to unscrupulous behavior. The purchase had been made in lieu of repairing the roof, and Daniel had not forgotten the long winter that followed wherein he and his family dined on potatoes and withered apples. Nothing of that sort would ever happen again. He would make sure of that.

“You brought me here to discuss something. What is on your mind?” That morning, Daniel arrived home after a ten-year absence. A week since, he’d received a letter requesting his return home on account of Father’s ill health. But he found the man well and as energetic as ever. The lie existed among many, and it should not have stung as it did. He reminded himself that it didn’t matter since he’d already been wrapping things up with the bank in preparation to return home for good. Since his arrival, the conversations between him and his parents were stilted. They were keeping something from him.

“Ah, always too clever. A step ahead of me, eh?” Father’s tone was good-natured, but the comment was a jab. A self-educated man, he had never wanted Daniel to attend school. However, since his maternal grandfather had paid his way, Daniel attended university, and his father disparaged the Cambridge education any chance he could. Perhaps Father felt embarrassed by his own lack of formal education. More likely, it was due to having not gotten his way. “It is simply that you must marry.” Father continued looking through the reflector. “I won’t live forever, and I want to see my grandchildren running about the castle.” Daniel sat on a parapet and faced his father, who remained hidden behind his brass contraption. “Your mother and I are finished with your moping. That episode with Miss Jensen happened long ago, and it is time to leave her in the past.” Stiff white hair brushed his shoulders as he turned grey eyes to Daniel. “I found you a wife. You will marry and stay in the castle.”

“I retired from the bank and plan to stay home.” He was saving this surprise announcement, but his father robbed him of the celebration by expressing no pleasure at the news. “I’ll stay here, but I will not marry.”

“If you don’t wed the lady of my choosing, I must appoint another heir. The castle is for families, children—not single men.” Father looked back into the reflector. “Andrew will do.”

Daniel stood. “What?” He could not be earnest. Was this another lie? The stakes were

too great to make that assumption, but he did not trust his father's word.

"So bright tonight. Always steady in its course. Enchanting." Father's tone turned whimsical, and Daniel doubted he'd get anything further by way of serious conversation.

"After everything I sacrificed to preserve the castle, you would disinherit me?" Disinheritance it must be, for he would not involve himself with any woman, not after Miss Jensen's betrayal, though he certainly no longer mourned it as his father implied.

No response.

Andrew Chapman, a vicar and member of Father's lunar society, married Daniel's sister, Emma, and was as featherbrained as they came. The silent, glacial night folded Daniel into its solitary darkness, opening a familiar chasm in his chest. Though only a few feet away, his sire may as well have been floating among the stars.

The injustice of the threat simmered. Daniel's money ran the estate. The very battlements upon which they stood had been repaired with his funds. He sat and rested his head on the cold wall behind him, pressing his hands against the ancient rocks that supported him.

"Come! Look at this. You've never seen Venus so bright."

The muscles in Daniel's back tightened, and his jaw twitched, while his father was swallowed into the sky, oblivious or merely careless of his son. It was always thus—and the reason Daniel had avoided coming home. Talking with his father was like trying to catch a flea. As a child, he'd loved his father's eccentric ways, but as he'd grown older, he recognized the manipulation.

“Answer my question, Father. You would disinherit me after all the money I’ve poured into the castle?” He spoke deliberately through clenched teeth, trying to temper his twisting stomach.

“In fourteen years, Venus will pass over the sun, and we will be able to calculate our distance from the sun.”

“Gah! You are impossible,” Daniel yelled into the night.

“It happens only once a century, and Venus is the key to that calculation.”

Daniel took a deep breath, but the growing coils in his gut tightened. “Talk to me!” Father remained attached to his telescope.

Why had he come home? He should have stayed in Nottingham at the bank, where his superiors valued him, and the work was straightforward, where he excelled. He missed the castle more with every breath, but no one deceived him or tried to control him at Smith’s Bank.

He left his father and sped down the spiral stairs, head spinning, fist clenched around his lantern. Before he spoke with his mother, he would need to calm down.

He stomped across the courtyard to the castle’s thick wooden front door and pressed his forehead against it. After three deep breaths, he pushed it open, scraping it across stone flooring as he stepped inside. He inhaled the cool, earthy musk of home. Almerly Castle had come to his family in a roundabout way generations ago. According to family tradition, the maternal line passed the castle down from mother to daughter until there was no daughter, only a second son, Daniel’s father. His parents spoke as if Daniel would inherit it upon his father’s death, but no entailment made that a requirement. The women had taken prodigious care that the vast estate remain lucrative and undivided, even while they spent most of their time at their

husbands' homes. A row of portraits shifted in his lantern's light. His female ancestors glared at the shabby rug and rickety tables.

"Do not fret," Daniel told them. "I have the means to renovate, but you must haunt my father until he comes to his senses." Father's poor maintenance of the property showed in the tattered curtains, crumbling walls, and immense acres of land that struggled to turn a profit. When Daniel first began work at Smith's Bank, he sent his wages home with his father's promise to use the funds to repair cottages and invest in the land. When he discovered his father had instead donated the money to scientists investigating the rotation of the moon, Daniel began corresponding with the steward directly. He had done his best to retain value and make repairs, but powers were limited from a twenty-five-mile distance.

His boots clicked over flagstone, and he roughed his fingers against the grooves of the rock-walled entry. He felt a kinship for the decrepit, old castle that would tumble deeper into disrepair should it fall into the hands of Andrew and Emma.

Grandmother's stare met him from her portrait as he rounded the corner. Though she did not blink or move, Daniel squirmed. Her eyes were as bright and vivacious as they'd been in life. Through still lips, she sent him a clear message. "Don't be an idiot, Daniel. Do what you must to keep your castle."

As a boy of maybe six or seven, she had taken him on her knee and pressed her arthritic fingers a little too tightly around his shoulders. "When I am gone, your father will take control of Almere for a time, but never forget it is yours to love and protect. It is your duty to care for it." She captured him during his peak obsession with knights, when his play consisted of plastering paper into makeshift armor and clamoring around the towers with a wooden sword. "This castle is your future," Grandmother had said, and his armor tightened around him, solidified into true iron fittings. With those words, she knighted him.

As he'd matured, the castle became a living, breathing entity that defined Daniel. It shared his heartbeat so that each dislodged pebble that crumbled from its majestic facade cracked his soul. It whispered for him not to abandon it. Yet, he had. For ten long years, he'd worked diligently elsewhere, leaving his castle in the hands of his father, the man who foolishly invested his money and lost it all. The family had only learned of their penury when creditors lined up at the front door. It was then that Daniel left to restore the family fortunes. It was time for him to become the knight of the castle and bring back the glory it had once shown.

"There you are." His mother sat knitting beside the fire, wearing an old linen gown. The lace that used to embellish its cuffs was missing, probably disintegrated from decades of wear. "I have said it again and again, but I'm glad you are home." She had a childlike, enthusiastic voice.

Daniel sat beside her, soothed after staring down Grandmother. "You aren't wearing the fabric I sent you."

"Don't be angry. I gave it to Emma. Since she became the vicar's wife, she thinks everyone ogles her at church. But anyhow, I hope you are staying. For you to have been away all these years with barely a visit and only the most tedious of correspondence was an insufferable way to treat your mama." She rested her hand on his arm.

"Someone has to look after the estate's finances."

"You will do it much better from here." She narrowed her eyes at him. "Your father spoke to you about our plans."

"If by plans you mean that I am to be disinherited in favor of Emma and Andrew, then yes."

“But did he mention he found you a bride?” She sparkled, as if telling him they’d found a trunk of gold in the cellar.

“I don’t want a bride.”

“You must let go of Miss Jensen.”

He snorted. “I haven’t thought of her in years.”

“She used you ill. Count it a blessing, my dear, for rumor has it she spends her husband’s money with the abandon of a duchess. Not the woman you want. Certainly not worthy of you. But never fear. Your father found you a match.” She giggled, then stopped short. “Oh, darling. I apologize for my hard heart. You are hurt.”

“Mother, please. It was eight years ago. I promised her I’d return in a few months, which turned into a year and then another. It is my fault she was unfaithful.” Despite knowing his culpability, his mother was not entirely wrong. Miss Jensen had wounded him, robbed him of the hope he had clung to that his future would hold warmth and family. It was a long time ago, and he rarely thought of her.

“Unfaithful! That puts it mildly. You forget that she flirted with every man in the parish and was with child on her wedding day. It is no wonder you don’t wish to marry.”

“So, to ease my heartache, you and Father found me a stranger to wed on threat of disinheritance?”

His mother beamed. “She is no stranger. Well, we have never met her, but her name is Louisa Thorpe. Your father is a friend to her father. I hear she is lovely. Her dowry is seven thousand pounds, and she has a little property somewhere.”

“I don’t care about her dowry. How could you go along with this?” He wiped her hand off his arm.

“It was my idea—and a splendid one. I want you home. We need your steady influence. I need it. I am surrounded with lunatics, which is quite literally true, for, as you know, the word is from the Latin *lunaticus*, madness caused by the moon.” She laughed at her own overused witticism. “Besides, you are...what shall we say? A little left-footed around women. Don’t look like that. You know as well as I that the span of an age may pass before you capture another.”

How would she know if he were awkward? The passage of ten years changed him, probably. It was hard to say since he’d spent far more of those ten years earning money than socializing. He clenched a cushion but kept himself from throwing it across the room. “I’m going out.”

“It is far too late, sweetness. Stay with me.”

Daniel walked away, turning to kick the library door closed, but it didn’t budge. He kicked it again and groaned when it remained in place. The conversation reignited that horrible time when he had learned his fiancée had married another man. The news came directly after his receipt of an amorous letter from her. The sphinx.

His mother tittered. “It hasn’t shut in ages. Rusty hinges, you know.”

Turning his back to his mother, he trudged up the stairs to his room, where he removed a bundle of letters from his still packed trunk and left the castle. It was a twenty-minute ride to the tavern. No matter. If he over imbibed, maybe he would stay all night and teach his parents a lesson. Perhaps he should let them give Almerly to his sister Emma and her useless husband Andrew and watch it crumble around them. It would only be what they deserved. Therein lay the problem. They would not care. The castle was of no worth to them, neither did they value the improvements he had

made, though the estate now had the potential to sustain them all for generations.

In the stable, he ran his hand over his mare's velvet neck. "It is too bad that women are not as trustworthy as you." He mounted and bolted into town.

A full moon led Daniel over the country road and to the tavern without incident. He tied up his horse and followed raucous noises to a door that opened before him with a whoosh of warm air, laughter, and song. A man staggered into Daniel, who offered a steadying arm.

"Can I help you home?" Daniel asked.

"Nar, I'm-a nearly there."

Daniel watched a moment, making certain the man could walk.

"Close the door!" someone shouted.

Daniel shut himself into the dark tavern, where a fire blazed, setting aglow men of all ages and stations, who bellowed, sang, and drank. A group of men played a loud game of dice in a corner. He approached the bar, pushing himself between two men, and asked the barman for a gin, downed it in three gulps, and begged an ale. Drinking away sorrows did not suit him, but there was nowhere else to go.

He took his mug and sat in a lone chair close to the fire. He pulled the collection of letters from his pocket and eyed Miss Jensen's looping script. His fingers caressed the satin-soft paper and stroked the edges of the letters, which had worn into decided creases. He could read them once more, but there was no need. When the relationship began, he was working at Smith's Bank with a desperate frenzy nearly every waking moment. When not analyzing investments or meeting with clients, he was reading Miss Jensen's letters. He had his favorites, certain lines he repeated to himself.

They'd given him hope, a vision of the comfortable domestic future that awaited him once he earned enough to restore Almerly. How absurd of him to have kept her letters. Once she had married, he worked even harder, though without the softening expectation of matrimony.

Behind him, a raucous group of young men sang a song about a wench with a thousand lovers. How appropriate.

Heat from the raging fire burned his legs and face, signaling it was long past time to bid farewell to his unfaithful love. His reluctant fingers pulled on a pink satin ribbon, unraveling the bow and releasing the stack of missives. He tossed a letter into the fire. It curled in on itself and fluttered to ash. He threw in another and another.

"Good evening. Mind if I sit?" A young man scraped a chair toward Daniel's and sat before gaining permission. Daniel recognized him as one of the men who had been playing hazard. "It's never good to drink alone, especially not when burning a lady's letters."

"How would you know what I'm burning?"

"What else could it be?"

Daniel shrugged, the letters tight between his fingers, somehow not wanting this man to witness the ceremony.

"How long have you known her?" The man was in his early twenties, perhaps a decade younger than Daniel, of medium build, with sparkling eyes, brown wavy hair, and pleasing manners. The kind of man who made everyone feel like his best friend.

"It is an old wound. I hardly know why I still have them." The man waited, so Daniel continued. "I thought we had an understanding, but I mistook her intentions."

Speaking the truth aloud freed him to fling another letter into the fire.

“Such are women. I’m through with them myself. Through with this whole town and heading to Bath.”

“So far? Why not London?”

“Too big for me.”

Daniel envied his open and jovial laughter.

“I like a small town where I can know everyone. Plus, less competition.”

“I thought you were through with ladies.”

“A lie.” He winked and leaned forward. “I need a fresh supply.”

Daniel tossed letters into the fire in twos and threes, each a burden lifted. “My parents want to arrange a marriage for me.”

“And why not? Much simpler. Fewer expectations.” He leaned back and shouted to the barman, “Two mugs over here, if you please.”

“When do you leave, then?” Daniel asked.

“Tomorrow, if it suits. Why not join me?”

Wouldn’t that be nice? Run away. Before his parents strapped him to a stranger, he might take a holiday. Three letters remained in Daniel’s lap. His fingers twitched with the urge to return them to his pocket. Losing them terminated something he wanted to hold on to—not Miss Jensen, for that was long over, but to the hope that

somewhere in the world a woman existed whom he could love. Love was problematic and addled the mind.

“Here I am inviting you to join me, and I’ve not introduced myself. Tobias Savage.” He extended his hand.

“Savage? We are neighbors. I’m Daniel Fletcher. The last time I saw you, you let a toad loose in church.”

He smiled. “I promise to keep any pets in my pocket when in Bath. The fine weather and abundance of women will have you forgetting those letters.”

The soft paper weighed heavy between Daniel’s fingers, and he tapped the letters on his thigh, as if they meant nothing. He would accept this Louisa Thorpe and keep the castle. Surely, she would do as well as any woman.

“In fact, I will join you,” he said.

Mr. Savage clapped him on the back. “We’d better go home to prepare. By the by, you don’t mind traveling post?”

“I have a landau and a fast pair.”

“Perfect! I invited the right man.” Mr. Savage’s grin convinced Daniel that he, too, was in luck.

Chapter Three

Mary enjoyed the ride to her brother's insofar as the weather was agreeable and the exercise beneficial, but her mind would not settle. That morning in the London Evening Post she read a review of *A Woman Who Loves*, and the flattering words flowed through her mind in alternating waves of anxiety and—mortifyingly—pride. She cherished all praise for her work, and there was much to cherish, for included in that blasted package she received from Ireland were many letters from her devotees. Her bosom would swell and her eyes sting while reading those missives.

Humiliation tempered her pleasure. Ladies did not publish books, especially novels in which the heroine eloped to Gretna Green. One barely spoke of such things. And Mary strove to be ladylike. All happiness she'd found had been the result of her proper behavior, with the great exception of novel writing.

At sixteen she had eagerly anticipated romance and believed herself ready for marriage. As her study of comportment at a school in Bath drew to an end, she had prided herself on developing every skill required of a lady. Primed and primped, on a walk in the park, her handkerchief had blown from the sleeve of her dress. Her heart still fluttered when she recalled Lord Allen running toward her, a white strip of fabric fluttering in his hand.

"There is an MT very finely embroidered," he said to her. "Is it a product of your own hand?"

"Yes, however the quality is due not to my talent, but to the competence of my instructors." She remembered raising her chin but quickly lowered her eyes to

compensate for that mistake.

“Pray, tell me, what does MT signify?”

She hesitated to give her name to a stranger. “I am Mary Thorpe.”

It worked. They met that evening at a musical sponsored by the school. After her passable performance of the only song she knew on the pianoforte, she overheard him tell his mother that Miss Thorpe was a perfect gentlewoman, a compliment Mary never thought she would hear. Cornwall was not exactly known for producing fine ladies, and her mother, too busy tending to her flowers, did not concern herself with genteel niceties.

This successful courtship taught her that she could, with the appropriate level of humility and clever assuaging, get what she wanted. With her husband, she had not considered this manipulative, rather a gentle method of making her will known. The skill served her well throughout her marriage and subsequently with all her relationships—in particular, with her brother, an inflexible, disagreeable man.

Mary approached her brother’s home. After dismounting, she headed toward the stable with her horse when her eye caught the outline of two people at the edge of the forest. There, where the tame garden met undisciplined wilderness, Louisa spoke with a young man. Mary squinted to see who it might be. Was it John Lawrence? His father owned a successful business, but a man in trade was inferior to the squire’s family. It surprised Mary to see her niece in conversation with him.

Too far away to hear what they said, Mary watched while Louisa leaned toward him, speaking earnestly. Mr. Lawrence looked away and took a step back. Louisa stomped her foot. He ran a hand through his hair and looked toward the forest. Louisa reached for his arm, but he shook his head and slipped away from her, turning and walking into the trees. Louisa looked after him for a moment before darting behind the house.

Was this a lover's tryst? That child had better not involve herself with Mr. Lawrence. Yet another reason for the trip to Bath.

Mary entered her childhood home through the kitchen, inhaled the delicious smell of baking bread, and nodded to Cook. She mounted the few stone steps into the back hall and made her way through the house over the worn parquet floor. Everything remained as it had in her childhood, not a portrait out of place, every heavy damask curtain the same, if a little worse for wear. She found her brother in the study at his desk, just as she had expected he would be.

"Good afternoon, Brother. Charlotte told me all that is happening with Louisa. Daughters can be troublesome." To arrange a marriage for your daughter is beyond foolish! Think of how Annie would berate you for your tyrannical behavior. Instead, she said, "Are you certain your dear wife would approve?"

"I'll act as I see fit with my daughter." Stephen had not stood when Mary entered. He barely looked at her as he spoke, and now his attention had gone back to whatever papers lay before him. He had lost weight since his wife's passing, and the skin on his face sagged, especially around his eyes, giving him the look of a worn rag, thin with use. Though Stephen had his faults, Mary's heart ached for him. She'd been unable to get out of bed for months when her husband died.

Mary softened her voice. "She misses her mother, just as you miss your wife. Give the girl time."

He grunted and turned over a page.

"I've just hit upon an idea. I am going to Bath soon. What do you think of her accompanying me?"

His hand paused. Her idea caught his attention, it seemed. Perhaps he needed time

alone.

“You are overburdened. Let me help?” She knew her brother’s foibles and used a saccharine voice that had served her in the past.

“Perhaps you’re right. Things have not felt quite right since...” His chin quivered.

“No one can expect you to worry about a young daughter’s marriage so close to your wife’s passing. I, for one, suffer at seeing your distress. I will take Louisa to Bath, and you shall rest.” It was only six months since the funeral, and time was a slow healer.

Stephen said nothing.

Mary tried again. “Brother?”

With a heavy sigh, Stephen lifted his head. “All right. Perhaps when she returns, she will look more favorably on the marriage I propose.”

That would not do. Louisa could not come home to some unknown, unwanted fiancé. “Of course, you are too doting a father to deny her, should she find a suitable alternative in Bath?”

“Things are not settled with the match I’ve planned, but soon all will be arranged.”

No, no, no. “But should she find love, Annie would be so pleased.”

He harrumphed and stared at his wife’s portrait, rubbing his quivering mouth. “I will give her eight weeks, after which time I will announce the engagement.”

Hah! She had him. But just to be certain, “And you will accept a different

arrangement should she fall in love while in Bath?"

Stephen rubbed his eyes. "Yes. Of course. Her mother would prefer it your way, though I doubt your little venture will come to anything. Thank you, Sister." Stephen drooped with every word. Grief took its toll, and Mary guessed her brother's fatigue caused him to care less than he should about his daughter's future. She went to him and kissed his forehead in an unusual gesture of affection. She placed her hand on his shoulder and bid him goodbye, remembering how she'd missed physical touch after her husband's death. She missed it still.

Mary stepped across the hall to find Louisa reading in the morning room. She explained her plan with genuine enthusiasm, but her niece's visage faded with each zealous word uttered.

"Bath? Why? Is this a punishment? Am I to be banished?" Louisa crossed her arms like a defiant child. They sat in the window seat, where the sun pushed afternoon warmth onto their backs.

"Darling, of course not." Used to Louisa's dramatic temperament, Mary said, "I only wish to see you dancing at the assembly rooms, meeting new people, perhaps finding love."

"Love?" Louisa sniffed and slammed a fist on a small side table, upsetting a candelabra.

"You are angry at your father for trying to force an engagement. Of course you are. But in Bath you may find a suitable man before your father saddles you with a stranger. You want a man of your own choosing, do you not?"

Louisa's lip trembled. "I would like a man of my own choosing." With that, she marched across the room and threw herself into an overstuffed chair. She had lost her

mother and now faced the possibility of marriage to an unknown man. It was little wonder the girl was out of countenance and required a moment to compose herself. Louisa wanted her mother, a kind, shy woman, whom Mary had liked but never known well. A spectrum of emotion passed over the girl. She changed position in her chair, flopping this way and that, as if comfort were not to be found. She pursed her lips, knit her brow, set her jaw, and finally looked up at Mary.

“When can we leave? I am ready this moment.” Louisa stood as if they could jump into a carriage and depart immediately.

“What about your clothes? And I need to arrange for lodgings. Preparations by the servants...” Mary’s voice trailed as Louisa’s face fell.

“All of that will take weeks. We will never be off.”

If it weren’t for Louisa’s trying circumstances, Mary would have chided her ingratitude, but considering the situation, she kept her voice soft. “Perhaps we can stay at an inn for a few days while finding a suitable place to stay.”

“I loathe an inn.” Louisa’s lower lip protruded in a pout that rivaled any toddler. Before Mary could think of a way to coax her niece into greater civility, Louisa turned toward her aunt. “I want to leave as soon as may be. We can have gowns made up there, can we not? What about that friend of yours? Mr. Eliot’s mother. Doesn’t she have a townhome in Bath?”

She did. More than that, Mary knew Agnes resided there, at this moment, and would delight in having company. But Mary would rather not stay with her friend. Though she planned to use Agnes to introduce them into Bath society, she preferred Agnes in small quantities. Living with Agnes would be a strain at the very least.

“Yes.” Mary spoke with care. “But wouldn’t you rather have a place to ourselves?”

“Whatever for? Mrs. Eliot is pleasant enough. I am sure she has a grand place, rich as she is.”

If Louisa had not been at school during her cousin Sophia’s courtship, she may not have used the word pleasant to describe Agnes Eliot. Mary loved her friend. Their attachment extended back to their school days, and since then, they shared the joys and hardships of life. But Agnes meddled. When her son Philip had fallen in love with Mary’s niece, Sophia, Agnes tried to separate them, not believing anyone worthy of her son. Philip had chosen Sophia over his mother, and Agnes, bereft at the loss of her son, persuaded Mary to help her reverse the damage to their relationship. Now, as Sophia’s mother-in-law, Agnes strove for congeniality, and that amiability formed Louisa’s opinion of the woman. If they stayed with her in Bath, everything Mary envisioned for the trip would change. She looked forward to planning and arranging and did not want Agnes to take over, for she certainly would.

Louisa sniffled, drawing Mary’s attention. The girl’s eyes were red-rimmed, and her face was blotched. The poor child. “I will send an express to Bath, asking Mrs. Eliot if we may stay with her.”

Louisa sprang to her feet and kissed her aunt. “Oh, Aunt. Thank you. Leaving home is just what I need. I’ll begin packing now. When may we depart?”

Agnes liked to appear on one’s doorstep without an invitation and on short notice. Since that was the case, Mary would inform her friend of their impending arrival and leave as soon as possible. “I think we can go in three days, if we are very quick in arranging our affairs.”

“I will be ready in two.” Louisa flew toward the door.

“Oh, Louisa. What did you and that young man speak of earlier? I saw you in the garden when I arrived. Mr. Lawrence, was it?”

Louisa froze. Without turning around, she said, “Nothing at all. He merely stopped by on his way to town to give me news of his sister. She is ill.”

“I hope she is recovered. You seemed upset.” But Louisa disappeared before the sentence concluded. Yes, Bath suited them very well. The companionship of superior men would draw Louisa’s thoughts from John Lawrence.

Mary said her goodbyes to Stephen and departed for home. Her heart lightened with hope, despite the tug in her chest that yearned for the same excitement Louisa was about to experience. To be young and falling in love! Mary’s pleasure would be found in observing it all and encouraging where needed.

Chapter Four

It was not that Louisa did not like Aunt Mary. Indeed, she loved her. And she understood what her aunt attempted to do, however misguided her intentions. But Louisa wanted her mother, the one person who understood her. Since Mother's death, Louisa drifted and bounced, was flung aside and not merely in her own unsettled mind. Father did not know what to do with her. He was the flinger. If she wandered into his study, he cleared his throat repeatedly and glared at her like she was some vermin he must attack before it pounced on him. Her brother Charles knew how to disappear. And disappear he did, into the dark doorways of gaming hells and houses of ill repute only to reappear at home late in the morning to slink off to bed.

John too was flinging her aside. His unsteadiness convinced her that he felt unworthy, which was expected considering their different stations. Despite all of her encouragement, he did not know what to do with his adoration.

If Mother were alive, Father would never have even sought to arrange a marriage for her. She would know how to advise Louisa about John, and there would have been no question of going to Bath. Although, if Mr. Lawrence became overwrought with jealousy and came after her, she would be pleased. Even if he didn't, the search for love was an unnecessary waste of time. Louisa had found love already, even if John's humility kept him from admitting his affection.

Tears spilled over her lashes, obstructing the view of the passing countryside as the coach rolled ever farther from her one true love. Her one true love. Yes. That was he. She adored John Lawrence above everything in the world.

Yet, he refused to admit his love for her. When she had explained to him that her father would marry her off to some nameless stranger, John was nonplussed. Worse still, he was distracted. Instead of focusing on the problem and proposing straight away, as she'd expected, he shifted. Where before he inclined toward her, interested in her every word and look, when she told him she would be forced into marriage and hinted that he would make a better match for her, he averted his eyes and stepped back, focused on the sky, the trees, the ground, his fingernails.

"Ugh." She put her hand over her mouth, not wanting to alert her aunt.

"Darling, are you all right? Am I crowding you?" Aunt Mary edged from Louisa, allowing more room on the narrow seat they shared.

Louisa sucked in a slow breath before responding, hoping emotion would not leak into her words. "I am very comfortable." She kept herself turned toward the window. "The scenery is breathtaking."

"If you're hungry, we have plenty of food. I packed all sorts of things for you in the basket. Hand pies—both strawberry and lamb—cakes, biscuits, and cream filberts. Don't hesitate, even if I am asleep."

"Of course." As if she could eat while galloping away from the bosom of her heart. Aunt Mary pushed food as a cure for everything. No sweetmeat could fix this.

The bulk of their travel was behind them. For two days they'd trekked from morning until dusk, seldom stopping except to change horses, refresh themselves, and eat. Likewise, they departed early this morning and had only three hours until they reached Bath. They would arrive before noon.

The journey wore on, with Aunt Mary sleeping and Louisa reciting her favorite passages from the letters John slipped her, always with a surreptitious wink. He'd lost

courage of late and had sent nothing new, so the sweet words were written on paper softened with the passage of a full years' worth of unfolding and refolding.

“Thou art as radiant and fresh as morning dew. If I was permitted to touch it, the softness of your cheek would rival any fresh-shaved lamb.” He possessed little poetic instinct, but she preferred sincerity. Unaffectedness and kindness were attributes lacking in the young gentlemen of her acquaintance, qualities with which John abounded. Without actually being a gentleman, he was what every young man should endeavor to be.

Louisa dabbed a handkerchief against wet cheeks and pressed her fingers over her throat. It felt swollen inside. Why shouldn't she marry a tradesman? He had enough money—or would soon, if things went well. But his suitability mattered not at all. He abandoned her in the very hour she most depended on him. More than sorrow, more than a broken heart, more than the pain of separation, Louisa was furious at John and her father. These men little considered how their actions—or lack thereof—affected the females who surrounded them. Well, Louisa had had her fill. She would find a way to be the mistress of her own life. She was not as weak and spineless as her brother often told her she was.

Like words over a pulpit, the truth resounded in her brain. Louisa was an impotent bystander in her own life. Regardless of her wishes, everyone made decisions for her. Even Aunt Mary would try to control her, dress her up like some doll, drag her to dances, and force her to stand up with plain, respectable gentlemen. She looked forward to the new gowns but could do without the rest. Oh! That she was like Sophia. Two years ago, while she was away at school, her cousin had outwitted Louisa's conniving father and gained everything she wanted—her land, her farm, and her true love. If Louisa could learn such bravery.

Even Aunt Mary, who wore her widow's grey with earnest solemnity, was free to do anything she pleased.

Aunt Mary? Could she hear Louisa's cries? She wept in earnest now, desperation mounting painfully in her chest.

Louisa bit her handkerchief, putting a stop to a rising moan. Aunt Mary did not stir, but the horses did. Louisa was pressed back against her seat as the carriage lurched forward, the speed increasing as it rattled onto cobblestone. They must be close, for the horses, familiar with the road, were eager to reach food and water. If only Louisa carried a whit of their excitement.

At the movement, Aunt Mary sat up, not looking at Louisa, who dabbed away any remaining tears. "Are we arrived? Look!" She pointed out the window at a cluster of buildings. "We haven't long now. I must have slept." She rubbed her eyes. "The rocking carriage is so soothing."

Aunt Mary pointed out building after building. She had attended school just there, down that road. During their courtship, she and Lord Allen had walked down that lane. With her hand over her heart, Aunt Mary prattled about Lord Allen's fine character. Inwardly, Louisa scoffed. She didn't know what kind of gentleman took his new bride to the obscurities of Ireland and then died, leaving her alone to rebuild a neglected estate. Alas, this judgement was not entirely fair. Many widows were left in inferior circumstances. Some lived out their lives with their mothers-in-law, for example.

Louisa shuddered as the carriage pulled in front of a fine townhouse. Before she could exit, Aunt Mary put her hand on Louisa's arm.

"Now, we are staying with Mrs. Eliot. She can be domineering, but you will get on famously if you simply do your best to listen to her and then do whatever you wish afterward."

Smiling at the strategy, determined to apply it to other relationships, Louisa freed

herself from the confines of the carriage and looked up and down the street. She'd never been to Bath and was astonished, not only at the grandness of the place but also at the crowded streets. People, carriages, horses, and sedan chairs, which Louisa had heard about but never seen, littered the street. The houses were so close they could not be distinguished one from another. In her emotional distress, Louisa didn't know how she would bear the suffocation of it.

The door of the townhouse opened. "Mary! I am delighted you finally accepted the invitation to join me here in Bath." The intimidating figure of Mrs. Eliot obstructed the door's opening. "And to bring Miss Louisa. She will add a great deal of interest to the visit." Mrs. Eliot paid no mind to the army of manservants who removed trunks from the carriage. They waited some moments for her to get out of the way before piling everything outside the door.

"We are pleased to be here. Let us go inside, away from the road." Aunt Mary took her friend by the arm and led her into the house. Louisa trailed behind, noticing how deftly Aunt Mary had maneuvered Mrs. Eliot out of the way so the men could do their work. Her aunt was observant, yes, but not keen enough to understand Louisa.

Perhaps her expectations rose too high. Louisa hardly knew what she wanted herself. The thought of being in Bath had at first distressed because it would take her farther from Mr. Lawrence. But it also seemed the only thing to do, for how could she face him? Was it a mistake to leave him to forget about her or a grand idea that would force him to miss her?

Mrs. Eliot took her guests into the salon to partake of refreshments while their trunks were brought to their rooms. The airy and beautiful apartment made a pleasant contrast to the bustle of the outdoors and in opposition to her own home, where if one wanted peace and fresh air, one must find it in nature. The Thorpe manor, complete with scuffed floors, wood-paneled walls, and what felt like medieval furniture, stifled compared to Mrs. Eliot's fashionable townhome. The blue ceiling floated above with

sweeping puffs of painted clouds. Trimmed in elaborate gold molding, the walls were dressed in soft green brocade while a carpet in reds and pinks anchored the room. The colors, the swirling embellishments, and the tall windows echoed by mirrors on the opposite wall presented an ambience both effortless and sumptuous.

Louisa balanced on one foot and then another while Mrs. Eliot planned the day for them all. “There is so much you haven’t seen, Mary. Countless additions to this town, which I know you love as I do. We will go to the Pump Room directly after you’ve rested an hour. No one will be there this late in the day, but you must read the rules posted there...” And on and on schemed Mrs. Eliot until Louisa’s head ached in anticipation of a full day’s activity. She waited for her aunt to object, but that did not happen.

After Mrs. Eliot’s five-minute soliloquy, Aunt Mary said, “We shall see. Louisa is quite exhausted. The inn was not what one would hope for by way of comfort. Let us rest, and then we will decide how to spend the afternoon.” Mary nudged Louisa, who took the cue and expressed her fatigue.

Mrs. Eliot blinked at them. “Yes, of course. Let me show you to your rooms.”

Louisa found the same luxury in her chamber as in the rest of the house. She washed with the water provided in a China basin, was undressed by Nellie, Aunt Mary’s maid, and made her way to her bed where, after a few minutes of indulgent weeping, she fell deeply asleep.

“Darling, I hate to disturb you. You’ve slept only twenty minutes, but I’ve just convinced Agnes to write to her son. We must make our escape while she is occupied, and you will find so much delight here in Bath. It cannot wait.” Aunt Mary’s words were full of an enthusiasm that Louisa had never heard in her aunt. She agreed to be ready in an hour. At the door, Aunt Mary turned to Louisa. “Wear your walking dress and be sure to put something comfortable on your feet.”

Louisa made haste to prepare herself for going out, though she considered it the height of rudeness for Aunt Mary to have wakened her after a long, exhausting journey. Louisa schooled herself into the docile girl she had been created to be and dressed in less than half an hour.

They did not go directly to the Pump Room as Mrs. Eliot suggested. Indeed, Mrs. Eliot did not accompany them at all. In her contemplative mood, Louisa welcomed the near solitude, not wanting the company of a stranger who might force her into conversation.

They made their way to a shop-lined street where milliners, drapers, haberdasheries, bakers, grocers, and shoemakers assembled in an endless parade of merchandise. Despite her melancholy, Louisa found herself cooing over kid gloves, a plumed bergère hat, and a burgundy beaded reticule. Never having experienced such a plethora of options, Louisa's heart forgot to ache and began beating with tranquility. Using the money her father had allowed her for the visit, she would outfit herself with new gowns and accessories. The excursion to Bath would not be a waste after all.

By the end of the afternoon, she and her aunt walked back to the townhouse, burdened with parcels and a calendar bookmarked with various fittings at the dressmaker's. Aunt Mary stopped. The abrupt action caused the person behind them to bump into her. No damage was done, but Aunt Mary did not seem to notice the near disastrous collision. She stood before the window of a bookshop. Louisa followed her aunt's gaze to the display, which featured a novel covered in deep pink canvas. Gold lettering announced its title: *A Woman Who Loves*. Louisa turned to her aunt to urge them on. The packages were cumbersome. However, a smile teased the corner of Aunt Mary's mouth, and a certain brilliance shone in her face.

"We may go in, if you like. I'll take your things so you might peruse the store," Louisa offered.

Aunt Mary turned abruptly, her eyes shifting to the ground as she secured the packages in her arms with an air of efficiency. “Not at all. We must be on our way.”

Louisa must remember to purchase that book.

Chapter Five

Daniel pressed his hat onto his head and walked toward the bookseller's shop to exchange the book he had finished for another. With no wish to speak to anyone, he kept his head down and arrived with no one intercepting him. A bell jingled as he opened the door and stepped into a room full of the woody vanilla scent of books. The proprietor, Mr. Leake, sat behind a counter, spectacles perched on his nose, book in hand. They mumbled cursory greetings, and Daniel perused the shop at his leisure. Since it was part booksellers, part circulating library, a new book always waited for discovery in one of the many disorganized piles that cluttered the room.

He moved past Newton, Pope, and Hume to a shelf of novels. There must be something new. Pamela , Jonathan Swift , Tom Jones , Clarissa . He'd already read those. Mr. Leake hunched over his book and did not look as if he would welcome a disturbance. Daniel pulled out his pocket watch. He had a call to make and must leave soon or be late.

"Excuse me, do you have anything new in?"

Mr. Leake lifted the pink book he was reading. "You will want this one, if you've not read it. There are a few in the window display."

"A Woman Who Loves ? Is it any good?"

"It's grand. New author. Very popular." He bowed over the page and continued reading.

Daniel stepped toward the display, and at that moment, a woman, dressed in grey and wearing a smart grey hat, appeared in the window. Eyes on the array of books, her lips parted, and her hand moved slowly toward her face until three fingers covered her lips. Beneath her hand, her smile flickered then sputtered into a self-conscious grin. He had never seen an expression wrought with so much conflict. He stepped toward the door, yanked it open, and was on the street just in time to watch her bustle away. He removed his hat and ran his hand through his hair. What had he been thinking? He'd been about to chase after her and ask what she found so fascinating, which would have been an impertinent breach of etiquette. And he wanted to know what color her eyes were, since he had not been able to tell from inside the bookshop. What a fool!

The Abbey clock chimed half past three. Due to call on the Wimples, Daniel left without making a purchase and hurried across town, where he stood under an elm tree to wait for Savage. After a few minutes, he began pacing in front of a row of houses, hope decreasing with each step. He could return to his rooms, but he had been present when Savage promised to call on the pretty Miss Whimple and agreed to the visit. This was the third and last time he would promise to make calls with Savage. He rang the bell and was escorted into a parlor, where Miss Whimple and her mother waited with tea and smiles that fell when Daniel made excuses for Savage's absence.

A disappointed silence attended the clink of China and silver as Mrs. Whimple passed refreshments. After a moment, the matron recovered herself and asked after Daniel's health, a conversation that ended in less than a minute. Miss Whimple kept her eyes down and nibbled on a biscuit at a rate that would ensure it lasted the century. After each taste, she brushed crumbs from her skirt exactly three times, looked at the clock, glanced at her mother, and sent a longing gaze to the door. She wanted Mr. Savage's company and perhaps did not know she held an undistinguished position among many women the man had disappointed. Her mother, on the other hand, a wiser lady, smiled, even while chewing. Would the girl be more offended or relieved if he ended the call earlier than the requisite fifteen minutes?

During the fortnight since he acquiesced to his parents' wish that he marry, he had spun countless young ladies on the dance floor, clapped at their insipid performances at musicals, and made innumerable calls to them and their mothers, all of this at Savage's urging. This dizzying parade of pastel flounces and powdered curls left him exhausted and ready to return home, marry Miss Thorpe, and start restoring Almery.

Society called him reserved, which was fair. Drawing room visits were dreadful, so he developed a system that gave structure to the visits, especially in Savage's absence.

First, discuss the weather. Example: This rain is insufferable. Second, ask a question about someone or something they both know. Example: Have you heard lately from your brother who is in the Royal Navy? Finally, the question he was most interested in having answered: What are you reading?

With his current visitors, he advanced to question two.

"Miss Whimple, I understand your sister is lately married. How is she?"

Mrs. Whimple directed a sly smile at her daughter, while alarm registered on Miss Whimple's face. Apparently, the word marriage was too forward. Time for the final question.

"Do you enjoy reading, Miss Whimple?"

Her hand fluttered to her décolletage. "Yes, of course." Her mouth remained open, her lips forming a circle. Somehow, Daniel did not think the lady breathed.

"I am reading *Amelia* by Henry Fielding and find it quite entertaining." He leaned forward to ask what she thought of Amelia's nose, which was broken in a carriage accident. Some believed the author should have healed her nose so as to restore the

heroine's beauty, but Daniel thought this a shallow suggestion that attractiveness determined worth.

"A novel?" Mrs. Whimple may as well have repeated a vulgarity, but she soon composed herself with the vigorous use of a fan. "Miss Whimple is very accomplished. She embroiders and draws with charcoal. Though she cannot sing, she plays the harp." After a pause, she added, "And she is a wonder at arranging flowers." The mother nudged her daughter, prompting Miss Whimple to gesture energetically in confirmation of her mother's statements.

"I cannot live without a harp." Miss Whimple spoke in a sigh. Very likely she wished she were with her harp now.

It was Daniel's turn to peek at the clock. Five minutes remained of the visit, and he exhausted his resources. The seconds ticked forward, lending no inspiration to Daniel. Miss Whimple remained mute. Not so her mama, who graciously filled the silence with details of a lost kitten found by her daughter. She punctuated the story with, "You will never find a more tender-hearted girl."

At last, the doors were shut against him, and Daniel stood alone in the street. In a few short steps he could be at the revered Roman Bath, where he might drink the sulfuric water that made his stomach turn. A social man might go. A man whose objective was to find a wife would certainly pursue that action and continue to mingle with unattached ladies. Daniel was not that man. More and more he agreed with Mr. Savage's assertion that an arranged marriage removed complication and expectation. A marriage to Miss Thorpe would solve many problems.

He longed not precisely for Miss Jensen, but for the future he designed for them. Even after the passage of eight years, he found it unfathomable that she promised herself to another man while engaged to him, writing him letters, promising her affection, planning their union. With his tendency to get absorbed in his work, he

might have corresponded more regularly, but her consistency sufficed for them both. She deceived him, led him to believe she loved him and would wait for him, all the while cavorting with another man. His stomach soured. Could any woman be trusted with his affection? She cheated and betrayed him, and though she was not worth the ache in his chest, he remained powerless to vanquish it. Each halting conversation with a young lady reminded him that he'd lost the comfortable expectation of domestic felicity. An amicable relationship with the unknown Miss Thorpe formed his highest expectation.

He stepped down from the doorstep and turned toward Prior Park, halting mid-step. At this time of day, all of Bath would be parading around the park. These foolish social games made the fashionable set far too easy to find, and he did not want that. He pivoted and headed toward his own rooms, where Savage would, no doubt, be sleeping.

The shutters were closed inside the flat when Daniel arrived. In the darkness, he moved toward the window, toes catching the edge of a table. He cursed.

A groan sounded from the sofa. "Tobias?" Daniel asked. "Why so dark? You missed your appointment with Miss Whimple."

"My head. Too much to drink," he slurred.

Daniel could smell it now. "Have you taken a bath in a distillery? Go wash up and sleep in your bed. You will feel better for it." He arrived at the window, unlatched the shutter, and brought light into the room.

Tobias groaned and covered his face with a cushion. "You devil. Are you trying to kill me?"

Daniel smiled. "You are doing a fair job of that yourself. Come on." He scooped his

friend up under the arms, pulled him to his feet, dragged him into his room, and dropped him on the bed. “I told the Whimples you would see them at the rout party tonight.”

“Wouldn’t miss it.” He sighed and began to snore.

That man was a marvel. Each evening, he frolicked with posh society, smiled, flirted, ate, drank, danced, and played cards. Half the women in Bath trailed him with worshipful admiration, regardless of their age or marital status. After wooing the ladies and charming the gentlemen at the assembly rooms, he continued gallivanting at a private party or a gambling hell or...Daniel’s knowledge ended there. He only knew that in the morning Savage was usually asleep in his bed, but occasionally he stumbled in much later, as must have happened this afternoon.

Daniel accompanied Savage through a long night only once. After a ball, they’d met with a private party of friends for a late supper. From thence, Savage had dragged him to a gambling den. He played one round of hazard before exhaustion overtook and he returned home, but it was long enough to see that Savage had a too-eager glint in his eye when playing. Whether from desperation or addiction, Daniel could not say.

When Daniel spoke of it to him, Savage brushed him off with, “Can’t a man have a little diversion?” Any further conversation flipped on its head when Savage teased Daniel for being a spoil sport.

Daniel did not think his friend needed money. When they had first arrived, they were about to take a modest set of rooms, but Tobias insisted that since there were two of them, they not settle for a mediocre part of town. Every other day, he upgraded his style with new suit of clothes, boots, a snuff box. Daniel thought he saw him sporting a bejeweled pocket watch, though only once.

Naturally, a young man diverted himself in such a manner, especially when Savage inherited only two years ago and would likely want to feel the power of his fortune. No purse strings cut access to his funds now. Let the boy experiment with life before settling into responsibility. It was not, of course, what Daniel would do, but he did not judge Savage ill for it. Besides, Savage's faults diminished under Daniel's gratitude at having so amiable a friend to help navigate all the social niceties with which he was unfamiliar and for which he lacked patience. When the man showed up, that is.

That evening at the rout party, Daniel searched the face of each lady in the room. She, the woman whose face appeared in the bookshop window, was not there.

Chapter Six

Mary pushed a feather-shaped hair comb deeper into her hair with a shaking hand. She steadied it by seizing her locket, but her breath came short. Were her stays too tight? They weren't, but the parts of herself that she tried to hide were warm and glowy and fluttery, like the juvenile jitter she'd experienced at her first balls. More than anticipation, hope blossomed. The possibility of meeting someone. The chance of falling in love. Though blood rushed through her with as much persistent life and feeling—nay, more—as it had in her adolescence, her expectations were all for Louisa. Wrinkles embellished the corners of her eyes, and she could swear, just the day before a new line appeared from nowhere at the edge of her mouth. The one person who would tell her she looked more beautiful than ever had been gone for so long that the sound of his voice and the warmth of his hands were as accessible as the morning's mist.

She examined Louisa, whose appearance mattered. She wore a new-made silk and brocade gown in blush. Pearls lay against flawless skin. Pomaded and powdered hair curled to magnificent, but not unseemly, heights. She was ready.

“You are beautiful, Louisa. I wish your mother were here.” She took her hand and spun her around. Louisa obliged but did so in the drooping attitude of the extremely bored. “You don't like your dress?”

She brightened. “Oh! I love it. Thank you for taking me to the dressmaker.” Before the mirror, she twirled with a real smile. The child changed like the wind.

In the carriage, smashed between Louisa and Agnes, Mary tamped the sparks in her

belly by recalling that her purpose in visiting Bath was to witness Louisa's falling in love. At Mary's advanced age, one could hope for nothing more.

What were these defeated thoughts? She'd never wanted another husband. It must be nostalgia for the trees that canopied her courtship, the cobbled streets she walked when she first slid her arm through Lord Allen's, drawing her back to her younger, more buoyant self.

It was Louisa's turn. For Mary, it might be the very inspiration she needed for her next novel. A novel that would never be read by another soul. Decency prohibited ladies from engaging in authorship, and she experienced unseemly pleasure in the accolades she received. Here in Bath, her obscurity as a widowed aunt sheltered her, assured her that no one would guess what she'd done. She dismounted from the carriage, thoroughly sobered, and entered the assembly hall with equanimity.

"Louisa." Mary squeezed her arm which was tucked into her own. "Is this not breathtaking? I am so glad we've come. You've been out of spirits, but dancing will put you to rights."

"Mm."

Mary watched as Louisa's attention flitted from one person to the next, absorbing the room, the crowd, the décor, even the refreshments. As she did so, her face fell by degrees, dimming until her lower lip quivered. She required a partner. Of course, the girl was overwhelmed with the glitter that lay before her. She did not know she gleamed brighter than everyone else in the room. At moments such as these, it was natural for one to miss her mother. Mary hesitated to mention it, not wishing to further upset her or spoil the evening.

"Aunt, when will the country dances begin?" The girl's voice cracked, but she cleared it and gave a faltering smile.

Mary listened to the music. A minuet, of course. She tapped her foot to the rhythm, losing herself in the past.

“Aunt Mary? I asked when the country dances will begin.” Louisa bounced in the impatient way a young child might when being ignored.

“Perhaps only one or two more.”

“We came too early. I knew it.” Though Louisa spoke to herself, Mary fought the urge to reprimand her.

The rules of the Bath Assembly, as posted in the Pump Room, required women who wished to perform the minuets to wear a full-trimmed sack with lappets and large hoops, as at St. James Court. Not wishing to bother with the costume, Louisa dressed in country dance attire, for which no hoops were allowed.

Mary turned to Agnes and whispered, “To whom can you introduce us? We must secure Louisa a partner for the first country dance.”

Just then, Mary’s eyes caught on a gentleman entering the assembly. Beginning with fine legs, broad shoulders, and a trim figure, he completed his flawlessness with a splendid visage, a prepossessing face that appeared both open and kind. Mary Allen’s heart swelled at the sight of him. If perfection were a man, it was he.

“Who is he?” Mary nudged Agnes and directed her notice toward the door where the man in question stood in conversation with another gentleman, both dressed in full-trimmed suits of clothes.

“Ah. You have landed on the most eligible man in the room, excluding those in the peerage. That is Mr. Daniel Fletcher, and if we trust rumor, he is in search of a wife.”

Mary perused him more thoroughly. Brown hair en queue tied with a ribbon, unassuming. Quality breeches, well-tailored jacket, good taste. The ruffle around his neck and the buckle on his shoes befitted the occasion of a ball but were not ostentatious. He appeared thirty-three or thirty-four. Louisa might take issue with his age, but he was old enough to have his finances in order, which took precedent over a preference for a younger man.

“We must gain an introduction to Mr. Fletcher.” Mary tugged Agnes’s sleeve, a gesture sure to irritate her friend into action.

Agnes slapped Mary’s hand away. “Consider it done. But I will first introduce her to the other young men. She will be even more desirable in the arms of another.”

With Louisa in tow, Agnes disappeared into the crowd, leaving Mary to follow behind. Agnes flew from one group to the next, introducing Louisa and Mary as she went. Before the first country dance began, Louisa had a half-dozen partners. Mary sighed in gratitude for Agnes’s efficiency.

The minuets over, Louisa took her place on the dance floor.

“He is rather green, but better than no one.” Agnes referred to Louisa’s partner.

In compliance with the rules, Mary and Agnes sat on the second bench, allowing the gentlemen access to the younger ladies. Behind a wall of skirts, Mary caught glimpses of her niece, whose partner turned the wrong way and bumped into the person next to him. He would benefit from a few more rounds with a dancing master.

“Wait here.” The crowd swallowed Agnes, who reemerged moments later with Mr. Fletcher at her side. Mary’s heart erupted at the sight of him. She turned away, reprimanding herself for the ridiculous reaction. Then, with her most ladylike smile, she rotated toward him.

“Mrs. Allen, allow me to introduce Mr. Fletcher,” Agnes said.

He bowed and stood to face her. Their eyes collided, and the room seemed to hold its breath. Mary was falling, sinking, drowning in his pale blue stare. A slow smile ticked the edges of his mouth and grew into a lopsided grin. His gaze held her like a physical embrace, the room spinning around them in a blur of light. Mary felt her mouth hitch in an answering smile. Her lips parted, and a silent breath escaped. Butterflies fluttered from her toes into her head, but more than that, she became the butterfly. Blossoming warmth opened in her stomach and spread to her feet, to her chest, through her arms. She felt beautiful—even desirable—under his gaze. More than that, she wanted him.

He cleared his throat, and she looked away. Goodness. What was that?

In the noise of the room, he stepped toward her, and speaking into her ear, he told Mary, his voice as low and rich as coffee with cream, how pleased he was to make her acquaintance. “Mrs. Allen, would you... er... care to dance?”

He seemed nervous, in a charming way. Heat traveled up the back of Mary’s neck. It had been an age since she’d danced. She blinked up at him, sure she had not heard him correctly. Declining an invitation to dance was not among her cache of polite phrases. Her fingers covered her locket, and she opened her mouth, waiting for the words to come. Agnes pinched the back of Mary’s arm, alerting her to her social faux pas.

“Yes. Thank you.”

She slipped her arm through his, and all unease melted away at his touch. Why shouldn’t she dance? It was a respectable diversion for a widow. Her lavender-colored gown embroidered in black hinted at her loss, though perhaps full mourning would better express the profound depth of her sorrow. This evening marked the first

time she'd discarded her blacks and greys in favor of color. While it stung to shed her mourning in the same room where she'd danced with her husband, her movements became a tribute to her loss rather than a show of disrespect for her departed loved one. She'd been widowed over two decades ago. Surely it was time to dance again.

And dance she did.

Her feet recalled each step, and her arms moved with what felt like immaculate grace. Reaching up, she pressed her palm against his. Heat burned through silk. She examined his face. The line between his brow suggested private worries, but his eyes were large and candid, his face open and intelligent. Though his dancing lacked polish, the unpracticed movements made him seem unaffected, and he never stepped amiss. They separated, chasséed down the line.

Framed in dark lashes, his eyes followed her. How long had it been since a man's gaze had made her feel so desired, so assured? They came together again, hands touching, sliding together then apart in a way that suddenly felt unseemly. The room was so very warm.

It ended. They bowed, and Mr. Fletcher walked her back to Agnes.

"I have seen you before," he said. "Through the window of the bookseller's, looking at *A Woman Who Loves*. Have you read it?"

Her stomach plummeted and she reached for a lie that was not a lie. "I have heard of it."

"The shop is well-stocked both with new and used books. Do you enjoy reading?"

His voice, so deep and rumbling, reverberated through her, so it took a moment for her brain to catch up with his words. "Yes. Very much." She searched for a change of

topic. "Where are you from?"

"Gloucestershire."

She wanted to reply but could not remark on that part of the country.

After a beat he said, "The weather is fine."

"Yes. We are fortunate that it is not raining." He kept opening his mouth and leaning toward her as if to speak. She did not care if he remained mute, wanting only to look at his lovely blue eyes, the line of his jaw, the slope of his lips.

"Mrs. Allen, allow me to introduce you to Mr. Roberts." Agnes arrived, yet another man in her wake. Mr. Fletcher thanked Mary for the dance and left her bereft.

"He wishes to dance with you," Agnes said, pushing a short, thin man toward her.

Before Mary could contrive a response, her arm linked with his, and she walked toward the dance. The night continued thusly. She never lacked a partner and did not know Louisa's whereabouts or whether she was enjoying the evening. Mary consoled herself that she had done her best to encourage all whom she judged worthy to call and meet her niece, with the notable exception of Mr. Fletcher.

It wasn't until one of her partners asked after the size of her estate that she understood. The men were set upon her by Agnes, who had certainly whispered that Mary was a widow who loved to dance. Mary hoped Agnes had not said more. Agnes thought Mary should find another husband and was not above exaggerating the truth to make Mary seem more appealing. Her modest fortune and lack of children made her attractive to men. But the more information Agnes shared, the more likely someone might guess she authored *A Woman Who Loves*.

Candles burned low, and the orchestra began making exhausted errors in their harmony. With the final dance afoot, Mary stole herself away into a quiet corner where Agnes could not find her and where she could watch the final moments of the ball half-tucked behind a leafy plant. Through the palm fronds, she met Mr. Fletcher's eyes from where he stood directly across the room. She lowered her head in acknowledgement and tried to find Louisa among the dancers, but her gaze kept returning to Mr. Fletcher, who seemed to watch her.

An effervescent bubbling excitement trickled through her, a sensation she believed was lost in her past. She threaded her locket along its chain, recalling with pleasure of their dance before forcing herself to consider how well Mr. Fletcher and Louisa would suit.

The following morning, Mary trudged downstairs, hoping breakfast waited for her at so late an hour. The ball had ended at eleven, but thoughts of Daniel Fletcher kept her awake well into the night.

In the breakfast room, Mary found the sideboard replete with food, a welcome sight.

"Mary, how are your feet this morning?" Agnes sat with a bowl before her.

"Well, thank you. Why do you ask?"

"On account of all the dancing."

Mary served herself and sat down across from her friend, wondering if she should feel guilty for having enjoyed herself so well and if Agnes noticed how taken she was with Mr. Fletcher. "I have you to thank for sending all those gentlemen my way," she said primly.

"Not at all. You were the belle of the ball. The men clambered after you, as if you

were a rich young heiress.”

Mary’s heart fluttered. “What did you tell them?” She wanted to imagine what Mr. Fletcher might think of whatever Agnes had told him.

With high brows and heavily lidded eyes, Agnes lifted a shoulder before taking an enormous bite of porridge and widening her eyes.

Mary said, “Bringing me partners was unnecessary. Our concern is Louisa.”

Louisa appeared in the doorway. “What are you saying about me, Aunt?”

“Only that all the men want to know you.”

“From what I saw, they were more interested in you.”

Mary looked from Louisa’s red-rimmed eyes to her pale face and wondered if the girl had been crying. Surely, she was not jealous of Mary’s dancing.

“Louisa, I spoke of you to every gentleman I thought worthy of you. There were only two or three, for I am very discerning, but I have special hopes for Mr. Fletcher.” Her stomach twisted, but she pressed on. “We must invite him to dinner.”

“Oh, yes. I danced with him as well. He’s ancient. Could be my father.” She slathered honey on her bread.

“He is not so old. And besides, the younger gentlemen are foppish and careless these days. Really, Louisa, they are not to compare with Mr. Fletcher. He is?—”

“I already did,” Agnes interrupted. “Invite him to dinner. He is coming tonight with his friend, Mr. Savage. But I thought Fletcher more suited for someone else.” She

took another bite, her focus not slipping from Mary.

Agnes, who noticed everything, must have seen Mary's absurd response to Mr. Fletcher. She did not know the man. They had barely spoken. He might be a highwayman. No, not a highwayman. They were mysterious and alluring. Mr. Fletcher was probably boring and steady.

He would be at dinner that very night. Panic gripped her lungs.

"Aunt, are you choking?" Louisa pounded her on the back.

"No, no. Please. I am well. When you're finished eating, let's get some air."

Louisa nodded and piled her plate with food. At least she had an appetite. Her despondence was surely an effect of travel and the stimulation of last night's dance.

Chapter Seven

Three minutes before seven o'clock in the evening, Daniel's landau clattered to a halt in front of a first-rate townhome in the Parade. The four-storied townhome, with two rows of Palladian windows, made it clear Mrs. Eliot was flush in the pockets.

Mr. Savage whistled. "This is the lady to know."

Though crass, Daniel was grateful Savage had seen fit to accompany him that night, for he never lacked something to say, and everyone seemed pleased with the flattering words that slid from his mouth.

"It's as I told you," Savage said. "Fresh ladies arrive daily, and we shall have our pick of them." Tobias made a crude gesture and jumped out of the carriage. Daniel did not like the way Tobias spoke of women, and this comment was no exception. Already he'd reminded him a dozen times that one should speak of women in private the same way one spoke of them in public. With respect. But it had made no difference.

Daniel glanced at the black door, the evening sun glinting off its bronze handle. Behind it was Miss Thorpe. In a strange twist of fate, he would spend an evening with the very woman his father had chosen for him. At least it might be her. He could not be certain since no one had yet mentioned her first name, and something kept him from asking. If he knew she was intended for him and she knew the same, if they put two and two together, his forthcoming marriage would become all too real. He wasn't ready.

When introduced at the ball, he had called himself Daniel Fletcher but had seen no flicker of recognition in her eyes. She'd given him an uninterested smile and agreed to dance with him in a flat tone that signaled to him she didn't care. If she knew of him, her behavior would have shown it, either by more curiosity or more indifference. Perhaps she was not his Louisa Thorpe after all, but he would listen for her name.

Though pretty and pleasant with soulful eyes, Miss Thorpe was not her aunt. Mrs. Allen was not like anyone. Both demure and exuberant, ladylike and sensual, she was a paradox. A puzzle he would spend no time solving, for his loyalty stood with Almery, so if Miss Thorpe was Louisa Thorpe, he would commit to her. He would marry her for Almery. Besides, Mrs. Eliot told him at the ball that Mrs. Allen was a wealthy widow. Judging from her attire, she was just out of mourning. And why would she want an awkward bumbler who would take her to a crumbling castle in a remote county? She was interesting, enticing even, but not for him.

While he dismounted, a hackney stopped behind his landau. Daniel and Tobias mounted the steps of Mrs. Eliot's residence as a tall, slightly stooped figure with a modest, if crooked, wig emerged from the hackney holding a cane. From the agile way the man moved, the stick was ornamental. He was of indeterminate age and so thin and tall one could imagine the man as a May pole.

The three men gathered on the steps. "Good evening. It appears we are bound for the same place. I am Mr. Bateman." His airy voice rasped like it was a great struggle to push the sound out his windpipes.

"How do you do? I am Mr. Daniel Fletcher. This is my friend, Mr. Savage." They bowed as well as they could huddled on the porch.

The door swung open, and the butler ushered them into the drawing room, where the ladies waited. Mrs. Eliot, tall and straight, not unlike Mr. Bateman, greeted them in turn. Mrs. Allen, possessed of a more feminine figure and less stately posture than her

friend, looked beautiful in her mauve gown. His eyes lingered on her white throat. Perhaps feeling him watching her, she pressed her hand over the locket that hung around her neck. Beside her stood Miss Thorpe, a little wilted. She looked out the window and gave little heed to the men beyond a requisite greeting.

Miss Thorpe was more attractive than he remembered. If she were his Miss Thorpe, this was a lucky chance to get to know her. He gestured to a sofa, and they sat down together. "Are you enjoying Bath?" An inane question, but he could think of no other.

"I like it very much, but I miss home." Still no evidence she knew who he was.

Daniel relaxed and smiled, pleased with her honesty. "Don't young ladies long to escape from home and attend balls and dinners and the like?"

Miss Thorpe lifted a dainty shoulder and looked at her lap. While Daniel struggled to think of another question, his attention was caught by Mrs. Eliot's imperious voice enumerating the advantages of Mr. Bateman to Mrs. Allen.

"... bachelor with a home in Bath and an estate in Herefordshire. Very amiable besides. There, Mrs. Allen, sit next to Mr. Bateman and ask about his sheep." Mrs. Eliot shooed Mr. Savage away so Mr. Bateman and Mrs. Allen could sit together on a settee.

Mrs. Allen frowned at her friend and put as much distance as she was able between herself and Mr. Bateman. Mr. Bateman's sharp elbow pressed into Mrs. Allen's side, and she scooted farther from him until finally putting her hand over the place where the elbow intruded. Mr. Bateman pressed closer, leaning toward her even as she bent away.

Beside him, Miss Thorpe puffed air through her lips. "Mrs. Eliot can be such a bore."

Daniel agreed.

Mrs. Allen answered her assailant's questions. "I live in a cottage on an estate where sheep are the main source of income. While they are frequently discussed, I cannot say I know much about them, as I find the business of sheep rather uninspiring." She moved to a chair and crossed her hands in her lap, her manner stiff and cool.

Daniel turned fully toward Mrs. Allen and her disinterested expression. She caught his eye and raised a brow. Hoping she did not misunderstand his interest as disapproval, he gave her what he hoped was an affirming smile. She was her niece's superior in looks and manner. Her husband must have recently passed, else she'd surely be remarried.

Dinner was announced. Daniel escorted Miss Thorpe but watched Mrs. Allen attempt to make space between herself and Mr. Bateman, who offered her his arm and then drew her to him. Mrs. Eliot gave an encouraging nod to Mr. Bateman.

Steaming bowls of savoy soup arrived, and Daniel tried to make conversation with Miss Thorpe but was again distracted by Mr. Bateman's behavior toward Mrs. Allen. He could not heed her answers. Mr. Savage winked at Daniel and stepped in to entertain Miss Thorpe.

"Mrs. Allen," Daniel said, "do you find Bath much changed from the last time you were here?"

A smile bloomed over her face, and she turned toward Daniel. "Yes! I was only sixteen when I last came, and it is almost a new city."

Daniel retained Mrs. Allen's attention as much as was polite, but Mr. Bateman's determination did not waver. He even tapped her on her shoulder when her back was toward him. She turned, and Mr. Bateman spoke to her through a mouth full of peas.

Her dismay showed only in a slight twitch of her jaw.

“Mr. Fletcher, tell me about your situation. I hear you are a partner at Smith’s.” Mrs. Eliot’s command could not be ignored. He gave the briefest of answers and tried to turn his attention back to Mrs. Allen, but Mrs. Eliot followed up with educated questions that required thoughtful responses. Mrs. Allen was left to Mr. Bateman.

He turned toward Miss Thorpe. “Where are you from?”

“Cornwall.” She showed no interest in continuing the conversation.

“Ah. And what brings you to Bath?”

“My aunt. She thinks it will be good for me to see more of the world.”

To see the world before she settled into marriage? This guessing was ridiculous. He would simply ask her name.

“Louisa, are you speaking of me?” Mrs. Allen asked.

Louisa! She was his intended but gave no indication of knowing their connection. On the contrary, when Mrs. Eliot had garnered partners for her at the assembly rooms, she spoke of Miss Thorpe as one searching for a husband. In this case, his announcing their engagement would certainly not be welcome. She probably sought a match of her own to avoid her father’s arrangement—or had not been told of his intention. It put him in the difficult position of knowing their proposed relationship when she did not. Did honesty compel him to tell her? Becoming acquainted before she knew may benefit them both, decreasing discomfiture on both sides.

“I am just explaining that you brought me to Bath,” Louisa said.

Mr. Bateman tapped Mrs. Allen's shoulder. She turned to him with a biting smile, which did nothing to deter Mr. Bateman from commandeering her conversation.

"And what will you do after your time here?" He wanted her to give something away. Did she know who he was? Did she know her father had promised her away to a stranger?

"I will follow the tradition of all proper females and marry." On the word marry, she stabbed her knife into a bloody piece of beef. She seemed ignorant of their engagement.

After dinner, the women retreated to the drawing room, leaving the men to their port. Mr. Bateman stretched his legs and began pacing the room, with no apparent desire to converse with the other two gentlemen.

"What do you think of Miss Thorpe?" Daniel asked Mr. Savage.

"She is pretty enough, though a little melancholy."

Daniel had yet not told his friend that his father intended for him to marry her. "Do you have designs on her?"

He snorted. "I am in no position to marry."

This surprised Daniel. Tobias inherited his estate only a few years ago. Marriage should be his next step, but Savage was a bit of a rake.

"But if a young lady catches your fancy, you may change your mind?" Daniel asked.

A sneeze erupted from the quarter of Mr. Bateman, a sound which may have signaled the beginning of battle. Both Daniel and Mr. Savage turned toward the man, who

hastily pulled out his handkerchief but did not wait to finish his nasal cleanse before addressing the other two men.

“I am partial to Mrs. Allen. She is a suitable woman, proper and lovely, soft, malleable.” He then blew his nose so profoundly that it rivaled the sneeze. “I may propose in a day or two, once I am certain of my feelings.” He mopped his nose.

Daniel could not help himself. “How will you gauge her regard for you?”

Mr. Bateman waved his soiled handkerchief in the air as if brushing away the concern. “She is likely desperate for the guidance of a husband and will take little time in forming an attachment to me. At her age, and having been a widow for so long, she will be thrilled for any proposal. To receive compliments from a man such as myself? Well, I hardly need wait.”

Mr. Savage scratched his chin, moving his hand over his mouth to disguise his amusement.

“A widow for how long?”

“Decades. According to Mrs. Eliot, she was married and widowed before she turned twenty.”

“But Mrs. Allen seems very comfortable in her situation. She is quite independent and, if I understand correctly, has a profitable estate in Ireland.” Mrs. Eliot had spread the private details of Mrs. Allen’s life to all unmarried gentlemen last evening.

“Quite. Only think how much value I will add when it’s under my stewardship. Having been run by a woman, there are bound to be a multitude of improvements awaiting my hand.”

Disgusting. Why did Mrs. Eliot press him on her friend?

When they joined the ladies, Daniel paused in the doorway. Mr. Bateman hesitated not at all to take a seat beside Mrs. Allen. The impulse to cast Bateman out of the house had him balling his fists. Why did he care so much for Mrs. Allen's comfort? One dance did not make him her protector. Mr. Bateman's pompous assumption that Mrs. Allen wanted his company rankled, and Daniel refused to watch the poor woman endure the attentions of so insufferable a man. In a space half-wide enough to fit him, he wiggled between them so that Mr. Bateman drooped off the edge of his seat. He used his cane to keep himself from slipping to the floor. Mrs. Eliot, seated across from their trio, grinned and clasped her hands under her chin as if watching a delightful scene in a play. As if she were directing it.

Under Mrs. Eliot's feline scrutiny, he became aware of his ludicrous behavior. He had just squeezed himself between two people. Beyond the fact that no woman deserved to be accosted by the likes of Mr. Bateman, the motive for his behavior remained murky.

Across the room, Miss Thorpe brightened under Mr. Savage's attentiveness. She spoke with animation, and Daniel's gratitude for his friend strengthened. To atone for his neglect, he would take her up in his landau tomorrow, where they may become acquainted.

The guests rearranged themselves when tea and coffee were served, and Daniel found an opportunity to make the invitation. Louisa glanced to her aunt, who smiled in approval.

"You shall come too, Aunt. Surely it is not fitting for me to go alone." It would perfectly correct for Daniel and Miss Thorpe to go together so long as his groom attended, but if she felt uncomfortable, Daniel would not dissuade Mrs. Allen from chaperoning.

Mrs. Allen pursed her lips before speaking. "I will accompany you, if you wish." To Daniel she said, "Is there room for three?"

He assured her there was, and they made plans to meet the following day at half past five. He could not tell if he looked forward to learning more about Miss Thorpe or her aunt, but made the decision not to tell them of their connection. It could only complicate matters, particularly should Miss Thorpe develop feelings for someone else.

The evening continued with the usual entertainments. Daniel offered to turn the pages for Miss Thorpe, who played the pianoforte while the others gathered to play whist. Mr. Bateman fixated upon Mrs. Allen. From across the room, Daniel riled against his powerlessness to intervene when the presumptuous man inclined himself toward his prey to touch her forearm or whisper in her ear. Mrs. Allen squirmed, bent away from him, gently swept his hand off hers, and gave every indication that she did not enjoy the attention. Unlike many ladies, there was no tittering at his demonstrations. She seemed well-equipped to handle herself.

Daniel turned a page for Miss Thorpe, admiring her attractive, turned-up nose. She was his objective. He focused on her.

Chapter Eight

Across the whist table, Mary stared at Agnes until she caught her eye. Then she glared and made a small gesture toward Mr. Bateman, who found every excuse to put his hands on her. Agnes, the instigator of Mary's discomfort, should do something to remove the man's attentions. Agnes smiled and laid down her cards.

Mary was partnered with Savage but could barely keep track of their tricks, with Mr. Bateman's foul breath tickling her ear. It took everything she had to remain in her seat, to refrain from screaming in Mr. Bateman's face to leave her alone. Good manners tethered her to her chair.

"Have I expressed the utter delight I find in your presence this evening?" Mr. Bateman elongated his "s," sending uncomfortable chills down her spine.

Have I expressed the utter revulsion I find in yours? "My hearing is very good, you know," she said. "You may speak to me in the customary way."

"But I delight in your proximity, your lavender smell."

I wear rosewater, you imbecile. And you smell of mothballs and sour milk.

He rested his hand on her wrist. "Your humility does you credit."

It did not. Humility was an indoctrination that served only to make it near impossible for her to say what she really wanted to express. She opened her mouth, determined to put the man in his place, but good manners stopped her tongue. There must be a

gracious way to discourage him.

Mr. Savage said, "Your turn, Mrs. Allen."

Mr. Bateman snaked his arm around the back of her chair. "Do you need advice, my dear?"

"No, thank you. I do not need anything." Including your disgusting arm around me. Have you no sense for when you're not wanted? Propriety kept her silent.

He chuckled and patted her shoulder, his arm tightening around her. Being a genteel and proper lady meant she should signal her discomfort by moving away only slightly. Any other response would be frowned upon by the entire party, and she did not wish to cause a scene or jeopardize Louisa's chances with Mr. Fletcher. But she longed to throw his arm away from her and smack his smug face.

He clutched her closer still, regardless of her stiffness, and she felt the dampness of his underarm penetrate her sleeve.

Her elbow kicked into his side. She turned on him. "Sir, you will refrain from touching me and whispering so intimately in my ear." She clenched her teeth, pushing down the embarrassment at making such a speak. "You will move your chair from mine." Her vast patience exhausted, she punctuated her command by slamming her fist on the table. Everyone must be looking at her indecorous exhibition. From her bodice to the top of her head, heat seared through her, punishing her for her outburst. But what else was she to do?

The last note of the pianoforte echoed into silence.

Mr. Bateman withdrew, but his spine lengthened, and he appeared far more intimidating than he had a moment before when hovering over his victim. "I say, such

unladylike behavior.” Mr. Bateman grumbled the accusation into his cards and maintained a cool expression, his eyelids half-closed and his nose in the air.

Anger flashed like tinder to a flame. This was outside of enough. How dare he twist his bad behavior and make it her problem? She turned on him. “Pardon me?” She paused, proud of her calm but stern voice. “I endured your attentions with polite, repeated insistence that you give me space. If my conduct is unladylike, what do we call a man who ignores the wishes of a lady?”

Across the table Mrs. Eliot pressed her lips together but could not disguise her mirth. Mr. Savage shook with silent laughter. Mary darted a glance at Louisa, who stared at her as if she sprouted a horn. Beside her Daniel nodded. Censure or approval?

There was only one way to handle this level of humiliation. Lean into it. She flapped her elbows out to ensure she had enough space and placed the next trick. “Thank you, Mr. Bateman. The consideration you have shown me this evening is commendable.” Still simmering, she tried to smile at him, but feared it manifested more like a dog baring its teeth. Time to change the subject. “Mrs. Eliot, dinner was delicious. You possess great skill at selecting a menu.”

At this, the rest of the party, with the notable exception of Mr. Bateman, chimed in with their endorsement of the meal.

The card game soon broke up, and for the remainder of the evening Mr. Bateman bored Mrs. Eliot with long descriptions of his last harvest and the exact remuneration of his efforts.

Mary found a quiet corner wherein to hide with her knitting. Her embarrassment warred with triumph. It felt good to say just what she liked.

Mary was at her wit’s end. Despite the urgency, it did not seem Louisa took her

plight seriously. Their time in Bath slid by, already two weeks passed since their arrival and no effort by Louisa to settle on a man.

“I cannot like Mr. Fletcher. He’s an old codger.”

“That is taking it too far. There is no comparison between him and the younger men. Their foolishness is not to be borne. Besides, you do not know Mr. Fletcher yet. He is handsome, is he not?” Mary said, utterly confused by Louisa’s lack of interest in the most superior gentleman in Bath.

Louisa’s look communicated both ennui and scorn, a withering expression that implied she thought her aunt the stupidest woman in the world. And perhaps she was, for she could not comprehend why Louisa’s heart did not beat for Mr. Fletcher. His attractive, solicitous nature put him above every other man, and he singled out Louisa by inviting her to ride in his carriage.

“What about Mr. Savage?” Though Mary herself did not particularly care for the man’s derisive expression, if Louisa liked him, so much the better. She would have performed her duty, for which she began to regret volunteering. It was also information Mary needed as Louisa’s chaperone. If her niece liked him, she would need to know Mr. Savage better.

“I have not seen a man in Bath who interests me. What would you have me do? Flirt with any stranger?” She wrapped her shoulders in a light shawl and draped herself over the settee in the limp manner peculiar to girls under the age of twenty.

“Yes! That is exactly what you do. Flirt a little and get to know them. You cannot judge Mr. Fletcher’s suitability as a husband until you are more familiar with him. It takes time.” Time was in short supply. Only six weeks remained until they must return home. “I am asking you to make an effort. Marriage to a stranger of your father’s choosing is a dreary prospect.”

Louisa groaned. “You needn’t remind me.”

Yet, Louisa did nothing to help herself. The eligible and amiable Mr. Fletcher provided an impeccable solution to Louisa’s quandary and seemed the answer to her future happiness.

Mary opened her mouth to encourage Louisa further, but the butler stepped in the room and informed them of Mr. Fletcher’s arrival. Louisa sat upright and pinched her cheeks in front of the wall of mirrors. Perhaps there was still hope.

In the carriage, Louisa sat by Mr. Fletcher, and Mary situated herself vis-à-vis. He asked Louisa if she preferred a tour of town or if the countryside was more to her taste.

“Take me to the trees. Since there is no ocean, the forest will do.” Near the outskirts of town, Louisa leaned back and took a deep breath. The bustle of Bath must be a strain on the girl’s nerves. “I miss the ocean air.” Louisa was homesick. How could Mary not have taken that into consideration? Young and away from everything familiar for the first time since her mother’s death, of course she missed home. She did not have the adventurous tendencies Mary suppressed in her own heart.

“Do you enjoy books, Miss Thorpe?” Mr. Fletcher asked.

“I adore novels. I’m reading the most fascinating story, *A Woman Who Loves*. I know gentlemen are generally wary of a romance, but I think everyone should read it.”

Mary’s heart jumped to her throat, while Mr. Fletcher beamed at Louisa as if she’d given him a gift. Louisa was reading her book. Mercy! Was it suitable for her?

“Odd you should ask. The bookseller recommended me that very title.”

Heat prickled up Mary's spine to the base of her hair. If it weren't impolite to scratch oneself in company, she would have attacked her neck.

"Oh, you will love it. Have you started yet?"

"I didn't have a chance to make the purchase, but I look forward to it. I told your aunt that I thought I saw her through the bookshop window that day."

Mary held her breath, her mind a scramble of thoughts, none of which sufficed to redirect this conversation.

"It is possible. She likes to gawk at that display. By the by, Aunt, what is your interest in it?"

"Mine? I was pleased with the color of the binding."

"I do enjoy reading," Mr. Fletcher said after an uncomfortable silence. "Mr. Pope, for example."

Louisa scoffed. "Tedious. I don't know how you endure reading a sermon when you could go speak with the vicar."

Mary's shoulders relaxed with the turn in conversation, though the comment did not show Louisa to advantage. "Louisa, I am sure you would appreciate 'The Rape of the Lock.' We shall read it together." Louisa gave her aunt a look that might have shriveled an evergreen. At least Mr. Fletcher did not see her.

He laughed. "Alexander Pope was talented, but sadly, he wrote no novels. Did you enjoy Robinson Crusoe?"

"My brother liked it so much that I determined to despise it," Louisa said.

With a nudge at her niece's shoe, Mary cut in. "It is a favorite of mine, except..." She caught herself, not liking to insert herself again, but what else could she do when Louisa behaved with so little decorum? She must lend her *The Whole Duty of a Woman*.

"Yes?" Mr. Fletcher asked.

She tried to be brief. "The scene where Crusoe is on the beach, and he sees footprints? It seems that having been alone for so long, he would have longed for human contact, even if he feared they were cannibals."

"I had never thought of that. You believe a person starved of human interaction would put themselves at risk to have it?"

"We are not meant for solitude. I don't know how anyone would retain their sanity when left alone for so long." The carriage rolled over a rock, and Mary clutched the cushion beneath her. Were they still discussing the book?

"Mayhap he didn't, with his imagining his dog to be his footman." Mr. Fletcher smiled, showing strong white teeth, and she felt herself grinning back at him like a schoolgirl. Mr. Fletcher asked her opinion of *Tom Jones*, and the two of them slipped into comfortable conversation.

"I have always wished to be a member of a literary society." Mr. Fletcher led the horses deftly along the path, which grew narrow as the trees thickened. "Not the sort for writers, but a place for readers to discuss books."

"What a lovely idea." Mary glanced at Louisa's slack face. "Louisa, why don't you select the first book, and we will begin this literary society." She closed her lips to keep herself from speaking anymore. They could not fall in love if she kept prattling on.

“ A Woman Who Loves .” Louisa did not pause before stating her preference, and Mary could have swallowed her own thoughtless tongue. After encouraging Louisa to choose, she could not very well disagree.

“Mr. Fletcher, what are your thoughts?” She prayed he would suggest another book.

“I am in complete agreement. There is no reason why I should not enjoy a romance as well as anyone.”

The clomp of the horses faded to a hush, and the sharp rays of sun dampened as Mary sunk into her own thoughts, becoming only vaguely aware that Mr. Fletcher and Louisa debated possible meeting times and other members to invite for their society’s first gathering. To sit among a group while they analyzed her book...the idea stole her breath and veiled her senses.

“Would Pamela be a better choice?” Mary asked. Had she whispered? Neither of her companions glanced her way. A sudden swelling in her throat prevented a repeat of the suggestion. That and an awful wave of heat that prickled down her spine. An image of a group of educated people praising her book blossomed in her mind and carried her away from the present conversation. What would they say? How would she respond to their praise or criticism? Perhaps she would have a headache on the appointed day and stay in her room.

M ary, Louisa, and Agnes gathered in the drawing room to drink tea and finalize the list of literary society attendees. Mr. Fletcher would choose the men while Louisa, with the help of her aunt and Mrs. Eliot, would decide which women to invite.

Learning what people thought of her writing, hearing it discussed as a work of literature, was a gift Mary had not expected. It made her fingers itch to write. Thus far, the publisher, newspapers, and readers fawned over the book, but this literary society might as easily recognize it as dross. In that case, Mary would endure

criticism without the benefit of explaining herself. Not that she would. Mary harbored no illusion that *A Woman Who Loves* was anything more than trivial nonsense.

Mary's eyes did not close that night. Fear that someone would guess her identity based on a few autobiographical elements kept her awake. Not many knew her late husband had been a member of the peerage or that she held an estate in Ireland. Her misgivings were an overreaction, but that recognition did nothing to calm the fluttering in her chest or send her to sleep.

Agnes posed the greatest risk. As a dear and longtime friend, she could easily find the truth within the story, but Agnes would never suspect what Mary had done, being too self-centered to think anyone could do something she hadn't.

With an extra biscuit on her plate for support, Mary forced herself to join in the conversation, despite her fatigue. Louisa and Agnes wrote the names of ten women and were deciding which to remove. They were only allowed seven, including themselves. A total of fourteen was the perfect number of participants. Few enough that all could voice their opinions, yet sufficient to keep the conversation fresh.

"Read the names aloud, please, Louisa. I may be able to help eliminate someone," said Mary.

Louisa did.

Agnes cut in before Mary could remark. "Scratch Miss Park and Mrs. Thurston. I don't expect they will add much, since Mrs. Thurston is more than half deaf, and judging from my last conversation with Miss Park, I question her literacy."

Mary addressed Louisa. "And what a chance for you to become better acquainted with Mr. Fletcher—and six gentlemen besides."

It was meant as encouragement, but Louisa slumped and announced she would retire to her room and reread *A Woman Who Loves* .

That very day, the invitations were sent and the menu set, and they selected Louisa, though still in her room, to moderate the conversation. That done, Mary had only to fret and anticipate the meeting, which would take place in one week. She would behave with such incontrovertible correctness that no one would suspect her. She would be everything that was appropriate and amiable. Even if Mr. Bateman encroached upon her, she would bear it with fortitude.

“By the by, Agnes, you did call off Mr. Bateman, did you not?”

“You did that all on your own.”

“I trust you will refrain from assaulting me with other men?”

“Why would I do that? Watching you take him down was great sport. I have not been so diverted in ages. But I do apologize. He was very gauche. I own my mistake.”

“It is a waste of time, putting men in my way.”

“Come, a man would do you good.”

Lord Allen had been the perfect husband. No one could exceed him in her affection, but it was a long time to be alone. Charlotte, Mary’s sister, a widow of less time, did not seem as forlorn as Mary sometimes felt. Charlotte had a granddaughter, a daughter, and a son-in-law living with her. In contrast, Agnes spent less and less time with her husband and never wanted for company.

The mere thought of marriage betrayed dear Lord Allen’s memory. He had been great in the way of the world, an affective speaker, a capable landlord, an amiable friend,

but Mary treasured his soft words, spoken each night before she closed her eyes for sleep, when he told her he loved her. Each day when she awakened, he had been beside her. He kissed her cheek and bade her good morning. It seemed a small, a very small thing, but that had been a constancy she'd never had before or after. Upon his arrival home, he would find her first thing to tell her what he had been doing. He asked for her opinion—which in hindsight was laughable because she was so young and ill-informed—and then he listened, a powerful gift. The absence of his ear left her unmoored, even these twenty years later. Their love was a wonderful, astonishing gift; an honest, loyal, passionate love, equal on both sides. She loved him with all the strength of her being and felt his adoration in return.

A gentlewoman did not indulge in second marriages. She endured and allowed other women a first chance at happiness. With the shortage of good men, finding someone for Louisa was proving difficult enough.

Mary poured all her romantic fancies into her novels. That is one of the reasons it was so embarrassing. She'd written about a life no true lady would consider living. Yet, she, herself a model of ladylike behavior, had dreamt it. She'd not only fantasized about a love that would never be hers, but she'd also written it down for all of England to read.

“Are you feeling well? You are little flushed.” Agnes appeared as concerned as she ever had.

A wave of nausea rolled over her. “Just a flush of heat. I will soon recover.” She hoped it was true.

Chapter Nine

M ary tried a second time to swallow a bite of bread. Though thoroughly buttered, it scratched its way down, leaving a residual lump in her throat. Each bite sat like a ball of yarn in her stomach. In only a few hours, the first meeting of the literary society would begin.

For Agnes and Louisa, the novel was a favorite topic at breakfast, at tea, at dinner, or any other time the two were in the same room together, so Mary had a sense of what lay ahead. Before *A Woman Who Loves* became a part of their lives, the two women had very little in common, but over the past week, Agnes and Louisa found innumerable topics of discussion.

Agnes smarted over the disobedience of the main characters, Penelope and Richard, who deliberately cast aside respectability and parental authority. Louisa sympathized with the lovers and claimed that their over-managing families pushed them into unscrupulous action. She insisted that the couple found happiness in the only way left to them. Agnes and Louisa pulled interminable support for their arguments from within the pages of the book.

On this evening, dinner was a casual affair. Mary and Agnes began eating without Louisa. Agnes, engrossed in marking passages of *A Woman Who Loves* by stuffing scraps of paper into her copy, did not heed Mary or the way she pushed her food about her plate.

Louisa rushed into the room. “Mrs. Eliot, listen to this passage. ‘ Richard’s father lived a life of selfish debauchery, caring for others only insofar as they served his

own wicked purposes. A purse full of money, a belly full of port, and an evening full of women: that was the life Richard could expect if he remained in his father's pocket. ” Louisa looked up, brilliant with conviction.

“Nonsense,” Agnes said. “Richard could have refrained from greed, drink, and women while pursuing a lucrative position in his father's line of business.”

“But to drag Penelope into the situation, to have her saddled with a reprobate father-in-law. They could not marry if Richard did not escape his father.”

“Precisely. Penelope should have married the earl,” Mrs. Eliot said.

Louisa's book snapped shut. “You do not remember what it feels like to be in love. Or to have never loved at all.” She mumbled the second sentence through a mouthful of cheese she had plucked from the sideboard.

“Louisa,” Mary interjected. “That is quite enough. You will not speak to your hostess in such a way.” Agnes waved away the insult.

Louisa turned to Mary. “You understand. You are like the aunt in the story who believes in true love.”

Mary's stomach plummeted to the floor, a now familiar sensation whenever conversation turned to her book. “Yes, well. I see both your points.” She was precisely like the aunt in the story.

“You never say what you think.” Louisa carried her plate to the table and swooped into a chair next to Mary.

“You have barely taken a bite, Mary. Are you well?” Agnes set her book aside.

Mary assured her friend by taking a mouthful of quail, gulping water to work it down.

The housekeeper entered with a stack of mail on a silver salver. “Mrs. Eliot, pardon the disruption. I brought the post. With all the preparations for this evening, it was forgotten.”

“I need a new butler. In no establishment should the housekeeper bring mail. My butler is likely inebriated in the pantry.” She thumbed through the correspondence. “Something for you, Mary.” She squinted at the address. “What’s this? Golden Buck Publishing?”

Mary’s heart stopped. Sending her publisher the Bath address had proven foolish. The game was up. She was found out.

“An investment?” Agnes handed over the letter with a raised brow.

“Yes, precisely.” Mary sank back in her chair, marveling, and not for the first time, that Agnes did not see the glaring truth. In preparation for today’s meeting, Mary revisited the pages of her novel, wherein she discovered countless hints to her identity. The most damning of which was that the kind aunt rescued the impoverished couple after their elopement and took them to her estate in Ireland. That estate lay in the same county as Mary’s property. In addition, the girl had come of age in Bath and gone to school there. Just as Mary had. But the aunt was hardly the main character. Perhaps no one would notice her history.

With the letter stuffed into her pocket, she mentally composed her reply. Dear Sir, In future when addressing your correspondence, please be more discreet ...

“Look, here, Mary.” Agnes waved a letter at her. “From the orphanage. They’ve received the donation of the woolen blankets, though a little late for winter use.” She perused the letter. “They are very grateful.”

Mary helped Agnes with her philanthropic work at an orphanage in London. Once begun, the two of them might discuss for hours the endless needs of the foundling hospital, but Mary didn't have the patience for the debate. "I am delighted to hear it. And would love nothing more than to discuss the next project, but I am tired. I will retire to my room and rest before tonight's meeting." Agnes glanced between Mary and her plate of untouched food—she did not ordinarily skip meals. Mary pushed in her chair and hurried upstairs, eager to know what her publisher had to say.

With the door bolted, she sat on a chair near the window and read.

Dear Lady Mary,

As you are aware, *A Woman Who Loves* is a great success, outperforming our greatest expectations. We are eager for news of your next romance. Kindly inform us of your progress.

Progress? Next romance?

However tempting to her pride, there would be no future novels from her. At least none for a publisher. She would continue to write in obscurity, keep the novels already completed locked away in their special trunk, and hope that *A Woman Who Loves* would not send her into a nervous fit or to an early grave. It might, given the affect it had on her heart each time she heard it mentioned. She moved to the dressing table and readied a quill to write the letter informing her publisher of that fact.

Dear Mr. Porter,

Her pen hovered over the page until ink pooled at the tip of the quill and splattered over the words. Keeping Louisa occupied robbed her of writing time, and weeks passed since she last held her pen. The weightless writing implement righted something inside her. She slid the ruined letter aside and, on a fresh sheet of paper,

began a new story.

In the middle of the ballroom and in the arms of a respectable, if undistinguished gentleman, Lady Ashley caught sight of her future husband. Though she had never seen him before, she knew as certainly as her heart beat in her chest that her destiny lay with the tall, chestnut-haired man ...

Not wishing to draw attention to herself, Mary took exceptional care with her appearance, choosing a deep blue, almost black gown, few ornaments, and no rouge. Her hair was coiffed in a demure style. She would not bring along a knitting basket, however tempting. Inane comments would do well enough.

Only old women knitted in public, and she did not feel old. At forty, perhaps she should, but that birthday had brought with it the liberating sensation that she may wear what she wanted. She put aside her wigs and changed her hooped gowns for more comfortable options. It almost made her brave enough to voice her true opinions on occasion. But she never expected her work to become the subject of a literary meeting, where anyone reading her ridiculous fabrication could judge her. All the self-consciousness of a girl in her first season descended upon her, and her only defense was to hide behind a mountain of decorum and respectability.

If she never published another book, what did she have? She was never the first person her loved ones thought of when they needed company or help. If her niece Sophia wanted to throw a dinner party or someone to hold her daughter, Sophia called on her mother. Agnes had her husband and son. And, despite Mary's efforts, Louisa wasn't exactly grateful for her aunt's intervention. Their volunteer work for the charity had been Agnes's idea, and Agnes did most of the work.

Mary was superfluous—except in novel writing.

Only uncivilized females like Eliza Haywood wrote novels, and she was an actress

and a woman of ill-repute. Mary owned that Haywood's *Love in Excess* inspired her own writing but would never admit to having read the novel. She did not wish to be thought unladylike and strove to avoid the censure her mother had suffered. Was she becoming too uninhibited, more like her mother? Her sense of independence sometimes led her astray and into the grey area where women behaved outside the realm of delicate femininity.

The clock in the hall struck quarter to eight. It was not too late to feign a headache, but sitting in her room listening to the muted buzz of the conversation would kill her. Curiosity overcame her discomfiture, and she descended the stairs. With a copy of her novel in hand, she made her way into the drawing room and placed herself in an out-of-the-way corner. Guests trickled in, and Mary greeted each with the demure attitude befitting a woman of her station and tried not to feel giddy at the sight of her book in so many hands.

Before sitting, Mr. Fletcher approached Mary. "I, uh, must warn you." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Mr. Bateman heard of the meeting and insisted on coming. My apologies."

No further communication was necessary. His eyes spoke deep regret, and Mary appreciated it. "I will keep myself apart. Do not concern yourself."

So perfect a gentleman, so attentive. With dawning clarity, she realized he was the hero of the novel begun the evening before. The awareness made it impossible to meet his gaze. He squeezed her arm, and the warm touch drew her to his mesmerizing eyes. Her hand hovered near his arm, and she almost took hold of his sleeve and pulled him into the chair next to her. She must not forget herself. She nodded at him in dismissal and watched him sit next to Louisa, as was proper, as Mary hoped he would.

A familiar woman entered the room. Miss Barry? Mary had not paid close enough

attention to the guest list, or she would have protested the invitation to her former schoolmate, now a decided spinster. Miss Barry was mean. She kept a list of girls she considered “unbefitting” and tormented them. As a result, the younger students were forever trying to garner her favor, a challenge Mary had lost. Miss Barry labeled Mary unbefitting, a persecution that still stung. Perhaps it would prove a distraction from the churning anticipation that coursed through her.

Once the party assembled, Mr. Fletcher stood and thanked Louisa for inspiring the meeting. He was everything genial and solicitous. How did Louisa prevent herself from swooning for him right then? Were Mary in Louisa’s shoes, she would be half in love with him. The party settled, and Mr. Fletcher announced that Louisa would moderate the discussion.

“Mrs. Eliot and I have engaged in continuous debate between duty and happiness,” Louisa began. “In the story, Penelope and Richard place their happiness above the expectations of their families and society. Is this a formula we should adopt in our own lives?”

Louisa’s ability to articulate the argument so clearly was impressive. Everyone began speaking at once, some holding fast to tradition, others applauding Penelope for taking her desires into her own hands and proposing the elopement.

“How can you approve of such behavior? The scandal would tarnish their reputations and their children’s and their children’s children. The respectability of their familial line ruined,” said Miss Barry, whose stays were strung so tight that her bosom ballooned out of her gown.

“But they found happiness,” Louisa said.

“In the backwards place of Ireland, they could be as respectable as they pleased. No one would know of the scandal that far off.” Agnes sent Mary an apologetic look.

“No offense to those who may own property there.”

Mary shoved a cream filbert into her mouth and chewed.

“There is no escaping it. God would know and punish them for it,” said a gentleman who spoke through his nose. Mary did not remember his name.

“Too true, too true.” This from Mr. Bateman who was, as Mr. Fletcher promised, on the other side of the room from Mary.

Mary sat forward, absorbing each delightful word. To think that her fanciful words were being taken so seriously. Her lips stretched into a smile. She pinned them between her teeth. None of that.

“I only wonder who wrote this rubbish.” Miss Barry punctuated her curiosity by clattering her empty plate onto a side table. “This Lady Mary must have been familiar with Bath, as half the novel takes place right here.”

Agnes speared Mary with a quick but meaningful glance. Did Agnes suspect? Did Miss Barry know? A hush fell, and everyone in the room looked with suspicion at everyone else. Mary’s face burned so hot the heat might have consumed her. She wanted it to. Why hadn’t she brought her knitting? Mary lifted her teacup and downed its contents in slow, silent gulps. If understanding dawned on someone’s face, she did not wish to see it. She chewed another filbert but didn’t taste it.

“It is unlikely that anyone we know wrote the book. It is so well-done. Why would she hide her identity?” said Agnes.

Mr. Fletcher said, “If it was rubbish, we could not have this rousing conversation.” Mary wanted to hug him for the reassuring glance he gave Louisa.

“I quite agree.” Louisa spoke with a boldness Mary rarely saw from the girl. “It is a lovely, romantic tale. Their sacrifice was nothing compared to what they gained.”

“Ostracized from worthy society? That is the prize for people who behave in so atrocious a manner.” Miss Barry seemed determined to have her point. “And that is why I call it drivel. It will influence the minds of those too young to make proper choices. The author should be denied ink.”

“You are too hard, Miss Barry. It is a lot of fluff, but hardly dangerous.” This from Miss Rowe, a new friend of Louisa’s.

Several voiced their opinion on Miss Barry’s side, calling the book and its author a disgrace. Mary listened to the criticism as one awaiting trial. With every hard word, the noose tightened around her neck. The first chapters of Mary’s latest novel lay on her writing desk filled with more fluff, drivel, and rubbish. More completed novels and short stories filled the dark trunk hidden under her bed in Cornwall. Her heart thumped slow in her belly.

Mary could hold back no longer. “Certainly, the author meant the story as a diversion rather than a book of instruction.”

“That is just it.” The man with the nasal voice leaned forward. “A novel is for casual entertainment, but it will permeate the minds of the young, dissuade them from obedience to their parents, and convince them to disregard convention.”

“Penelope is active in forming her own future,” Louisa said. “In a world where women have so little freedoms, I admire her for pursuing her happiness.”

“But you would not do such a thing yourself. No well-bred young lady would,” said Miss Barry.

“Perhaps you would not be so bitter a spinster had you taken a risk in your youth.” Louisa’s tone was so blasé that it took a moment for the insult to hit.

Mary held her breath and watched Miss Barry’s face turn as red as the paint on her cheeks. Her hand fluttered to her overwhelming décolletage while Louisa brushed her skirt with commendable nonchalance. Agnes grinned wide enough to split her face. It seemed she had a protégée.

Mary leaned back in her chair, away from the discomfort of the room, catching Mr. Fletcher’s eye as she did so. He lifted a shoulder at her and smiled. His communication, so private, so intimate, fell upon her like a caress. He withdrew his gaze, shifted in his seat, and opened his mouth a time or two, before clenching his jaw together.

“I say, this is a much better party than I expected.” All eyes turned toward Mr. Savage, who had hitherto contributed nothing to the discussion. “I’ve not yet had a chance to finish the book, but I will certainly do so now.”

Mary stared hard at Agnes until she caught her attention. With meaningful eyes, Mary urged Agnes to lead the conversation into a less charged territory. Agnes had a gift for such things, but in that moment, she seemed inclined to allow the tension to marinate.

Instead of helping, Agnes said, “You have spoken few words today, Mrs. Allen. What do you think of this Lady Mary who writes of Bath and has estate in Ireland?”

With a start, Mary understood. Agnes knew the truth, and she wished Mary to confess.

Chapter Ten

M ary reached for her tea. Empty. She felt naked, and without even a porcelain cup to cover her face. And her filberts were gone. Nothing remained to shield her from impending mortification.

“How am I to guess? I suppose she could be anyone.” Her undisciplined eyes darted to Mr. Fletcher. Of those in the room, she held an illogical dread of his knowing the truth. “There can be no wrong opinion about a work of fiction.” Pleased with her composure, Mary smiled, confident she appeared collected.

With the narrowed eyes of a hunter cornering her prey, Miss Barry pressed further. “The author, Lady Mary, shares your name.”

“Yes.” Mary waved a hand in the air in a flippant gesture. “It is a common name.”

“Come, Miss Barry, the name of the author is hardly interesting. Let’s go back to the previous question,” said Louisa.

Mary sighed as the conversation escalated, passionate comments flying across the room. Despite there being no more set-downs, her shoulders tightened with every word. An hour later, when the last guest departed, she turned to Louisa. “Your treatment of Miss Barry was inexcusable.”

“She is a pig.” Louisa batted her lashes. “I was inspired by your handling of Mr. Bateman.”

Mary groaned and, too exhausted to argue, excused herself, leaving Agnes and Louisa to rehash the event while she ensconced herself in the bedroom. In the dark of night, with her head on her pillow, Mary did her best thinking.

The first meeting of the Literary Society was perhaps its last. Feelings were hurt and divisions made among the attendees. She never supposed her little book would arouse such controversy. If asked before the meeting who would station themselves in which camp, Mary could have guessed. Agnes emerged as the only surprise, debating on Louisa's side in favor of love conquering all. Her change of opinion was likely made only to give herself an opportunity to argue with Miss Barry. Though no further hints were made that Mary Allen authored the book, the insinuation rattled Mary and she could not help but envision her ruin should everything come to light.

Throughout the whole of the soirée, despite her discomfort, Mary was aware of Mr. Fletcher. Every encounter she had with him reinforced his suitability. He spoke thoughtfully, criticized no opinions, and interjected in support of Louisa as much as correct behavior allowed. To see Louisa settled with Mr. Fletcher was her one wish. Then she could return home having done her duty and explore the possibility of writing anonymously.

Her pen called to her. Though her fingers itched to create a villain of Miss Barry's stamp, she remained in bed, candles out, attention refocused on Mr. Fletcher and the methods she might use to convince Louisa there could be no better match than he.

In all things, Louisa proved difficult to manage. She would not admit Mr. Fletcher's charms or that she'd been abominable to Miss Barry. Despite Mary's best efforts to be a flawless gentlewoman, she was a bad influence on her niece, as demonstrated by Louisa's near obsession with *A Woman Who Loves*. Though Mary was not wholly opposed to the romantic notion that one might sacrifice for the beauty of love, she would never wish Louisa to behave as Penelope had. Mary's fictional characters had fallen into a ruin so deep that not even the generous aunt could save their social

standing. In real life, such altruism did not exist. Few in the world were princely enough to turn over wealth to an impoverished, disgraced pair of lovers.

With these thoughts swirling in her head, Mary fell asleep to a dream of dancing daringly close to Mr. Fletcher. His hands wrapped around her, moved to her back, then slid up to her neck. In his arms she became whole, safe, and wanted. The woman in Mr. Fletcher's arms turned again. Louisa smiled up at him.

Over breakfast, Mary expressed her concern that she and Agnes were guiding Louisa astray. Mary tried to persuade Agnes to join her in an effort to behave more properly. Agnes opposed and called it fraudulent.

"Fraudulent?" Mary did not understand.

"Yes. If we behaved, we would not be representing our true selves. You like to pretend you are a well-behaved woman, but you've a rebellious heart."

Mary snorted but decided it wise not to debate over her own character. "You heard what she said to Miss Barry. I didn't know she was capable of such insolence. With Louisa trying to make a match, it would not be well to have an enemy in Miss Barry. You said yourself that she and Mr. Nash are great friends." Beau Nash was Bath's powerful, if unofficial, master of ceremonies, who created social rules, approved or dismissed those wishing to attend the assemblies, and even brokered marriages.

Agnes put down her fork and leaned back, a nearly imperceptible smile on her lips. Mary's stomach tightened at the familiar expression. "You are worried she will out you as the author of that book."

Mary inhaled a bit of toast and lost herself in a fit of coughing. When she righted, wheezing with watery eyes, she asked, "How long have you known?"

“From the first chapter. It is a good book. I’m proud of you, but you did little to hide your identity. I thought you were waiting for the world to discover your secret. You chose the book, after all.”

“I would never! Do you really think me so vain? It was Louisa’s choice.” Mary looked round the room to be sure no servant had caught wind of her confession, or worse still that Louisa should walk in. “An accident, never meant for publication. My housekeeper posted it.”

Agnes grinned. “Good for her. If you don’t find a husband, perhaps your novels will sustain you.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You are a romantic, Mary. And you need something to do. You can’t spend your life in your sister’s garden and your niece’s nursery.”

This declaration made Mary feel like a child, helpless and somehow trapped. “I don’t wish anyone to know.”

“No one will. People are very stupid. They need mounds of evidence before drawing conclusions. Take Louisa. She has no idea, though she’s known you for her whole life.”

The words did little to quiet Mary’s anxiety. She dreaded the moment society called her mercenary or indecorous. Mary’s mother had been a bit of a businesswoman. She’d loved flowers. Perhaps that is why Mary had little use for gardening. Masses of flowers grew in her mother’s garden, and the parlor was often replete with heaps of greenery, making it off limits to Mary and her siblings. Their mother arranged the abundance into garlands, wreaths, swags, and any number of huge displays. For a fee, she’d delivered them to wealthier members of the community. At school, with

teachers and students citing beliefs about propriety as if it were a religion, she'd become embarrassed by her mother's enterprise. No other mothers did anything so gauche.

And now she was an authoress. Earning money just as her mother. She could almost hear Lord Allen rolling in his grave. And his mother, still alive and ruling the estates... it did not bear consideration.

The clatter of Agnes's teacup landing in its saucer roused Mary from her reveries. "You need a husband. I see how you watch Mr. Fletcher, and he will be pleased to protect you from any censure you may receive from being an author."

For a moment Mary was dumbstruck. She lived according to *An Infallible Guide to the Fairer Sex*, in which second marriages were discouraged. Having already experienced the felicities of marriage, propriety necessitated she leave the bachelors to the young ladies who had not yet experienced that joy.

"Mr. Fletcher?" Her heart fluttered. "If my eyes follow him, it is for Louisa's sake. Besides, he is young enough to be my..."

"Your brother?"

"Well, yes. We have an amicable relationship, one I hope will continue when he marries Louisa." Mary blinked away the image of herself standing before the church altar, swearing her loyalty to Mr. Fletcher, his blue eyes looking back at her in adoration. An outrageous fantasy. She would have to alter her book to less accurately portray Mr. Fletcher. "Agnes, do not speak of such a thing when you know very well I do not want a husband."

"I know nothing of the sort, but I do know that Louisa and Mr. Fletcher will never marry."

Mary sighed and looked to her tea for comfort. She poured a generous dollop of cream and watched it swirl and tangle through the liquid before stirring in two teaspoons of sugar. She swallowed half the cup, concentrating on the heat that scorched the back of her throat and the creamy sweetness coating her tongue. Ignoring Agnes served best when a confrontation arose between them. Pushing away her own thoughts of Mr. Fletcher remained the true problem, one that would take more than a few swallows of tea to quiet. Her preference for him was nothing more than a fancy born from a return to Bath, where she had fallen in love with her late husband. It resurrected a wish for love and believed-in romance. But she lived all that in her mind and on written pages, though it was mere play. Romance was not for her, not anymore.

During calling hours, they received Mr. Fletcher and Mr. Savage. Agnes stayed in the room but excused herself to her writing desk, claiming she had correspondence that could not wait. It was abominably rude, to Mary's thinking.

Mr. Fletcher rested on a settee next to Louisa while Mary and Mr. Savage took the chairs across from them. Though speaking to Mr. Savage, Mary lent half an ear to Louisa and Mr. Fletcher. However, their heads were bent toward each other, and they spoke in so intimate a manner that Mary could not hear what was said. Mr. Fletcher touched Louisa's arm, a familiarity that reverberated through Mary's own arm. Though pleased by the development, it gave her the sensation of standing alone on a beach while watching a ship take sail.

Louisa turned to Mary. "It is decided. We will hold another meeting of the Literary Society. One sour apple in Miss Barry will not deter us."

"Oh, I'm so pleased." Mary lied. "Will you invite Miss Barry?"

"It would seem strange if we did not," said Mr. Fletcher. "Though I rather hope she doesn't accept the invitation."

“Agnes, what do you think?” Mary asked, hoping Agnes would not use this as an opportunity to wage war on Miss Barry.

Agnes looked up from her letter. “I enjoyed Miss Barry’s comments. It is no fun to belong to a literary society if everyone agrees. Conflict is necessary.”

So long as *A Woman Who Loves* was never mentioned again, Mary tried not to care who would attend.

Louisa wished only for solitude. While Mr. Fletcher applauded her behavior in asserting her opinion, she felt her aunt’s disapproval, and it reminded her how much she suffered. No one was happy with her. Not her father, who wanted nothing to do with her. Not her aunt, who wanted her to like old Mr. Fletcher. She could not please them any more than she could pretend contentment with their plans for her. They expected her delight when they schemed on her behalf. She knew what she wanted, but no one ever asked. Not that it would help, since she desired Mr. Lawrence, who ignored her plight and did not offer for her, though he knew she would accept a proposal. She sighed. Oh, mama. If you were here, all would be set to rights.

That was not quite true, for while Mother could soothe and advocate for her, she could not turn Mr. Lawrence’s head or gain his affection. If Mr. Lawrence loved her, he would have written. She did not comprehend what more he required, but if she figured it out, she would do it, cast aside Aunt Mary’s plans, and run to him.

Mr. Fletcher still spoke to her, but her eyes stung, and she could not attend him when her own thoughts were so pressing. She nodded and hummed in agreement.

Because of her rudeness to Miss Barry, Louisa endured even more condemnation, even though Aunt Mary’s insolent words to Mr. Bateman the other night far exceeded her own.

Mrs. Eliot called to Mr. Fletcher, and he moved to the other side of the room to speak with her and Aunt Mary.

“You look rather glum.” Mr. Savage approached, his frank observation catching Louisa off guard.

“Please, sit down.” He did, and she examined his features. Though they’d spoken before, this was the first time she scrutinized him with interest. He was handsome in the way one might imagine the great hero of a story. Too handsome for her taste and with none of the softness Mr. Lawrence held in his eyes and at the edge of his mouth. Mr. Savage had steel grey eyes and a slight sneer that never quite went away, even when he smiled. He looked the way Louisa felt. Dissatisfied and confined.

She experimented with honesty. “I am. I feel as if my life has been laid out and decided, not by myself or even by providence, but by my father.” Here she hesitated. “And by other meddling family members, though I love them dearly.” Mr. Savage nodded but said nothing. “This is perhaps a problem unique to my sex.” She bit her lip, hoping her sincerity would not drive him away.

“I think not. My experience is much the same. We are ruled by our relations and by circumstances.”

“Circumstances of our family’s making.”

His lips curled. “Yes. And we are left feeling as if we have no power at all.”

A warm shiver crept down Louisa’s arms. He echoed the thoughts of her heart. “I feel trapped.”

“Trapped,” said Mr. Savage at the same time Louisa said it herself. “In my wildest fantasy, I ride away to a place where I can do better for myself, much like Richard in

A Woman Who Loves .”

“Where would you go? What would you do?” Louisa was intrigued, his admission mirroring her own fantasies.

“I’ve always been one to do my duty. I came home from Cambridge early to take care of my ailing father. Since then, I’ve been strapped to my family, ensuring my sister finds a husband, looking after my mother.”

“I am sorry. Is your father gone, then?”

“Yes, he died two years ago.”

He understood. His experience paralleled her own. “I recently lost my mother, and now I am nothing but a burden to my father. He wants to dispose of me.”

Mr. Savage’s eyes, which had seemed cold only moments before, were full of sympathy. “I am sorry to hear that.”

“As am I. We are not so different, are we?”

“It seems not.”

Their eyes locked in understanding.

From across the room, Mr. Fletcher stood, and Mr. Savage followed. The visit ended, but Louisa’s exchange with Mr. Savage lightened her heart. She was not alone. If nothing else, one person understood. It wasn’t much, but it stitched together a tiny bit of the wound that grew within her since her mother became ill. This new friendship felt important.

Her mother's affliction had been of some duration. The pain of watching her mother grow less capable of performing the requisite tasks of daily life left Louisa ragged. By the end, she had been her mother's nurse and maid in every way.

"Darling, will you put my hair up? I want to dine with the family today." This and other requests had made up the final year of her mother's life. She asked Louisa to care for her appearance as well as administer medicines and remind her to eat. So, Louisa learned how. At the time, she wondered why her mother did not engage the maid or the doctor. Now, the memories were precious. While Louisa pulled a brush through her mother's hair or tightened her stays, they chattered and gossiped, and Louisa had received all the motherly advice she would miss in the years to come. It was the greatest gift her mother had left her.

Despite all those wise words, Louisa found herself in her current predicament, pressured to form an attachment with someone for whom she had no feelings. Since Mr. Lawrence was not in Bath, she could not chance upon him in town to remind him of her existence or hint at the expectation of a proposal.

Louisa watched out the window as Mr. Savage mounted the landau. His lithe figure looked well inside the carriage. A small smile tickled the edge of her mouth. She'd gained a true friend that day.

Chapter Eleven

The tedious conversation over Mr. Johnson's poetry had Daniel questioning the wisdom of holding meetings every two weeks. Since many Bath residents did not stay long, the bi-monthly frequency made sense, but so far Miss Thorpe's conversation with Mr. Savage was the only thing interesting about the day's literary society meeting. He shouldn't be eavesdropping.

Miss Thorpe leaned toward Mr. Savage and asked, "What is it you would do if you could do anything?"

He did not hesitate. "I would set myself up as a farmer and find a lady to share my life with. I love nothing more than quiet country, family, and the outdoors."

Daniel scoffed. Mr. Savage hated dirt almost as much as he despised animals. He claimed a love of horses but was useless at recognizing a solid bit of horse flesh. He could no more drive a team with finesse than ride a horse with ease.

Mr. Savage sighed, a dramatic exhalation that had Daniel rolling his eyes. "My past is riddled with regrets. I've been unscrupulous. But tied to my mother and sister, it is difficult to begin anew."

Struck with the urge to knock Tobias on the head, Daniel folded his arms over his chest. While it was true his mother and sister were in his care, he did a poor job of it. From what Daniel could tell, he gambled away their money.

He should explain to Miss Thorpe that their fathers had arranged for their marriage, if

only to keep her safe from Tobias, but something held him back. More than the embarrassment of explaining and the fear she would not be pleased, he hesitated to solidify the unannounced engagement.

He would marry her for Almery, but he grasped the hope that another option would present itself to Miss Thorpe. If she called off the engagement, his parents could do nothing. His gaze shifted to Mrs. Allen.

Miss Thorpe put her hand on Tobias's arm, clearly moved by his plight. "You will find a way to reclaim your life." The two of them shared a long look that made Daniel's stomach turn sour. Their conversation concluded, but Daniel would speak with Tobias about the way he was misleading an innocent and gently bred young lady. She deserved a far better match than Tobias. Someone who would never lie about his actions or spend so much time in gaming hells.

He glanced again at Mrs. Allen, who sat in a corner near the fire, detached from the gathering. She captivated him, physically and in every other way. Her age lent an assurance that younger women lacked. Though he hated to compare her to the duplicitous Miss Jensen, he could not prevent himself from admitting his former fiancée's inferiority, which showed in looks, in manners, in intelligence. Most importantly, Mrs. Allen was honest. The ease of their conversation, her straightforward speech and open smile, convinced him she was trustworthy.

During the last literary meeting, she paid close attention to the discussion but said little. Should he tell her what he overheard between Tobias and Miss Thorpe? Daniel almost laughed at himself. She regularly emerged in his thoughts, so he dreamt up reasons to speak with her. Even more troubling was the warm expansion that filled his chest. Her eyes flitted up to meet his. His stomach tightened when she smiled, then faltered as she glanced around the room and its general ennui. No one spoke, except for Mrs. Eliot and Miss Barry. The amused look she shared with Daniel sent a thrill right through his chest. He pushed his feet into the floor, ready to make his way

to her, but when her focus shifted to the fire, he lost nerve.

Mrs. Eliot and Miss Barry were insulting one another rather than having a true debate. Their argument was uninteresting and the room too warm. More than one attendee had given way to afternoon fatigue. A few heads slumped or lolled to one side. Mr. Bateman, however, followed the argument with enthusiasm, nodding vigorously in support of Miss Barry's points.

Mr. Savage stifled a yawn and interrupted Miss Barry by quoting a line from the poem. He must have just come upon it. "Life protracted is protracted woe." I'd wager Johnson is a merry fellow. Love to have him at a soirée. Too bad Lady Mary has no more novels." While the comment was intended to end the discussion, the ladies did not heed.

Mrs. Eliot drew herself up and raised her sharp brows at Miss Barry. Daniel sensed that whatever Mrs. Eliot said next would be her final blow. A small cough from Mrs. Eliot alerted the drowsy room. Heads raised and the guests made ready to take mental notes for tomorrow's gossip.

"The irony is lost on no one, Miss Barry." Mrs. Eliot paused and took in her audience. "You agree adamantly with Johnson, all the while displaying so many of the propensities he warns against. "Does envy seize thee?" Or will "Wealth unloved without a mourner die?"

Miss Barry, wealthy and a spinster, hardened. Her eyes narrowed, her mouth straightened, her hands, like daggers, pressed against one another in an attitude of prayer. Mrs. Eliot laughed airily, with an unconcerned wave of the hand that seemed to irritate Miss Barry further. Everyone, except the aloof Mrs. Allen, waited for Miss Barry's rebuttal.

"You are not without your evil tendencies," Miss Barry said, "grasping for social

status that no one whose husband is in trade will ever achieve.”

“I never claimed otherwise. Unlike you, I rejoice in the weakness that will be my demise. I know what I am.”

Daniel had to acknowledge Mrs. Eliot’s clever play. Agreeing with her own folly took the sting out of anything Miss Barry could throw at her.

“And you associate yourself with that Mrs. Allen, as she calls herself.”

“So I do. My wonderful friend.” Mrs. Eliot showed no concern, but Mrs. Allen sat up, her cheeks growing red.

With a haughty glance around the room, Miss Barry’s attention rested on Mrs. Allen. Daniel wanted to rub the smugness right off her face. “Do you know what she is?” Miss Barry asked. Mrs. Eliot did not answer the question. “She is the author of that rubbish, *A Woman Who Loves* .” Miss Barry’s chin lifted and her eyes gleamed. “Deny it if you can, Lady Mary.”

Mrs. Eliot raised a brow and glanced at Mrs. Allen, who opened and closed her mouth. Of all the fodder for gossip gathered over the last few minutes, this was the prize morsel. Was it true? Mrs. Allen possessed an estate in Ireland, but that provided little foundation for the claim.

“What a ridiculous accusation,” Mary said, her voice an octave too high and her face blossomed red.

“You are a widow and own an estate in Ireland. You lived in Bath in your youth. Not only did you author a work of complete nonsense, you also wrote yourself into the story as one who supports irresponsible behavior from our young people.” Miss Barry’s superior tone grated like a magistrate laying out a sentence to miscreant.

No one slept now. They all looked from Miss Barry to Mrs. Allen. Daniel groaned. If it was Mrs. Eliot's intention to become the most interesting hostess in Bath, she accomplished her purpose. No one would decline her invitation. But he could not approve of her method. She achieved her goal at the expense of Mrs. Allen. Why didn't she protect her friend?

Mrs. Allen stilled. Where her cheeks had been red before, they were now pale. No doubt from rage at the preposterous accusation. Daniel waited for Mrs. Allen to speak. If she had authored the novel, she had reason to be proud of her work and would not deny it.

"Come, Miss Barry. The person you describe may just as well be you." Mrs. Allen's voice sounded strained, as if her throat was closing. She did not deserve this attack.

"Liar." Miss Barry's pronouncement elicited an audible gasp from the room. She smirked.

"But thank you for imagining me capable of such a thing. The idea!" Mrs. Allen's voice was breathy and her laugh weak. She clutched her hands in her lap, staring at the floor. Daniel did not understand. After watching her with Mr. Bateman, he knew her capable of defending herself. The clock ticked into a silent room. Mrs. Allen pulled a bit of lace at her sleeve, hands trembling.

To call her a liar! He stood and made his way toward the fire. He stood by her side, reached for her. Under his hand, her shoulder was soft and warm. "Mrs. Allen is a gentlewoman. She is not the sort of person who drafts novels. And if she tells you she did not write the book, her gentility is proof of her word."

"Hear, hear." Came a few voices from around the room.

"Quite," Mrs. Eliot said, with an appreciative nod to Daniel.

Liar.

The accusation echoed and resonated. Though she told no direct lie, the denunciation sat thick and scratchy in her chest. The entire room had stared at her, their looks at first curious, then accusing. Had she really imagined no one would find her out? And now what? The impeccable behavior she strove to achieve became a mockery.

Her hands wobbled over knitting needles, an erratic pair of socks taking shape on her lap. She set the needles down and closed her eyes to keep them from straying to her writing implements. She had a traitorous heart and a rebellious temperament that urged her to pick up the pen.

First, she would like to scratch out Miss Barry's eyes. Why had that horrid woman accused her when the quarrel was with Agnes? A friendship with Agnes did put one in the line of fire. But oh! The disgrace. And then Mr. Fletcher! Like a knight, coming to her rescue. His hand on her shoulder, the solid heaviness of it, infused her with strength and prevented tears from pouring down her face.

If she were ten years younger, she would throw herself at Mr. Fletcher. Quite literally kneel at his feet and beg him to love her. An astonishing realization. She might be capable of love at long last. Their unfortunate gap in age prohibited a relationship, but she could admire his beauty, especially his deep, clear eyes of so divine a color. She placed her hand on her shoulder where his fingers had lain only an hour before. To have a man like that. What was wrong with Louisa?

Her fingers trembled and fidgeted. She picked up her knitting and tried to find solace in the clicking of the needles. Her stomach squirmed with duplicity. Knitting satisfied not at all. She would never find contentment making socks or gardening or performing social calls—even balls did not gratify. The life she lived outside her room was no less real than the one she created on the page.

With paper and ink, she fashioned a world for herself and for Daniel. The idea sent a warm wave from her chest clear through to her toes. She pressed a hand against her stomach. What sort of heroine would suit him? In the book she composed, the hero had pale blue eyes and dark hair. He was serious and loyal, and his every look thrilled the heroine. Mr. Fletcher already occupied the pages.

She thrust the yarn into the basket, took her place at the desk, and began to write. If she continued at the current pace, the novel would be complete and ready for the publisher within the month. If she'd learned anything from the altercation with Miss Barry, it was that with a few slippery words, she might evade suspicion. Each stroke of her pen morphed her into the indecorous sort of female who wrote novels and made money from her writing, the kind of woman who avoided questions about her identity.

After a few hours, she lit a midnight candle and continued scratching words into the still of night, her heart ashamed but too ecstatic to stop. Nothing had changed. What she did was shocking and illicit—delightfully so. She did not believe she could live without the indulgence. Here in the depths of her imagination she accepted that she was a liar. She wrote pages and pages of lies and fairytales. The idea that the rest of the world had begun to understand her chilled her to the bone, but she could not relinquish her quill.

Chapter Twelve

In the solitude of the window seat, heavy curtains obscuring her from intruders, Louisa turned the pages of *A Woman Who Loves*. She read it for the fourth time, imagining her aunt as the author. It made her laugh, the impossibility of it. This book was everything and, in each perusal, showed new treasures of insight. Penelope did not wait for her father to marry her off or her aunt to find her a suitable husband. She was a heroine in the true sense of the word—a woman who sacrificed to gain her reward. A brave woman.

Like Penelope, Louisa knew what she wanted, and it wasn't Mr. Fletcher or whomever her father chose for her. She wanted John Lawrence, but he'd not made the declaration she expected. No word of outrage against her father. No admission of love. No intention to make her his own. He'd been uncomfortable and would not look into her eyes, which was a pity because the deep sorrow that shone from her face would certainly have elicited an immediate proposal. Already more than five weeks of her time in Bath were gone with no sign of John, and no other man she met in Bath compared to him.

Louisa simply knew he loved her. Besides, he had kissed her under the chestnut tree two years ago, never mind that he'd been shy ever since, refusing even to hold her hand. When she came of age, she expected a proposal, but he avoided her. He said he hadn't the money to set up house. As if she cared for such things. She craved the independence of running her own home, and its grandeur held no import.

The conversation at the literary society reinforced her feeling of entrapment. Very few saw it her way, that romance, love, was the greatest and most worthy objective.

One deserving of sacrifice. It did not matter if the world disagreed, only if John Lawrence did.

They'd grown up together. He existed in almost every one of Louisa's memories, was a friend, and had comforted her during every trial. Except this final, most important one.

What would Penelope, the woman who loves, do?

The question plagued. In the story, when Penelope proposed elopement, her lover was only too happy to lose the respect of his family and his parents in exchange for the happiness of marriage to his darling. If only Louisa had read the book before she'd left for Bath. Now, she was trapped and miles and miles away from John with barely a choice as to what she did each day.

Mary exhibited her at balls, which did not amuse, because John was not there to dance with her. She visited various acquaintances whom her aunt and Mrs. Eliot thought might help her find a husband or move up in society. She attended dinners, soirées, musicales, and routs. She danced, played cards, and was infernally bored. She wanted John. Shopping remained the single consolation in a life of drudgery. Even then, there was no John to see how fetching she appeared in creamy blue silks that matched her eyes to perfection and heightened the sheen of her pale curls.

If he could but see her, he would fall to his knees at once and beg for her hand. Confined to Bath, trapped in an endless parade of social obligations, a wave of helplessness left her lethargic. Her hands wilted and she let the book fall to her chest, limp arms splaying to her side. She had not even the comfort of explaining herself to Aunt Mary, who would not understand, and her father would only nod, pretending to heed while not listening at all. If only her mother were with her.

"Louisa?" Mary entered the room. Louisa did not wish to be discovered, so she

stilled, waiting for Mary to give up and look elsewhere. Luck was not on her side, and Mary pulled back the curtain. “There you are.”

“Pardon me. I was so enraptured by the story I did not hear you come in.” The book lay upside down, but with so little privacy afforded her, Louisa forgave herself the obvious lie.

“This again?” Mary’s brow puckered at the novel.

“It inspires me.”

Mary’s frown deepened. “We are due at the Picketts’ in an hour. Mr. Fletcher will be there. Wear your blue silk. It is most becoming.”

Louisa did not wish to go. An afternoon to herself would do her good. She groaned and looked out the window. “Must I go? I am exhausted.” It was true. She felt unable to move her limbs. “I want to stay.” Her voice pitched in the child-like whine that irritated her father. Intent on getting her way, she swallowed and tried again. “I must rest from our constant activity.” Aunt’s mouth was in a straight line. Louisa must try harder not to sulk. Aunt Mary did not like a sullen face, though she rarely said so. She straightened herself and added, “Please?” in her most polite tone and with her most pathetic eyes.

It worked. Aunt Mary’s face softened, and she sat next to Louisa. “Of course, you are tired. Poor dear.” She smoothed a strand of hair from Louisa’s forehead and clucked over her for a few moments. Louisa basked in the attention. She knew they were both thinking of her motherless state. “I will go with Agnes and be gone only an hour, two at the most.”

An hour or two. What could she do with a few minutes alone? It was a gift. Louisa leaned against her aunt, a little contrite for being disagreeable. Aunt did her best.

“Thank you,” Louisa said.

Aunt Mary left the room, and Louisa returned to her problem. Time to act, as Penelope might, but how? Louisa re-imagined her final conversation with John, seeking inspiration. This time, she asked him to run away with her. In this new scenario, his eyes met hers in ecstasy. He told her eloping was what he dreamt of. He thanked her repeatedly for her acquiescence. How romantic their escape! Louisa sighed and melted into Mrs. Eliot’s plush cushions.

As soon as the front door closed behind Aunt Mary and Mrs. Eliot, Louisa went in search of pen and ink. The inkwell in the morning room was dry. And little wonder. Aunt Mary asked Mrs. Eliot for more only yesterday. A frequent request. One would expect Aunt Mary to keep enough ink on hand for her correspondence. Louisa mounted the stairs and went into her aunt’s room. There, near the window, was a dressing table turned writing desk. Even from the door, Louisa noted the row of empty ink bottles and numerous plumes as well as a stack of paper weighted down with a small sculpture of a woman reading.

With no intention of intruding on anyone’s privacy, Louisa approached the desk laden with papers. Under the mess there must be ink. She rifled through the chaos, so unlike Aunt Mary, until her eye caught on the words of what must be a letter. Overcome with curiosity, she picked up a page and read.

...received your letter only yesterday. I will depart immediately. Forgive me, my love. When I did not come at once, it was in protection of you, my dearest one. I did not wish to soil your name with my low birth. Now, I see that we are of one heart. Our separation pains you as well as it injures me. If you are in half the agony I endure, there is only one solution.

Aunt Mary had a lover! He wanted to run away with her? Stunned, she sank into the chair when an open sheet of paper to the side of the desk caught her attention. The

paper was a deeper hue of cream, weighed down by a large wax seal. An irresistible temptation. It must be from Aunt's sweetheart.

Dear Lady Mary,

Please respond and inform us on the progress of your next book. We earnestly hope there will be a second and many more afterward. Let us assure you of our desire to remain discreet as to your identity...

This made no sense. Why was her aunt receiving mail addressed to Lady Mary? She scanned down to the final sentence.

Enclosed are several clippings from London newspapers exclaiming the virtues of A Woman Who Loves...

She read every word several times until meaning emerged alongside Louisa's sense of propriety. With shaking fingers, she refolded the letter and put it carefully where she'd found it, took a full bottle of ink that had been hidden under the letter, and left the room with a cold hand on her hot cheek. Shame warred with excitement. Louisa had discovered a great secret. Her aunt was Lady Mary, authoress.

When Mrs. Eliot and garish Miss Barry had hinted at the possibility, Louisa scoffed. But here was proof! To think, Aunt Mary led a second life. She, a woman ever preaching the importance of ladylike behavior, hid a shocking secret.

Was it shocking? Indecent? Louisa could hardly say, but knowing that her aunt had authored A Woman Who Loves transformed her world. Mary was the aunt in the story. The kindly relation who took the couple in, supported them, gave them hope, nurtured their love. If this were so, and it seemed it was, Mary would lend aid to Louisa in a similar way. Aunt Mary was a hero.

Just like her aunt, Louisa took her future into her own hands. In a letter, she confessed her love to John. When he rescued her from her dreary life, Aunt Mary would stand guard over them.

Dear John,

You love me and must hope that I love you in return. With all my being, I assure you, you do not love in vain.

At this point in the letter, Louisa recalled, though imperfectly, the words she'd read on Mary's desk.

My pain is your pain, each of us suffering injury in our separation. Come to me, love. Only in you will my happiness be found.

She signed the letter and posted it without delay. She had only to wait. John would come, and Louisa's life could begin in earnest with a swift return to her home in Cornwall, a wedding, and blissful life as Mrs. John Lawrence.

Chapter Thirteen

Mary stood before her maid, Nellie, who pinned a cerulean silk gown onto a tufted and gathered stomacher in preparation for the evening's ball. Lace spilled from bell-shaped cuffs, and the blue, less austere than lavender, reminded her of Mr. Fletcher's eyes. The thought brought a rush of color to her cheeks. The blush suited her, but she would not think of him.

"There you are, ma'am. A splendid gown," Nellie said.

Mary turned in the mirror. This change in style connected her to her younger, more hopeful self and brought her out of mourning and into this new facet she inhabited as an author and one willing to explore new avenues of happiness. Though she traveled a precarious path, she might become comfortable within her own paradoxical identity. She could remain stable on the precipice she walked and never allow the truth to emerge.

"Thank you, Nellie. Will you see if Louisa needs your attention?"

When Nellie was gone, she pushed the button on her locket and beheld her husband's likeness. "Is what I do so very wicked?" she asked him. Sweetness swelled in her chest. He had liked her tales. Upon his discovery of her writing habit, she read him her work in the evenings after dinner. While Charlotte sighed over Mary's stories, he found their humor. His laughter had been like a swallow of warm honey that filled her completely.

Inside the assembly hall, the evening advanced in its predictable procession. Mary

peeked through the crowd to watch Louisa dance with a foppish young gentleman whose skip was entirely too enthusiastic. The floor flashed in a dizzying parade of embroidery and chintz, ribbons and lace, fringes and tassels. Candlelight flickered over young faces bright in anticipation of finding a partner for a dance or even for life. They glowed with the hopefulness of youth. And why shouldn't they? Life's sorrows would come. Let them find joy.

Mary tapped her toe to the rhythm of the dance but did not need to dance to take pleasure in the ball. Since arriving in Bath, the sorrow that followed her through widowhood slipped away. Instead of believing her grief too dense for future happiness, she was grateful for the wisdom her experience lent her. She retained no envy for the young ladies whose lives had not yet taught them sorrow reigned supreme. She felt light, fresh, and—dare she admit—beautiful.

A hand slid onto the small of her back, and she turned.

“Mr. Bateman.” Mary almost told him it was a pleasure to see him, but she bit back the falsehood.

“I wanted to express my sincere regrets for my enthusiastic admiration of you at dinner. You must understand I am not quite myself in your company.”

Mary nodded in reply, moving away from him so she could not smell his sour breath. He followed her.

“Please accept my apology and honor me with a dance.” He had already tucked her arm beneath his and was leading her into the group of dancers. She was too stunned to object.

When he leaned too close or held her too tight, she stiffened her arm and pushed him back. The delight of dancing was worth the discomfort so long as she kept her partner

in check. Though he lacked both elegance and finesse, Mary's nimble feet missed nothing. With delicacy and grace, she slid down the line of dancers, like a swan over smooth water. Her arm arched over her head to touch Mr. Bateman's, and she was vaguely glad they both wore gloves. She was certain he was the sort of man whose palms were perpetually damp.

She could not but compare this experience to what she'd felt years earlier when her worth rested on the number of dances she performed and the quality of the gentlemen who stood opposite her. The emotions of her sixteen-year-old self endured the passage of time. She had waited for a partner among a throng of other young ladies, all of whom she was certain were prettier, more accomplished, and cleverer than she. With determined fortitude, she kept a hopeful smile pinned to her face. But when Lord Allen had taken her in his arms, her confidence blossomed.

On this night, her enjoyment had nothing to do with her partner. She sensed the floor beneath her slippers, heard the swish of her dress, which added to the allure of the music. Forty trumped sixteen. At her current age, she no longer fluttered with hope and distress at the approach of a man. Though her figure was soft and full rather than light and willowy, confidence in her splendor banished anxiety. She was free to revel in the evening.

When the dance ended, Mr. Bateman tugged her close. "Is it true? Are you Lady Mary?"

Her elbow shot out to remind him he was too close. "Look at me, sir. Do I look like a woman who would do so base a thing?"

His eyes reduced to slits. "No. I must admit you do not. But your life parallels the story and?—"

"A mere coincidence." She lowered her chin and put on a show of humility. "Tell me,

should I be flattered by your outlandish assumption?”

“Well, I...” He knitted his brow, seeming to consider, and opened his mouth as if ready to speak, but Agnes appeared at her side, followed by Mr. Fletcher, who edged Mr. Bateman out of the circle and offered the ladies a lemonade.

Mary thanked Mr. Fletcher and inwardly sighed over his thoughtfulness. He would make a fine husband for Louisa, who appeared, flushed and smiling.

“Mr. Fletcher, my niece looks lovely tonight, does she not?” Mary nodded at the two of them in turn, but Mr. Fletcher’s smile fell.

“She does indeed. Mrs. Allen, would you care?—”

“And the two of you look so well together.” Mary ignored Louisa’s glare and smiled when Mr. Fletcher took the hint and asked Louisa to dance.

Louisa’s hand curled over Mr. Fletcher’s arm as if it belonged there.

“See, Agnes. How well they suit.” He was in every way a gentleman.

At that moment, Mr. Fletcher looked back at Mary, who nodded her approval, but her traitorous heart fell at not being the one on his arm.

“The only thing I saw was a man wishing to ask one woman to dance and then being obliged to ask another.” Agnes sniffed.

Mary would have liked to dance with him, to feel his hand on her back and to stand close enough to look into his eyes, just as he did with Louisa at that very moment. “Don’t be silly,” Mary whispered.

Agnes nodded toward the door. "Miss Barry has arrived."

Wearing an immense feather in her hair, Miss Barry greeted everyone she passed, drawing the attention of the room. Mr. Nash, the master of ceremonies, was at her elbow, and they walked together like the king and queen of the assembly. The lightness that filled Mary's chest seeped out as she watched her former schoolmate approach.

"Mrs. Allen, or shall I call you Lady Mary? How do you do? And you, Mrs. Eliot. I hope both of you have recovered from the literary discussion of the other day?"

While Mary felt herself shrink, Agnes grew until she towered over the pudgy Mr. Beau Nash, showing them both she was the real sovereign. "How do you do, Miss Barry? Mr. Nash? Lovely evening." She sipped her punch, her eyes trailing away from them.

"I am hosting a rout the day after tomorrow and hoped the two of you would come. Miss Thorpe is, of course, invited," Miss Barry said.

"Oh, dear. We are having our own evening affair that night. I don't suppose you would care to join our party."

"I'm afraid I've already issued a number of invitations."

"A pity." Agnes did not appear to have any regrets.

Miss Barry walked away.

Mary nudged Agnes. "But we have no plans."

"We do now, and we must invent a gathering no one will want to miss."

“You are childish.”

Agnes beamed and departed to make her invitations.

Mary turned her attention to the dance floor, noting the grace with which Mr. Fletcher turned. He bent his head near Louisa’s and said something near her ear. Louisa laughed up at him. An ache compressed Mary’s heart. Perhaps youth had its advantages. Mr. Fletcher smiled back at Louisa, his arm wrapped around her back, and their fingers mingled.

Mary’s mood soured. She walked demurely to the refreshment table and took a measured sip of punch, a practiced show of elegance.

“Mrs. Allen, how do you do?” Miss Rowe, a member of the literary society, appeared at her side with several other young ladies.

Mary nodded, but her cordiality faded when she recognized the petition in their too eager eyes. Since Miss Barry’s accusation, a few curious people had approached her with speculative expressions and leading questions. “Good evening,” she said.

“We wondered if you would sign our copies of your book.”

This, she was not prepared for. She glanced around the room. Several groups of people looked back at her. Did everyone suspect? Had Miss Barry been so convincing or her gossip so pervasive and enduring? Impossible. A fortnight passed since that grand revelation, and though there were whispers, these were the first overt questions from mere acquaintances. Besides, if at first one suspected she had authored the book, her genteel behavior was beyond reproach. Surely her refined comportment was enough to convince the world of her innocence. In fact, how dare they believe it of her?

She forced a tittering laugh. “You are darlings to imagine I could do such a thing. Lemonade?” She held a cup to Miss Rowe, pleased with herself for dodging their entreaty so gracefully.

Hours later, Mary’s feet ached. She danced several times and had a lovely evening, but the whispered remarks about her authorship sunk her spirits. At the edge of the dance floor, her heart began to flutter and press inside her. Do not allow those thoughts space . She was hot and needed air. She slipped out the door to the balcony where, as expected, several couples lingered. She inhaled cooler night air, gripping the rail of the balcony and watching a sequence of carriages stopping to collect the attendees of the ball and take them off to their beds.

She sensed someone at her side and looked up, brushing against Mr. Fletcher. His breath caught just as her own chest hitched. They stood very close, their arms touching. She was powerless to pull away.

“You seemed to enjoy the evening,” he said, his gaze intense, blue eyes sparking black in the darkness.

“I did, thank you, but I am grateful the balls in Bath end at eleven rather than going on and on into the early hours of the morning as they do in London.”

“I cannot endure endless parties.” They shared a smile.

As Louisa’s chaperone, it was her responsibility to become better acquainted with him. “What brought you to Bath? If you wished for a diversion, London is far closer to Chesterfield.”

After a moment of hesitation, he said, “My father wishes me to marry. Since I do not enjoy the bustle of London, I came here.”

His admitted search for a wife suggested an understanding beyond her knowledge. Was he about to ask for Louisa's hand? His father wished him to marry. Did he not want that for himself? She faced him, her back resting against the rail, but she lacked the courage to ask her questions.

"Tell me about Ireland." His look intensified, and she could not tear her eyes from his.

The answer twisted with complications, and Mary considered telling him what she told everyone else. But somehow, he did not feel like everyone else. "My late husband and I relocated to one of his holdings in Ireland following the first anniversary of our marriage. He dreamed of revitalizing the place." She examined his expression. He was interested. Still, she wondered if she should go on. His slight nod persuaded her. "I did not want to go, though living with his mother was uncomfortable at best. I thought it absurd for a man with so much to go so far away. I suppose he wanted to prove himself." She waved a hand, brushing away the notion. "I was angry with him and shut a part of myself away in a foolish attempt at revenge." She pressed her fingers into his arm, urgently and inexplicably wanting him to understand this part. Perhaps her wisdom would help him with Louisa. "We worked through it. I changed my attitude, and he worked to understand me. It was painful and took some time, but we were so happy. Then he got sick and died with his dream only half realized." She became wistful, tired guilt resurfacing, regret spilling into her voice. "Imagine if I had held on to my grudge."

"You stayed in Ireland alone?"

His legs pressed against her skirt, a distraction she breathed through. "I did for nearly twenty years, to finish what my husband started. It eased my grief." With as much lightness as she could muster, she said, "The estate is thriving now, and under excellent management."

“But you didn’t stay.”

“No. I missed my family and England. The occasional excursions home always felt too short.” The conversation shifted from her control as his questions became almost impertinent. He was not one for small talk, never commenting on the weather or sharing gossip. A serious man who appreciated thoughtful conversation. She’d said enough and wished to understand his past. “Your father wishes you to marry. You do not?”

His eyes grew flat. “No...I mean, yes. But I will not marry for love.”

“Why ever not?” The words were out before she considered them.

He rubbed the back of his neck. “It feels impossible that I should find one whom I trust well enough to share my heart. Most marriages are of a practical nature. Perhaps love is a complication.” His words were slow and deliberate, as if giving voice to an insecurity that sat unexplored.

Mary’s traitorous heart fluttered in her throat. The man was an idealist. No one ever said share my heart who was not a true passionate, but what made him hesitate? “And yet, here you are, dancing, dining, making calls. Sowing seeds of love.”

He smiled, a wry, half-effort that was no smile at all. “I...well, there was a lady whom I believed would be my wife, but...” His voice cracked. It was clear someone had broken his heart.

“I am sure she did not deserve you.” She slid her hand over his and squeezed. “There is a better lady for you.”

His eyes cut to hers and stayed. There was a deep sadness in them that begged her to be right.

“Perhaps. Well, I begin to believe there is a prospect,” he spoke haltingly, “for an understanding or that two people might understand one another...here...or at home, I meant to say.”

Was it Mary’s imagination, or did he shift toward her? They were already standing close enough that an observer might assume they were lovers. No bystander could know they were speaking of his future with Louisa.

“I am happy to hear that.” Ashamed that her words came out in a breathy sigh, she covered her mouth with the back of her hand and cleared her throat. “My niece is a dear girl.”

Mr. Fletcher blinked twice then turned away from her. When he said nothing in reply, Mary, feeling uncomfortable with the alteration in mood, searched for another topic of conversation. “Have you and Miss Thorpe decided on the next book for the literary society?”

“Poetry. We decided on something more sober, Thomas Gray’s ‘Elegy Written in Country Churchyard.’”

Mary laughed. “Rather morbid. Surely that was not Louisa’s idea.”

He smiled back at her. “No. But I persuaded her it would be less controversial than Ms. Haywood’s *Love in Excess* .”

“Dear me. I must thank you for saving us from that disaster.” Mary was both appalled that Louisa would make the suggestion and grateful for Mr. Fletcher’s interference. The discussion might include a comparison of her own book to Ms. Haywood’s, and she did not wish to be likened to an author of questionable morals. People already suspected her, and she did not believe she could maintain her countenance should someone compare the two books.

“Would you care to dance? I believe this is the last set.”

Mary nodded and linked her arm in his, ready to savor the delights of the dance floor and this transient *joie de vivre*. They navigated the crowded room, her arm linked through his, pressing against his rib. She felt the rise and fall of his breath, and it sent a jolt straight to her belly, liquefying her insides. The orchestra began, and she remained steady, light as a dandelion seed taking flight in his arms. His hand splayed against her back and pulled her to him. They stepped apart, palms sparking together, and turned, never allowing their eyes to stray. The room dimmed and sparkled, the music intensified and vibrated more harmoniously, and the moment became ethereal. She felt grounded, present, and calm while hummingbirds fluttered an unyielding rhythm in her chest.

This dance held danger. His proximity, his mere existence, frightened and tempted and allured her. She did not mean to step so close or to show longing in each brush of the hand. Her body exiled prudish manners, and they danced as lovers might. When the song ended, they would part ways, the heat would dissipate, their moment deteriorating into tepid friendship.

Louisa's low spirits lifted when Mr. Savage asked her for the final dance of the evening. A shiver chased up her arm when he took her hand in his and looked at her as if he could read her soul. The music began, and Mr. Savage's cool eyes did not leave hers. He wore an expression new to Louisa. A word from Aunt Mary's book put a name to it. Sultry. His eyes pulled away and slid down her neck to her bodice. When the dance brought them close, she felt his breath, hot on her cheek and through her hair. She liked it.

“We are good friends. You must call me Tobias.”

Louisa nodded at the acknowledgement. It felt good to have a confidant, and she needed one, for John had not come. He had not written or even acknowledged the

letters she sent him weeks ago, though she knew he had received them. Aunt Charlotte had written saying she had run into Mr. Lawrence in town. He told Aunt Charlotte Louisa had written, inquiring after the health of his sister, and asked her to please inform Louisa there was no longer any need to write to him. His sister was fully recovered.

A rejection.

“And you must call me Louisa.”

In step with the dance, he kissed her hand as if they were being introduced for the first time, his lips lingering a moment longer than she expected. Heat crept up her neck. He admired her. That much was clear.

“Let’s get some air.” When they progressed to the end of the line, they slipped out of the dance through the crowd and onto the balcony.

Louisa breathed. “This is nice. The ballroom is stifling.” Feeling bold, she squeezed his arm.

“You and I are through being stifled.” Over the past few weeks, each time she and Tobias met, they spoke for a few minutes on this theme. Now that there was no longer any hope of marriage with John, these conversations were precious.

He held her hand between both of his and brought it to his chest as if it were a fragile treasure. “My estate includes a bit of land near Chesterfield. It has been mismanaged and is rundown, but the more I think of it, the more I believe I would enjoy the challenge of farming. And it would benefit my mother and sister.”

“Tell me what it looks like, Tobias.” Louisa tried his name on her tongue and found it sweet.

“Louisa.” His handsome face stretched into a smile that felt like an embrace. “There is a little cottage with green rolling hills, perfect for sheep or whatever livestock you like. A little river runs through the back and there are trees for climbing and paths for exploring.” He continued describing a serene paradise, a place of freedom and peace. His narrative took hold of her and grew in her mind. She saw herself in emerald hills, carrying baskets to the villagers, her children swinging from the trees and rushing into a warm kitchen with a scraped knee, a line of trout, or an empty belly.

The tenderness of her thoughts settled like mulled wine in her stomach. While there was no Tobias Savage in her imaginings, he existed in the peripheries.

“Come with me, Louisa?” His eyes were dark and earnest.

“Where?”

“Come home with me. Start a new life. You and I are the same. Restless.” He was close to her, and his body warmed her from her shoulder to her knee. She had never been so close to a man. His scent was alluring, spicy and warm, an almost intoxicating smell that made her think of putting her face to his neck to inhale.

“Is this an offer of marriage?” She breathed the question, leaning closer to him.

He was moving to take hold of her other hand, but his motion stopped. He did not respond for a moment. “Yes. But let’s not do it the conventional way. We can travel north, to Gretna Green.”

“Like Penelope and Richard.” Her breath came fast. Could she? Dare she?

“Exactly so.” His lips covered hers, and she melted into him. He wanted her, understood and accepted her. She would agree to anything he asked of her.

His mouth slid from hers. "Let's go tonight."

Louisa's heart set off in a gallop. To leave so soon. Her time in Bath was drawing to a close with a week remaining of the eight her father had given her. While Aunt Mary persisted in her belief that she would become engaged to Mr. Fletcher, Louisa never would accept him. He was far too old, they had nothing in common, and there was no passion, no spark, no yearning between them. She knew he had no feelings for her, but Tobias loved her. "I have arrangements to make. I must think it through."

Tobias lifted the corner of his upper lip in an almost sneer, but she understood that his expressions were often misunderstood. "No, darling. We mustn't wait for our courage to wane. Your maid is loyal to you, is she not? She can pack your things, and you will be ready in a few hours."

"She can serve as chaperone." Louisa was not certain Nellie would come. Mary employed her, but there was a chance, and her company would make all the difference.

He scratched his chin and explained that since they were to be married, they required no chaperone. But Louisa was not some silly girl. She read plenty of novels and knew better than to do anything without a chaperone.

She lowered her head and looked up at him through her lashes in an attitude that showed her to advantage. "I must insist on bringing Nellie. She is indispensable."

Tobias started to say something, and Louisa was sure he would argue against bringing the maid. Louisa put her finger on his lips, a gesture she had fantasized trying on John, and said, "I insist. I will come with Nellie or not at all."

Tobias agreed, and it was settled between them to meet at three that morning and set off to Gretna Green.

On the carriage ride home, Louisa's nerves were in shreds. Surely her secret was stamped on her face. Aunt Mary and Mrs. Eliot would pepper her with questions about the evening, but she kept her answers short, and her face averted.

Once inside, she kissed her aunt on the cheek and bid a hasty goodnight. Halfway up the stairs, she remembered that the next morning, she would be gone. Turning around, she descended the stairs and took Aunt Mary by both hands.

"Thank you, Aunt. You are very good to bring me here."

"Well, I..." Aunt Mary seemed too shocked to say more.

"I know you were thinking of my mother when making this plan, and I want you to know I appreciate it."

Her aunt flinched a little. Strange. Perhaps her motives were not so pure, though Louisa could not imagine what they were. "I do love you very much, Louisa." Aunt Mary pressed a soft hand to Louisa's cheek. The touch was almost Louisa's undoing, but she excelled at swallowing her tears.

"Goodnight, Aunt. Thank you for everything." And she meant it. Without the inspiration of her brave aunt, she would never dare leave with Mr. Savage. "And thank you, Mrs. Eliot, for hosting us. You've been wonderful." She rushed up the stairs and sat on the bed to wait for Nellie.

The whole scheme depended on the maid's acquiescence, the final piece that would give Louisa freedom. At last, Nellie entered with a cheerful "good evening" and began unpinning Louisa's gown. While each removed pin freed her from the shell of her clothing, Louisa's insides tightened, and her presence of mind devolved into agitation, the rehearsed plea for help elusive. Where to begin?

“I am eloping, and I hope you will come with me?” Her words came out in a tense rush, and she held her breath.

Nellie stilled and stared into her face. The eye contact stung Louisa’s eyes. “I will not betray my mistress.”

This plan must work. She was ready to beg. “It would be a betrayal not to come, for I go with or without you. If Aunt Mary discovers I am gone alone, think of her distress!”

“I will tell her now.”

“It will do no good. If I do not leave tonight, I will leave tomorrow. If they return me to my father, I will run from him. They will have to cage me to keep me. There is no stopping me, so you must come with me. For Aunt Mary.”

“Tell me all.” Nellie did not have a husband, and though several years older than Louisa, not so old that she would not understand Louisa’s predicament. At least, Louisa hoped so.

She explained about her father and his arranging a match. “I am out of time.”

“But why rush off? If you tell your father, he will accept Mr. Savage.”

Louisa sighed. How to explain? “I want to do something else, something no one expects. Take action all on my own, like a heroine in a story. Don’t you ever feel that way?”

Nellie shook her head. “There’s a purpose to following tradition.”

“That is why I need you. Your presence lends credence to the marriage. We will have

a chaperone.”

“If I may speak boldly, miss, it is foolishness. Do you know him?”

“Enough to recognize that we are of one mind. We understand each other. We are both trapped. Don’t you see? This is my only escape.”

Nellie’s shoulders dropped. She was coming around.

“I need you with me.” Louisa took her by the shoulders. “Please. It is the right thing to do. Aunt Mary would wish it.”

“If anything is not right, you will come back with me.”

“I promise.” Louisa laid her hand over her heart to show sincerity.

While they swept the room clear of Louisa’s belongings, she imagined John’s disappointed face when he learned she was a married woman, settled comfortably in a cottage far away from Cornwall. She would never see him again, but she would write to his sister, tell of her marriage. When she expected her first child, she would inform the Lawrence family. John would be sorry.

At last, she made a choice for herself—and what a decision. Romance and adventure waited for her in only a few turns of the clock’s hand. Would Father miss her, be disappointed, or even care that she was gone?

Love was not exactly what she felt for Tobias, but she sympathized with him, which seemed far more important. Their singleness of heart would blossom into love. With her help, he would overcome the regrets of his past and bring her the happiness and contentment she had not found since her mother’s death.

Her trunk was packed, and her maid was ready to accompany her. A letter of farewell lay on her pillow, and she had only to wait for the clock to strike three in the morning.

“I have a pair of fast horses,” Tobias had said. “We will be out of reach by sunrise.”

Out of reach. The words were a balm to Louisa. No more waiting for John. No more futile attempts to find a match. No more acting as pawn for her father. No more hurt or struggle. Louisa would soon be free.

Chapter Fourteen

Daniel woke to thoughts of Mrs. Allen. Their conversation on the balcony the night before stayed with him. While he could not judge the circumstances that led her late husband to a remote estate, her regret over wasting their days together resonated. Their ability to find absolution and unity in their differences, he admired. Their marriage must have been one of the happiest.

On slippered feet, Daniel passed through the apartment and into the room that served as both sitting and dining room. On the table lay a plate of bread, cheese, and cured meat, the edges of which were curled and dry. A half-empty mug of ale beside it. Tobias must have wakened early and left in a rush.

Tobias seemed agitated of late. When Daniel questioned him, his friend responded in harassed tones, as if being pulled from a deep thought. He was a gambler, as Daniel had learned shortly after they'd embarked on this journey together, but when questioned about his losses, Tobias made jokes. Perhaps Tobias had left town in a hurry to avoid paying his debts.

He sat down to fresh eggs, and the valet entered with the post.

"Thank you, Jeremy. Will you bring the carriage to the front of the house? It's a fine morning."

Jeremy bowed, and Daniel opened a letter from his mother. His father had had an accident, and Daniel should return home as soon as may be. The details were not explained. Indeed, the handwriting was not the looping scrawl he was used to seeing

from his mother but illegible and a very short missive. Were it any different, he would assume his father was playing another trick on him.

Daniel pushed his plate away, an image of his father, pale and suffering, rising before him. He groaned and closed his eyes against it. Though he did not trust his father, he did love him. He was the sort of person who would give away his shoes. When Daniel was a child, his father took him on adventures, fishing, hunting, teaching him all he knew about science and anything else that caught his fancy.

After the investment that had left the family penniless, his father spent more rather than tell the family they were paupers. When debt collectors had come to possess Almerly and threatened debtors' prison, Daniel's mother sold her jewelry, and Daniel left for Smith's bank. Notwithstanding that deception and all of its consequences, Daniel hated the discord between them. If Father was seriously ill, Daniel wanted to restore their relationship before it was too late.

A door opened and closed, bringing him back to the present. It had taken very little time to ready the horses. "Jeremy, a change of plans. Please pack my trunk. I must return home immediately."

The valet entered the room, a shade paler than when he'd left. "Sir, the horses are gone. The carriage too."

"Gone?"

Tobias . Had he taken the horses to pay his debts? A decent bit of coin he'd get for them. Daniel groaned. How was it possible that everyone he associated with betrayed him?

"I can do nothing about that now. My father is ill. Go to the posting house and get the best pair available. I'll pack myself. Be quick about it. I'll need to bid farewell to

Mrs. Allen and Miss Thorpe.”

Mrs. Allen and Miss Thorpe.

There would be no resolution to the dispute with his father without Miss Thorpe. If his father passed into the next world before Daniel returned, the entire estate would go to his brother-in-law. He opened his trunks and began shoving his belongings inside, tucking the jacket he'd worn the evening before into a corner. Miss Thorpe had rested her hand against the arm of his coat, and though no feeling accompanied the memory, he believed their union inevitable. He must trust that all would be well at home and the marriage with Miss Thorpe would go as planned. Very likely his parents had it all arranged.

“Ready, sir?” Jeremy asked. Together they carried Daniel's things down the stairs and out the front door. While the trunks were strapped to the back of the borrowed carriage, Daniel told the housekeeper he was leaving. She would inform the landlord. The rooms were paid for another three weeks, so there would be no dispute.

The door clicked closed. He would never return to Bath and would not see Mrs. Allen again, unless she came to his wedding. Heavy sorrow twisted the already unsettled sickness in his gut. The rolling bounce of the carriage did nothing to soothe his nerves, but he soon arrived at Mrs. Eliot's townhome.

Inside the salon, heavy curtains covered huge windows, lending the room a funereal ambience and reminding him of his mother's somber letter. If, heaven forbid, his father's injury resulted in death, Daniel would live out his life in battle against remorse. For ten years he nursed a grudge against his father, planning to make amends as soon as his father apologized. That would never happen. Daniel would have to soften his own heart and tongue.

Mary rushed into the room, her face drawn and pale. She took his hands in hers,

squeezing them as if they could save her. “Do you know where they went?” Her voice was unsteady.

“Who went?”

“Louisa and Savage.”

“I don’t understand.”

She dropped his hands and slumped into a nearby chair. “They left, eloped.”

Savage and Miss Thorpe? He sat down and put his hands over his face. But how was Mrs. Allen? Daniel more than half expected to find her melted into a puddle of tears, but when he met her eye, she was statuesque. “He took my horses, but I did not know he took Miss Thorpe as well.” Worse and worse. Tobias Savage was a greater scoundrel than Daniel had ever suspected.

“From Louisa’s letter, I assume they are on their way to Scotland. To Gretna Green.” With a deep, unsteady breath, she continued. “Unless he is a greater villain. In which case, they could be anywhere.”

It was hard to look at her. The vivacity he admired in her was gone, and her eyes appeared bigger, her face more child-like. He longed to take her in his arms and assure her all would be well, but it was not his place, and he could make no such promise. He should have told Mrs. Allen about the conversations he’d overheard between Miss Thorpe and Savage weeks ago. If only he had intervened. The scoundrel! How dare he compromise Miss Thorpe. She would be ruined or saddled to a miscreant. And to what end? What was he really planning? Why run away?

“I will go after them. I was on my way home as it is, and the road to Scotland is the same as the road to Chesterfield.” From Bath, the journey to Scotland would take

weeks. What was Savage thinking? Was Miss Thorpe so foolish?

“Do you really think they can be found?” A glint of hope sparked in her eye, tempting Daniel to be untruthful.

“I do not know.” If Daniel was anything, he was honest and would not give her false hope. “I can do my best. Mr. Savage is an injudicious whip. He is sure to tire out the animals and be forced to stop.”

Mrs. Eliot filled the doorway. “Mary, you must go with him. I ordered the maid to pack your trunk.” In a gentler tone she said, “It is the best way to hush the scandal. If you are both gone, I can spread the news that you and Louisa left together. No one will be the wiser. If you hurry, you may find her tomorrow or even today. It is early still.”

“Find her today,” Mrs. Allen repeated and looked out the window, seeming to talk to herself. “Yes. I see the wisdom. Then I will take her home and let my brother do what he will with her.” She rubbed her forehead.

“I did not imagine Louisa was foolish enough to put herself in the power of that scoundrel,” Mrs. Eliot said. “You know what he wants, I suppose. Her dowry. He lost his sister’s in endless reveling and has been desperate to earn it back since she became engaged a few months ago.”

“What?” Mary and Daniel spoke together.

“Oh, yes. I thought everyone knew.” Mrs. Eliot paled. “Good heavens. Louisa may not know if the two of you do not. Talk of Savage’s escapades is all over town. I don’t know how I failed to mention it.”

Mary pressed a handkerchief over her face and whimpered. “I wish I’d never taken

her on this foolish adventure.”

Daniel’s chest tightened. He’d brought a serpent with him to Bath.

“Mary,” Agnes said, “all might not be lost. Go! Get that imprudent girl and marry her off to whomever her father chose.”

Me. I am the person of whom they speak. Could he marry her after this?

“You are right.” She stood. “I will be ready in quarter of an hour.” She left the room, muttering over Louisa’s stupidity and her own inept efforts to help her niece.

Mrs. Allen was to accompany him. Her presence might slow him down, yet there was pleasure in the thought of spending time with her.

Savage. That blackguard! A thief and a reprobate. The man ought to be whipped. Daniel’s father had told him of Miss Thorpe’s dowry. Not a fortnight earlier, when Savage wondered what Louisa would bring to a marriage, Daniel told him and thought nothing of it. Though generous, the dowry was not enough to sustain a lifetime of Savage’s laziness or his gambling habit. If news spread of Savage’s financial desperation, his chances of marriage to a lady of fortune would vanish. He must have hoped he could win back his losses at the gaming table, and when he could not, preyed on Miss Thorpe. If he ruined her, her family could not deny their union. They would appear at Mr. Thorpe’s door, begging for his blessing and Louisa’s money.

True to her word, Mrs. Allen’s trunk was packed in fifteen minutes, and in another five, Daniel handed her into the carriage. Mrs. Eliot rushed down the steps and stuck her head into the carriage door. “If I discover something, where shall I send word?”

Daniel gave her the direction of his castle. She nodded and took Mrs. Allen’s hands.

“My dear friend, trust that I will do everything in my power to help. Should you need anything at all, write.”

The carriage pulled away. “Where is your maid?” he asked.

“That is one consolation. Nellie is with Louisa, so they have a chaperone. She is a good sort who will look after Louisa.” Mrs. Allen pulled at her sleeves, then clasped her locket. Would wrapping his arm around her shoulders soothe her? He brushed the thought aside.

In any case, the carriage was too small for a maid, but Jeremy’s presence was enough to keep it proper. Daniel arranged himself next to Mrs. Allen. The length of her body next to his unraveled and soothed the coils that were building in his stomach. Anger calmed to a simmer. In the close space of the carriage, he inhaled her rosewater scent and surreptitiously peeked at her. Her fidgeting stilled, her hands rested on her lap and her forehead on the window. He wanted to console her but didn’t know how. They rode in silence until all signs of civilization lay behind them.

“This is my fault.” Her voice broke and shattered his heart. He ached to remove her pain, to see her free of worry once again. His fingers twitched to take her hand in his, but he kept them laced together in his lap. They were friends, but not that sort.

“You are merely her guardian and cannot be responsible for her behavior.”

“I am. I assure you. She’d never have done this if I had not put the idea in her head.”

“You suggested this to her?”

Of course, she hadn’t. She was a gentlewoman who would never say such a thing. “Not overtly. But yes. That is precisely what I did.” Her voice diminished to a rough whisper.

Daniel tried to imagine a scenario in which such a suggestion would have been made. Perhaps, there was an argument and Mrs. Allen told her niece to go ahead and run off with a rogue. Now was not the time to ask for elucidation. “You did not arrange with Mr. Savage to carry off your niece. You did not persuade your maid to pack her bags and accompany her on an infamous journey. Whatever you said to her could not have convinced her to take such a step. And it is at least as much my doing. I began to suspect he was a villain some time ago. I even warned him against flirting with her. But I did not foresee that he would make such a move.”

“Flirted with her? I didn’t notice. You see how negligent I was?”

He had no words to comfort her, so he patted her arm, a shadow of what he would like to do. How would he restrain himself for the entirety of the journey?

Silence followed, and Mrs. Allen watched out the window of the carriage, fingering a letter she’d been holding since they alighted the carriage.

She held it up and waved it. “Louisa’s farewell letter. She thanks me for inspiring her with the bravery to make the elopement.”

Daniel wanted to smack Miss Thorpe. “She is a young lady who made a poor decision of her own accord. You did nothing wrong, Mrs. Allen.”

“You may as well call me Mary. The need for formality vanished as soon as we embarked on this errand.”

“Daniel.” He took her hand and squeezed. In an effort to express assurance, he opened his mouth. Everything will be all right. I will make sure of it. And I am sorry for my part in this. The sentiment did not materialize, and anyhow, the words were not necessary. The clasp of their hands spoke what he could not utter.

She slid her hand away, pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve, and began twisting it. "It will rain."

Black clouds gathered, turning what had been a fair morning into an ominous afternoon. The weather could cut the day's travel short. He ground his teeth, thinking of all the ways Savage had taken advantage of him. He'd taken his horses, used information about Miss Thorpe to convince her to elope. He was disrespectful and did not pay his portion of rooms they shared. Daniel hadn't minded before, but he did now.

Though anxious to reach his father, Daniel had no choice but to do everything he could to find Savage, even if it meant postponing his arrival home. He was the idiot who had brought the cheat to Bath, introduced Miss Thorpe to Mr. Savage, and on more than one occasion had been pleased to leave Miss Thorpe in the company of the rotter.

Should he have mentioned their fathers' intention for them to wed to Louisa? Would that have prevented her from running away or simply made the scandal even more salacious? And now that she was gone, who would take her place? How would he convince his father to give him Almerly if there was no prospective wife?

With more time, he might try Mrs. Allen, a multi-faceted woman whose experience gave her a bloom beyond any girl enjoying her first dances. But she was not interested in a man such as himself. After what she told him the previous evening about her ideal marriage, it no longer puzzled him that she did not marry a second time. And Daniel could not offer her a union as loving as her previous had been.

From their conversations about poetry and novels, he had learned she was a romantic. She deserved to be adored in a way in which Daniel's jaded self was not capable. The previous evening, she described a love so full and without resentment that he found himself craving it, while knowing he could never have it. People let him down.

Betrayal patterned his life, and he could not trick himself into believing he would ever find someone who gave him the courage to share his heart, though her speech ignited a yearning for that very thing. What would it be like to be prized by such a woman?

Love did not benefit marriage. His mother's infatuation with his father never wavered, regardless of the hardships he put her through. Daniel pitied her. His father took advantage of her love, even while loving her in return. If they did what was best for the other person rather than what a love-stricken fool might do, the whole family would be better off. Like his mother's purchase of that reflecting telescope to which extravagance his father responded by sending his wife to the dressmaker. She'd needed the dresses, but not as much as the family required protection from the damp.

Mary's leg pressed against his. He willed his heart to stop its erratic beating. She huddled in the corner of the carriage. He crossed his arms over his chest, suppressing the desire to open his arms to her, to comfort and soothe her. He wanted to get home to his father and be reinstated as heir. He wanted the castle. Did he want Mrs. Allen, too?

Against every impulse, he did not embrace Mary Allen, but committed to stay with her until all the wrongs Savage had inflicted were righted as far as possible.

Chapter Fifteen

With utmost anguish had Mary read Louisa's parting letter and wondered at the boldness of the child. Louisa stated that her decision to leave was inspired not only by *A Woman Who Loves* but also by Mary herself. Mary's courage in becoming an author. Mary's unflinching treatment of Mr. Bateman. Even parrying comments to protected her identity as an author.

Rain fell softly against the carriage and trickled down the window, nature reflecting her suffering, even if she could not yet cry over it. Too sick for tears, her eyes ached and burned. Her stomach, though empty, felt like it carried a quarry full of rocks. How could she tell her brother that under her care, his only daughter had run away with a scoundrel? And that her action was inspired by Mary's poor example.

This was what happened when one did not watch herself, when a woman cared too little for what others thought of her. She paid the price now. Under the presumption that no one would ever read her writing, and she'd written a salacious tale that indeed inspired an innocent to take an irredeemable step. Even if Louisa was found, her reputation lay in tatters. Not even the man Stephen planned to marry her off to would take her.

A groan escaped Mary's lips. She swallowed it.

"What was that?" Daniel asked.

"What?"

“I thought you said something.”

Mary shook her head.

“Have you read anything by Eliza Haywood?” Daniel asked.

“Every word.” She was too tired to evade the truth but averted her head, watching rain slither down the window.

“Oh.” Daniel’s surprise expressed his opinions regarding her reading habits. “What do you think of her?”

Mary became intensely aware of their solitude, as it reminded her of a scene from a Ms. Haywood novel. The comparison brought heat to Mary’s cheeks. In truth, she had nothing to be ashamed of in her present action. The lenience given to widows did not extend to young ladies. Mary took a shuddering breath.

“I’m sorry. I only meant to distract you,” he said.

“I need to gather my thoughts. I suppose I admire her. There are no other women who write so boldly about women, their desires, and social impediments. Did you know she started her own printing press when her publisher didn’t pay enough?”

“I did not. An enterprising woman.”

“Yes, and though criticized by the likes of Mr. Pope, I am sure he wishes he sold as many books.”

“No doubt.”

“Have you read anything by her?”

“I cannot say that I have, but after reading *A Woman Who Loves* , I might.”

Another stone dropped into Mary’s stomach. She did not like the comparison, but it was inevitable. “Lady Mary is far tamer than Eliza Haywood.”

Beside her, Daniel shuddered, and she found he was laughing.

“What can possibly be funny?”

“I was thinking of Miss Barry accusing you of authoring *A Woman Who Loves* and the look on her face when you refuted her.”

She wanted to say that she did not find it amusing, but he might be offended, so she restrained herself. Instead, she said, “I am grateful you defended me.” Gratitude blossomed in her when he stood by her that night, but it had since dried up. She felt like a shriveled plant which no one expected to produce fruit.

Daniel sobered. “You know, Miss Thorpe practically memorized that book. It is no wonder she eloped like Penelope. Perhaps *A Woman Who Loves* is not a good influence for young minds after all.”

She turned as far away from him as possible in the small equipage. “You hardly need remind me of that.”

“Pardon me, I did not mean to suggest it is your fault. Did you introduce her to the book?”

“You might say that.”

“Even so, she is at liberty to make her own choices.”

Was she? Was anyone? Poor, stupid Louisa. This single foolish use of agency would lead her to harsher confines than ever. Saddled to a reckless gambler or abandoned by him, Louisa was ruined.

“Why not tell me one of Eliza Haywood’s stories to pass the time?”

In that moment, Mary could only think of Fantomina , wherein the heroine disguises herself several times to seduce the same man. One did not speak of such things. She put her hot cheek against the window and shook her head.

“You must forgive me. I lack presence of mind,” Mary said. She chanced a look at him and then could not tear her eyes from his. The gravel in her stomach turned molten, and she became aware of each place his body pressed against hers. The shoulders that overlapped; their elbows, hips, and knees pressed and jostled together in a sudden rush of heat. Rain poured faster, creating a curtain around them.

He leaned toward her. He parted his lips, licked his lower lip, closed his mouth. He was going to kiss her, but then he dropped his eyes to his lap. “Perhaps you should know...I overheard a conversation some weeks ago between Miss Thorpe and Mr. Savage, and I failed to tell you of it. I believed that speaking with Savage would be enough. I was mistaken. I...I am sorry for it.”

“What did they say?”

Daniel knitted his brow. “Some nonsense about Savage wanting to become a farmer, take a wife, and live quietly in the country.”

“That seems innocent enough.” She wiped her forehead, collecting herself from the assumption of his kiss.

“It does now that I say it, but at the time it seemed suggestive, as if he were on the

verge of inviting her to join him. His estate neighbors mine, but I would hardly call it a farm. It's expansive." Daniel's eyes lit. "Although, he does have a hunting box. He told me about it, spoke of it the same way he told Louisa about the farm, his place of refuge."

"Do you think..."

"It's a possibility. Either way, it is on the road to Scotland. If they are there, it will save us a journey."

Air ballooned in her chest, and she swallowed the overflow that might become a sob. It wasn't much, but it was more hope than she had two minutes ago. "I am very grateful. And that is not a strong enough word for what I feel. Thank you for your help." She put her hand on his forearm and pressed her appreciation.

Thunder rumbled in the not distant clouds, and with it the rain fell in deafening droves. The carriage stopped, and the valet rapped the window before shouting that the roads were too muddy to proceed and they must stop at an inn. Mary nodded her assent to Daniel. If they were stopping, Louisa had also stopped. Until there was nothing left, Mary would choose optimism.

In a few minutes, they arrived at an inn and were dripping puddles on a clean floor.

"Good morning," Mary greeted the innkeeper, noting that the clock on the wall marked the time. It was early, and disappointment at the meager distance they'd crossed fell heavy. "My little brother and I?—"

"Little brother?" Daniel scoffed close enough to Mary's ear that she shivered.

"—would like refreshment by the fire, if you please." She would pay for all the expenses of the travel and so had made a point of entering the inn first and putting

herself in charge.

“We may need rooms if the rain continues,” Daniel said.

“Yes. For my brother and me,” Mary said. What a useless thing to reiterate. She pinched her lips together.

That seemed to catch the innkeeper’s attention, and he examined them with narrowed eyes.

“You’re not the first brother and sister to come here today,” the innkeeper said with a touch of incredulity.

“Aren’t we?” Daniel said.

“The first pair had no resemblance either.”

“We are following our siblings. Perhaps it was them. Do you recall their names?” Hope fluttered in Mary’s chest.

“No.”

“What did they look like? A fair-haired man and a young lady with blonde curls?” Mary asked.

“Perhaps. They wanted to change horses, but the pair they arrived with was badly treated. Run practically to death. I chastised the man and told him to go elsewhere. He’d not ruin my horses.”

Daniel leaned forward. “Is there another place nearby where they may have changed?”

“Only one. Down the road a half mile.”

With a meaningful look at Mary, Daniel said, “I’d best go and see if that pair is in the stables.”

Mary allowed Daniel to see her settled by the fire before he left. She lingered on the sight of his broad shoulders and confident gait until he disappeared. What was she thinking? She raised her palms over flaming cheeks. In the carriage, she imagined he would kiss her. She noticed his fine figure. She lamented his absence. Absurd. And under such circumstances!

These were the feelings of a younger inexperienced girl, not of a widow. More than twenty years ago, in her first bloom of youth, Daniel had been a child, an adolescent. The absurdity that she might fall in love with a man so much younger...well, the idea did not deserve thought. Highly improper.

Mary laughed at herself and clutched her locket. The light fluttering of the heart, the heavy yearning in the belly, were sensations she had buried with Lord Allen, except they unearthed themselves when Daniel Fletcher walked into the room. Her love for her first husband was a fortress, a shelter built by the two of them with struggles and disappointments. The kind of love that is strengthened over hardship is not replaceable.

Early in their marriage, Mary had received a letter from Agnes, inviting her to act as partner and treasurer for an orphanage, an idea that thrilled her. She could not wait to tell her husband about the project and hoped it was something the two of them could work on together. She’d spent the day making lists of all the things they could do, the people she would contact, the money she might raise, and the best way to keep a ledger.

At that time, they lived on Lord Allen’s estate outside of London with his younger

sister and his mother. Mary had been bored with minimum responsibility to run the household since her mother-in-law found endless reasons to postpone her move to the dower house. Mary expected she would have a child and that would solve the problem, but it never happened, though they'd been married for nearly a year. This work with Agnes would close a gap in Mary's life. When she sat in the morning room with a stack of beautiful stationary at her elbow, she would have a list of things to do, important letters to write, people to meet. A life.

When her husband came home, he kissed her forehead and took her hands with bright eyes, his manner indicating he had something to tell her as well. They had a light argument about who should tell their news first, each insisting the other begin. Mary prevailed, and her husband told her about an estate in Ireland that was neglected. He proposed they move, remove themselves from his overbearing family. The property had great potential and could increase the family's income. With a sinking heart and a glance at Agnes's letter, she agreed to a change that would remove her from family, friends, and country, as duty required.

"Now you can stop writing your silly stories and run a household." He had said this with the assurance of one bestowing a long desired gift. With a beaming smile, he slid his arms around her and kissed her neck, twirling her around while tears pricked Mary's eyes. He never knew that in five short minutes, he'd shattered her dreams and her confidence.

Months earlier when he discovered by accident that she was a writer, he seemed delighted. She shared her stories with him and believed he enjoyed her writing. But that day she learned that he thought writing a waste of time or of lesser importance than keeping a house. Through the passage of time, his words twisted her heart anew.

Perhaps she should have told him about the orphanage. A home as far as Ireland prohibited her from any meaningful impact she may have had on the orphanage. She did not want to leave, even when living with her mother-in-law galled. If she had

protested, would he have honored her wishes and remained in England? Was her ambition important enough to impede her husband's desires? She would never know. When he asked for her news, she said she had received a letter from Agnes. The conversation ended, and Lord Allen left to tell his mother their plans.

Months passed before she let go of bitterness and surrendered to the effort of building a beautiful life with her husband. She learned the power of forgiveness and saw that he matched her in loyalty and love. She opened her heart and gave him all her love. To give and receive that tenderness without inhibition transformed her. There could be nothing equal to it. She continued writing but was not prolific. Keeping house did require much of her time. Eventually, she shared her stories with him again but never with the same relish as in the beginning. Even with forgiveness, some slights are never forgotten.

The fire in the inn did its job. Mary's clothing dried. She looked at her hands, and the black stain on her right finger seemed darker than ever. Despite many efforts, she could never stop writing. It was the one thing that belonged wholly to herself. To think, she was a published author. How would Lord Allen have responded to the circumstance that his wife's silly words were popular beyond expectation?

Instead of ruminating on the past, Mary concentrated on eating. She slathered clotted cream onto a scone and took a bite, but it stuck to the roof of her mouth like paste and sawdust. She waited with little patience for Daniel's return. Tea was the only thing that agreed with her, and she had consumed an entire pot by the time he strode into the room, a huge grin on his face.

"My horses are in the stables." He sat down opposite her, bringing with him a chill of the outdoors that rushed over her too-warm face.

"You must sit closer to the fire and dry yourself," Mary urged him. He did as she bid. "Now, tell me what this means for our search and in what condition you found your

horses?”

He explained that the horses only needed rest. The man at the posting house told Savage that because the horses were exhausted, they must change in less than ten miles. Mary closed her eyes and rested her forehead on her hand. A decidedly unladylike posture, but she did not want Daniel to see the tears in her eyes. They knew their next stop and were headed in the right direction. If not for the weather, they might have found them already.

Daniel reached into his vest pocket and withdrew a small book bound in green cloth, no bigger than Mary's hand. "I brought you something to distract you from your troubles." He held the book out to her, their fingers brushing when she took it from him, smiling.

"Thank you." Mary ran her finger along the soft broken spine. The book was well-worn, its binding loose. It crackled as she opened it, the well-read pages velvet soft, smelling sweet and musky. No one had given her so thoughtful a present in a very long time.

"There was not much to choose from, but I thought we might read to one another to pass the time." His neck turned red as he spoke.

"I like Katherine Philips. Do you know her work?"

He shook his head, and they lapsed into silence.

"You seem thoughtful." Daniel pulled the untouched platter of meat, cheese, and bread toward him.

Mary set the book aside but rested her fingers on the smooth cover while turning an eye to the window, where rain screened the view of the road. Since she was impotent

to do more to find Louisa, she needed to cast away her worry. “I was thinking about how our past choices affect our present.”

Daniel’s eyes grew soft. He reached out, and for a moment, Mary thought he would touch her bare hand. Just before his fingers touched hers, he dropped his hand to the table.

“I understand you. Miss Thorpe and Mr. Savage have made a terrible decision that may affect the rest of their lives for ill.”

Mary swallowed. She hadn’t forgotten about them, but she was a little ashamed for thinking of herself.

“Yes. Louisa’s flight will not serve her well.” She paused. “And I was thinking about my own life. Just a silly old woman’s fancies.”

“Old?” he asked, stressing the word with incredulity.

“Compared to you, little brother.”

“Why do you think of yourself that way? There is nothing old or silly about you.” He tapped her hand with his forefinger. He was probably only trying to make a point, but something in her stomach flipped, and her hand stilled. Mary almost took hold of her locket. But if she drew her hand away, there was no chance he would touch her again. It was a long time since an attractive gentleman had touched her or noticed her at all.

“Well?” Daniel asked.

She couldn’t remember the question. All she knew was that she and Daniel sat across a table, leaning toward one another, and neither of them was breaking eye contact.

“I was thinking of my late husband.”

Daniel sat up and crossed his arms, the spell broken. Mary didn't know how to reclaim the moment, so she plowed forward. “If we hadn't moved to Ireland, my life may have been different.”

Daniel nodded. “I know how that feels. I don't know where I would be if I had not gone into banking.”

“Do you wish you'd done something else?”

“No. But I regret leaving on poor terms with my father.”

He leaned forward again, his arms crossed over the table. She'd brought him close again. To hold him there, she began talking, not knowing what made her divulge her life to him. “I nursed a grudge against my mother, and she died before I could reconcile with her.”

Daniel's eyes understood, and he gave her a tight half-smile.

“It's a healed wound and doesn't carry the sting it used to. In my heart I've come to peace with her.” It also helped that her mother didn't know that she embarrassed Mary.

Chapter Sixteen

In the still dark morning, Daniel held his hand out to help Mary into the carriage. She slid her hand into his, sending a current of warmth up his arm. He watched her fold her skirts around her legs, making room for him. She leaned back and smiled, an invitation for him to join her. Sitting beside her was like walking from a cold room into a bright summer afternoon; he could not deny her appeal.

Humid air mixed the scents of rain, horses, and baking bread. They rose early to lay claim on the best horses and arranged for the smallest, lightest carriage available, hoping for the advantage of speed. That meant that the side of Mary's body rested against his, closer even than the day before. When the carriage lurched forward, they pressed together, and he became aware of his companion in a way he had not been the previous day.

Throughout the night, rain had drenched and muddied the streets and brought in a crowd of shelter seekers to the inn. The rising noise in the dining room put an early end to their conversation, and Daniel couldn't decide if that pleased or disappointed him. While he enjoyed speaking with Mary more than with any other person of his acquaintance, his feelings for her were foggy. He was at once irritated at not being able to return home faster while enjoying her company more with each moment they spent together. After dinner, the inn became almost riotous, and Mary had gone to her room. It had still been early, and he wished she stayed with him. Amid the clamor of the crowded inn, he began to consider asking her to pose as his...what? Fiancée? That was taking it too far. Perhaps the woman he was courting. Once the thought entered his head, it would not leave him alone. It persisted, even after he realized the idea came from *A Woman Who Loves*, wherein a wealthy spinster pretended to be

betrothed to frighten off a treasure hunter.

He wanted his family castle. The idea of losing it siphoned his ambition and filled him with listless energy. His work at Smith's Bank, which had consumed him for so long, would be for naught if he did not obtain Almerey. With Miss Thorpe unavailable and his father in a precarious state of health, might Mrs. Allen help rewrite his father's will?

When first he return home, a flood of memories surfaced, and he realized that he'd allowed anger against his father to overshadow his happy childhood. The castle walls, the coolness of the air, the earthy smell, the familiarity of it, had recalled him to better days. Frustrating though his father was, he did not want the light to go out on their relationship.

Before his father lost the family's fortune, the castle had abounded in warmth and affection. That nostalgia followed him to Bath. One bite of a biscuit and he and his sister, Emma, were at his mother's knee listening to her dramatic reading of Robinson Crusoe . At the smell of damp and paper, he was in his father's study learning Latin, his father whispering to himself whilst perusing Isaac Newton's Arithmetica Universalis .

It wasn't perfect. His parents were imprudent and disregarded their responsibilities. Still, he ached to return to the time before rancor let him neglect his relationship with his parents.

Perhaps, his happy memories were sweetened by the mist of time. Even the moments spent with Miss Jensen were tinted pink. Not that he wanted her , but his desire for affection and the stability of marriage grew when he remembered how he'd anticipated sharing the castle with someone he loved. When Miss Jensen had married another, that dream vanished, and the castle became the center of all his hopes.

Now, with his father's threat to disinherit him, he would not have the castle without marriage. The days he spent with his parents were a series of arguments, and they played the trump card. Bringing a potential wife home with him might build new understanding with his father. Dare he ask Mary to do him the favor of pretending interest in him?

He glanced at her, sitting with her hands clasped in her lap, looking out at the green countryside. She was a prim woman at times and, at others, quite passionate. The love she had given her deceased husband was a gift. To share love like that... Perhaps Lord Allen's death had enabled their love to endure. Had he lived, perchance their affection would have grown tired. The thought irritated him, and he shoved it away. What sort of man craved a woman's love when he was not willing to give love to her in return? Selfish.

The carriage slogged through the mud; their journey slowed with little chance the roads would improve anytime soon. Ask her if she will pretend a courtship. He opened his mouth, but Mary spoke before he had a chance.

"Do we stop at every posting inn along the way?" She tapped her fingers against the knuckles of her other hand. "Perhaps the rain stopped them in a village, and they took shelter inside a cottage. They could be anywhere."

Daniel mulled over the conundrum. "The best we can do is proceed as quickly as possible to Mr. Savage's hunting box. We don't have the resources to look everywhere. If they aren't in Chesterfield, we can send servants to search for them. Depending on my father's health, you may have to proceed to Gretna Green without me."

Mary tugged at her sleeves. "Yes, of course. I would never presume to engage you further. Your duty is to your family." Her lips were dry and eyes red. Though she'd retired early, she seemed exhausted.

This was no time to ask her if she would pretend to court him, but his heart thudded. He would ask, though it made him a blackguard. He could introduce her to his parents and make an excuse about why she had to leave so soon. It was a desperate plan, but the pretense would last only a few hours. Hating that he would take advantage of her when she was already in distress, he said, “Mary, I wondered, would you come with to my castle? Meet my family? After, I can set you up with servants to escort you the rest of the way to Scotland, should we not find them before then.”

Mary stilled. Now was his chance to speak and reveal his predicament. But what would she think of a man who would use her so abominably and deceive his parents? Even in his head, the suggestion to lie to his family so he could reconcile with his father and regain his inheritance was mercenary at best. And a lie. Daniel abhorred deception.

Was it really a lie? Could Mary be a symbol? She represented whichever woman would become his wife. It was a show of compliance to his father’s wish. He could tell his parents that Mary changed her mind, and that would give him a little time to find someone else.

“Certainly. I could use a rest from all these inns,” she said, lifting her chin and straightening, her weight against him lessening.

Over the short weeks of their friendship, if it could be so named, Daniel noted that Mary had dual personalities. At times she was warm and interesting, funny and endearing. But there was another Mary, a dignified and proper woman who emerged a paragon of polite behavior, complete with armor and a shield, ready to strike should anyone try to penetrate her defenses. The warrior version of Mary rose when she was uncomfortable. Daniel could only guess that she did not actually wish to visit Almere.

“There is, of course, no need, if you are anxious to be on your way to Scotland or

must take Miss Thorpe home after we find her.” Daniel wanted Mary at the castle. He could see her there, descending the stairs in that cheerful way of hers. Sitting with him by a fire. Walking out to the pond. Somehow, he knew Almercy would enchant her. Introducing Mary to the castle would return the intrigue and magic he’d felt for his home as a child. “Of course, I hope we find them sooner rather than later, but if they are not where we expect them, it would make sense to send servants to scour the countryside. There may be a period of waiting, and my home is ideally situated only a few miles from Mr. Savage’s hunting box.” Daniel cleared his throat. “You will like the castle. It is enchanting.” Almost as captivating as she was. He bit his tongue, stopping the flow of words.

“I cannot make any promises until we find Louisa and assess her situation. The girl may need whisking out of the country.”

His plan was faulty. If they found Miss Thorpe, he and Mary may need to take her to his house for some period. And that would be a disaster. As far as his father was concerned, Miss Thorpe was his future wife. He had no wish to marry Miss Thorpe, but he would if she were found. It was his duty, even more now than before. He assumed some responsibility for telling Savage of her dowry and for bringing him to Bath. Miss Thorpe would do as well as anyone. With some relief, Daniel abandoned the plan to ask Mary to pose as his bride to be. They must see how things with Mr. Savage unfolded.

He was once again at the beginning with no hope of success. And what if Father was dead? An anxious flutter entered his chest. He could lose his father. He could lose the castle. Though he did not begrudge any help he gave Mary, he wished to be on horseback, traveling home as fast as possible.

Daniel tried to relax his clenched hands and reminded himself that he didn’t know if his father’s condition was grave. His mother’s letter lacked details. For all he knew, his father had only sustained minor bruises, but that was not the tone of the letter. It

seemed serious. Something had to be done.

“Mary, I must ask you something. If we cannot find Miss Thorpe, when you meet my parents, will you pretend you are my...that I am courting you?” There. The words were out, and he felt her body shift but was too ashamed to look at her.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her fingers work over the embroidery on her stomacher. She said nothing for so long that he thought she wouldn’t answer.

“Why?” she asked. It was a simple enough question. He should have explained.

“The day we left Bath, I was already on my way home, you know. An hour earlier, I’d received a note from my mother telling me my father was injured, that I must return home immediately.”

“If your father is ill, why would you wish to mislead him?”

Under a wave of shame, he said, “My father and I are not on the best of terms. I want to reconcile with him. His greatest desire is that I marry, and I want him to believe me filial enough to abide by his wishes.”

“I see.” She folded her gloved hands in her lap and pulled her lips into a look of prim censure. “I will consider it. On one hand, it seems a kind thing to do. On the other, quite devious.” Her lips twitched. Did she find this funny? He supposed that from a certain point of view, it could be humorous.

“Do not imagine that I am blind to the unscrupulous implications of this favor.” He searched for her sympathetic eyes, but she kept her face averted. With the gentle touch of his hand on her chin, he turned her toward him. She recoiled at his touch, and his hand dropped, but her eyes were now locked on his. “I am desperate. You know how it is to have contention between yourself and a parent. I would not ask

such a thing if I did not fear his leaving the earth without knowing that, despite everything, his son loves him. I don't know how else to show him."

She blinked slowly back at him, her lashes splaying against her fine brow. She could not know how alluring she was. "I understand. I will consider your...I will think on it."

Daniel grimaced. What could she call it? A proposal? An offer? She clenched her jaw, and her fingers did not still. Only a villain would add to her distress. If it weren't for the heaviness in his own heart, for the resolute numbness he carried since reading his mother's letter, he would never ask such a thing.

He needed to distract her. "The book I brought yesterday. Do you have it on hand?"

In the carriage's crushing lack of space, she reached for the floor, pushing her hip against his thigh. She sat up, book in hand, and brought her eyes to his. In them he saw a depth of emotion that he did not understand and for which he was ill prepared.

Chapter Seventeen

Did he really wish to read poetry? Alone, in a carriage—and so snug an equipage—it seemed an indecent thing to do. Mary fished the book from her reticule and held it on her lap, fingers trembling in the most absurd fashion. Most of the poems spoke of friendship, but friendship between a man and a woman was a short step from love. After Daniel's request that she pose as his potential wife, the space between them shrank. There was no denying her attraction to him, and the day spent with him only increased her fondness.

Daniel's arm moved beside her own as he reached over and took the volume from her. "I will read first. Which poem would you like to hear?"

None of them. "Any of them."

Daniel read "A Retir'd Friendship."

To Mary, words were powerful, and her heart responded to the poem as Daniel uttered it, his voice low and intimate in the space they shared. And how apt that the poem's theme spoke of cares dismissed within the safety of love. When one had love, one also had solace. Daniel fell quiet, the final words pronounced, leaving Mary to still her trembling soul in the silence of the rattling carriage, too overwhelmed to comment on the poem. He was warm and solid beside her, and the desire to lean into him almost overcame her. The urge could only be the result of his asking to court her—or to pretend to do so.

Mary suppressed a sigh, her mind racing to find something else to discuss. "Tell me

about this castle of yours. And about your parents. What is the root of your dispute with your father?" She half expected him not to answer these very presumptuous questions.

"When I was young," he began.

"You are very young still." Mary smiled.

"I am, and that also makes you young as well. You and I are not so distant in age."

Was that true? He might be thirty-two, thirty-five at a stretch. Even five years set them at an unbreachable difference. Why did the world consider a man youthful when a woman of the same age was sometimes spoken of as if she were in her dotage? She didn't feel old.

"Please, excuse my interruption. You were saying?" she asked.

"Ah, yes. I was in love and engaged to be married. I alluded to this circumstance at the ball."

"You were engaged? You told about a woman you wished to marry, but I did not realize it was so serious."

He explained that at the time of his engagement, he had worked at Smith's Bank, due to his family's financial strain. "I felt responsible to ensure there was food on the table and enough money coming in from tenants to keep the castle from collapse. I fear I did not give my intended the attention she merited." He stopped talking and ran his hand over his face. "I'm not sure why I'm telling you all of this."

"We are stuck in a small carriage with miles and days of travel ahead. But you needn't continue if you don't wish."

Daniel lifted a shoulder. “I could not in good conscience bring another person into the household. More than that, we needed money, or the family would have to sell Alмеры, but without the estate and the surrounding lands, there was no income.”

Though a wave of tension ran through his explanation, he did not criticize those responsible for their poor financial state.

“When a friend offered me a position at Smith’s, I left home.”

“And your betrothed?”

“I believed I was only delaying our union for a year or two. We wrote one another constantly, and I visited from time to time, but two years past?—”

“Two? You left your beloved waiting for two years?”

He tugged at his sleeve. “I did. Furthermore, I assumed that during all that time she was faithful to me.” He exhaled a forced, ragged breath. “I never once doubted her.”

“I am terribly sorry.”

“It is just as well.”

She squeezed his arm, sitting with him in his pain for a moment before asking another question. “Did your mother and father asked you to reclaim their wealth?”

“They resent that I left, though I don’t know how they’d have sustained themselves without my help. My father in particular condemns my decision, saying money will take care of itself and family requires love and attention.”

“Well, I agree with him on the second point.” One could not neglect love, and Daniel

had done just that. In leaving his fiancée, he had left behind a greater chance of happiness. But there was time for him yet.

He rotated toward her, his pale eyes dark with hurt. “My parents show their affection in odd ways. I hate to speak ill of them, but I want you to understand. They are flighty. Neglectful. If I did not care for Almery, it would be in ruins.” His eyes clouded, became unfocused, and his mouth drew down. It seemed his parents ignored more than their home. They disregarded Daniel. Mary’s eyes stung, but she did not want to show him her sympathy in case he should interpret it as pity.

She drew in a breath and swallowed the lump in her throat. In her most efficient voice, she summarized his plight. “Your father is upset with you for disregarding your familial duties and wants you to marry.”

Daniel nodded.

“But you do not wish for a wife?” Her chest twisted as she made the statement.

He cleared his throat and straightened his cravat. “I do not wish to fall in love. Not again.”

Mary’s first instinct was to laugh. She’d never heard of something so foolish. Love was everything, but his fiancée had hurt him. The ache in her throat returned, and she patted his arm in silence. No words lightened a tattered heart.

He took the fingers that lay on his arm. “Yes, I’ve been a fool. While it is hard to regret my decision, I do wish I’d been more patient with my father. I wish I had recognized the good things about him.”

“If you tell your father what you have just told me, perhaps that would be enough to mend your relationship.” In a quieter voice, she added, “Even without my help.”

Daniel's body slumped beside her. "It would not be enough. But, please, forget I ever asked. It was a stupid idea."

Yes. It was an odd request, but after hearing the depth of Daniel's remorse, she understood. He was, as he said, desperate. Although she had reservations about whether it was fair to his parents, it might be fun to pretend she was in love with him.

"I will join you in your pretense." She decided. "I will tell your family whatever you wish and irritate you until your parents are convinced we would never suit."

"Never suit?"

"Of course. I am so much your senior."

"Not this again. You speak as if you are my aged aunt." He crossed his arms and frowned. "I am thirty-three." He raised a brow as if in expectation.

"I am older."

He laughed. "I'd forgotten. Miss Jensen, the woman I was to marry, was two years older than I."

"Gracious! You have a penchant for older women. I suppose I am perfect for you."

He turned to look her fully in the face. "In all seriousness, forget I asked. I should not drag you into my personal affairs."

"In that case, I suppose I will find Louisa on my own. I have no more need of your assistance."

Their eyes held contact. Daniel clenched his jaw. "The two things are incomparable. I

am asking you to lie.”

“We need tell no falsehood. You introduce me. I fawn over you. We allow your parents to draw their own conclusion. It will only be for a few hours. I will have to leave in the morning. Perhaps we should have a row before I go?” If she was not enjoying looking into Daniel’s eyes so thoroughly, she might have lightened the mood with a laugh. Instead, she watched his face, enchanted by the slow smile that teased the sides of his mouth.

Chapter Eighteen

From inside the carriage, Louisa heard the whip thrash against the horses over and over. They'd been on the road from Bath for three days, but rain impeded their progress, and it was no better today. Infuriated, Tobias rapped against the roof as many times as the driver whipped the horses.

"It seems we'll not get far today," he said, but smiled, slinking his arm around her and pulling her to his lap. Her lips were bruised, but Tobias persisted, despite Nellie's presence.

He withdrew a flask from his coat and drank deeply before offering it to Louisa. She shook her head, catching Nellie's disapproving look when his cool wet lips began working their way from Louisa's ear to her collar bone.

"Oh! Stop." She pushed his shoulders with both hands, but his arms tightened, vice-like, around her. Crushed against him, his mouth devouring any available skin, her weakness and impotence solidified into panic. Who was Tobias Savage? What had she done in putting her faith in him?

The carriage shuddered to a halt, and a few moments later, the driver approached. Hopeful Tobias would let her go, she tried to scoot away, but he squeezed her to him.

"We'll have to stop," the driver said.

"Not again!"

Nellie squeaked from across the carriage, and Louisa saw in her pale face the terror that bloomed in her chest.

Louisa eyed the sagging inn wherein they would spend the night, a reflection of her own despair. Tobias took her by the waist, lifted her out of the carriage, and dropped her into slippery mud. Nellie offered a steadying arm.

“You, what’s your name?” Tobias asked Nellie. “Go to the servants’ quarters directly. You’re not needed until morning.”

“Don’t leave,” Louisa said. “I’ll need help?—”

“I’ll be happy to help you, love.” He turned to Nellie. “Go.”

Nellie walked toward the inn, turning once before disappearing through the door.

Tobias bound his hand around Louisa’s wrist as he directed the footman about the trunks. Inside the inn, a sour smell filled her nose, and a mouse skittered across the floor. She looked for Nellie but saw no familiar face.

“A room for my wife and me.” Tobias said to the innkeeper, pulling Louisa into him.

“Two rooms, if you please,” she said. This was the first time Tobias asked for a single room.

Tobias glanced at her, his habitual sneer exaggerated. Her insides shriveled, and she tried to step away. This was not what she had agreed to. He held her tight, his fingers digging into her waist. He put his mouth against her neck and told her they would never spend another night apart. He snaked his other hand around her bare neck and under her bodice. She pushed him away, but his smile grew at her distress.

The face that she had thought so handsome was now grotesque, his smile menacing and his eyes bloodshot. She would have to get rid of him. But how? She tried to catch a sympathetic eye, but everyone went about their business without glancing her way. The innkeeper kept his head down, staring at his ledger. Near the stairs, a woman paused to take in the scene. Louisa pleaded with her eyes.

“Polly,” the innkeeper addressed the woman without looking up. “See that the upstairs room is ready.” The woman turned and began ascending the stairs, sending Louisa’s heart high in her chest to pound in a rhythm of panic.

The room paid for, they made their way to a dank chamber with cracked yellowing walls and slumped furniture, where Tobias removed a flask of whiskey from his pocket and tipped the last few drops into his mouth. He’d been drinking for hours.

“Oh, you finished the bottle just as I was wanting to try a bit myself.” She begged him to fetch a little more rum. His eyes brightened, and he turned out of the room.

As soon as his footsteps faded, she bolted the door then stepped back to examine it. Unlike many things in the inn, it did not look like it would fall apart. A sturdy length of iron, about the width of her thumb slid into a bracket in the doorframe to secure the door. Still, she did not feel safe.

The room contained a bed, a dressing table, and a chair. With all the strength her terror inspired, she tried to push the bed across the room. It barely budged. She turned to the chair. It was rickety and small, but it was all she had. She secured it beneath the door handle. Pleased to find the little table heavier than it looked, she scraped it against the floor, sure Tobias would hear the noise and come running. But he did not. He was likely so inebriated that running was impossible for him. With the furniture piled against the door, she curled on top of the bed and waited.

Within minutes, Tobias turned the knob. He pounded on the door. “Louisa! Open the

door.” He kicked it, and the chair shuddered. Frozen to the bed, she pressed her palms into her eyes and remained silent.

“You hen-hearted, low-bred, slattern. Open up.” His shouting brought the innkeeper, asking what the matter was.

“My wife has locked me out. Get an ax.”

Louisa’s pounding heart stopped.

“No, you don’t.” This from a female voice, perhaps the innkeeper’s wife. “This establishment is enough of a mess. I’ll not have you ruinin’ a fine door.”

“That’s sure,” said the innkeeper. “She’ll open to you soon enough.”

No, she wouldn’t. She would never willingly permit him into her sight again .

The innkeeper continued arguing with Tobias. So long as they did not allow him to break the door, Louisa might be able to wait it out. She pulled a dingy coverlet around her. Covering her ears with a yellowed pillow, she hummed to herself for what felt like hours. Eventually, the storm passed in a patter of receding footsteps.

There was a space the width of a thick book between the door and the floor, and a shadow waited there. With the lightness of a cat, she got out of bed to see what it was. She stopped in her tracks. A lock of hair, Tobias’s hair, stuck under the door. He lay on the floor outside the room.

Because she was on the fourth floor, escape through the window was not possible. And she could not abandon Nellie. There were also her trunks to consider, and she had some very fine new dresses that could never be left behind.

The only thing she could do was wait. Even if she starved or died of thirst, she would not open the door until Tobias Savage left the inn. Hopefully, Nellie would have the sense to stay out of his way.

The next morning, Louisa woke to his jeering. “Wake up, wench. My hands are aching to get hold of you. You’re a gilflirt, but I’ll take you.” He snickered from under the door, and it sounded as though he was still deep in his cups. “Open the door, love. I’ve a gift for you.”

He whispered profanities, calling Louisa names she understood only by the vile tone in which they were spoken. She covered her ears and watched the latch, as if her stare would keep it from failing.

After some time, the shadow disappeared. He was gone, probably to breakfast. Louisa’s stomach growled, despite feeling sick at the situation she had put herself in. She moaned into her pillow, too shaken to give way to tears.

“Are you all right, miss?”

It was the voice from the night before. The innkeeper’s wife. A plate of food appeared beneath the door.

“I can try to get the gentleman to leave, but I don’t know that he will heed.”

Louisa’s heart soared. “Yes, please. I will be forever in your debt. What is your name?”

“They call me Polly, the innkeeper’s wife.” Louisa had seen her yesterday, a young woman, stout and strong.

“My maid is upstairs. Nellie. Please tell her to stay away from my door and from Mr.

Savage, for I fear he will hurt her.”

“I will tell her. As for you, do not come out. Your man is just downstairs. I will tell you when it is safe.”

Over the course of the day, Tobias returned from time to time to shout and pound on the door, a habit that seemed to give permission to the other occupants of the inn who kicked at her door or cursed as they passed. Louisa remained quiet.

After a two-day verbal barrage from Tobias, she was as ragged and dilapidated as the inn. He left for long periods but returned to whisper luridly through the door. She went to a basin and rubbed her face with the small amount of water Polly was able to slip to her. In a distorted mirror above the basin, her shoulders appeared tight, her nose red, her hair bedraggled. She clenched her hands until her fingernails bit into her palms. Her muscles quivered at being held hostage, at the abusive language he murmured so casually. She thought he would have given up, but she remained imprisoned, a just punishment for what she’d done.

Tobias’s lips and chin were visible under the door. She glanced at the large porcelain bowl that peeked from beneath the bed. Did she dare? His mouth moved, time slowing as his glistening lips formed various abuses, whispering and bellowing in a cadence not unlike a dramatic soliloquy. She stomped to her bedside, lifted the heavy vessel from the floor, tiptoed as close to the door as she dared. She aimed and with one great thrust, emptied the contents of her chamber pot. It hit true.

She heard Tobias spring to his feet. He sputtered and spit, shrieking obscenities.

“You deserve worse, you badger.” She could do better than that. “You empty-headed, manipulating bully.” She wailed over her foolishness, called out for her mother, and cursed with some of the new vocabulary she’d learned. Though he did not remain for her tirade, she ranted, tears gushing as she thundered at him.

The last of the day's light slipped away, leaving Louisa in the hot, malodorous darkness of her room. She leaned forward, pulling the itchy wool coverlet from the bed. With knees to her chest, she shivered into the blanket, her ears and eyes open, waiting for Tobias to return with the magistrate or an ax. Considering the vile words that had spewed from his lips, she feared what he might do should he get hold of her person.

Louisa wasn't sure if she'd fallen asleep, but it was still dark when Polly's came through the door. "I believe you are rid of him, miss." There was caution in her voice. "I brought a brush and soap to clean up the filth."

"I am sorry for the mess. But I dare not open the door." Her voice was shredded and weak.

Polly pushed soap, wet cloths, and a scrub brush under the door.

Three days passed before Louisa risked unbolting the door, and only after a great deal of begging from Nellie. When she finally opened to Polly and Nellie, she rushing them into her room before bolting the door again.

"Oh, Miss Louisa, your eyes are red. You are so pale," Nellie said.

Louisa touched her face. She no longer cared how she looked. She knew what agony was, and it had nothing to do with her appearance. Home. She wanted the comfort of her bed and the village where she'd grown up. She craved salt air and strong sea winds.

But she could never return home. The shame that awaited her there was unbearable and would lead her to accept whatever her father decided for her.

Chapter Nineteen

After several days on the road, Mary and Daniel fell into a routine. At each stop for refreshment, to change horses, or to sleep for the night, Mary asked after Louisa. If there were additional posting houses or inns in the area, Daniel rode out in search of news. They did not get to every inn, but to most. It was the best they could do.

The absence of news constricted Mary's stomach until she could barely eat. She noticed Daniel did his best to distract her, but it did little good. The only solace Mary found was putting words on the page at the end of each day.

In yet another inn, Mary waited for Daniel to return from making his rounds at nearby lodging houses. There was no expectation of news, and her spirit sagged. Though she'd attempted the task multiple times, she had yet to complete a letter to her brother explaining Louisa's whereabouts. Words for her fictional romance overflowed, but she could not pen an explanation to Stephen. If Louisa were discovered, no one could ever know what happened. She would do everything in her power to keep the secret. But was it fair to keep it from the girl's father?

"Nothing." Daniel sat across from her. "We will be at the hunting lodge tomorrow afternoon, so long as the weather holds."

"That is a good thought." But she could only consider the enormity of her failure. Mary's intention to help Louisa into a love match led the girl to run off with this blackguard, a decision that would rob her of future happiness. How had she been so blind to what was brewing between Savage and her niece? "Stupid child. What will I do when I find her?"

“They will have to marry, regrettable as it is.”

“Of course, you are right. And if they are not there?”

“You could stay at the castle and send servants to the country, or you continue to Scotland. What do you wish?”

Nothing was more important than finding the girl and consoling her. Louisa had ruined herself and there was no undoing that, but Mary wanted to assure Louisa of the love she still felt for her niece. Men on horseback would cover more ground than she could in a carriage. Waiting at the castle for news meant spending more time with Daniel, more time pretending.

“It is wise to send a search party. Can we ask the servants to bring them to your castle when they are found? We could arrange for their marriage from there and make everything seem above board?”

“That is a sound plan.”

“Who can we trust to do the job of finding them while not revealing the situation?”

“Don’t worry on that account. My valet and groom know how to keep a secret.”

Mary nodded. It was all she could do. Stew and bread arrived at the table, but she set the food aside after taking a small bite.

Daniel pushed the bowl back at her. “You will need your strength when you encounter Mr. Savage tomorrow. He deserves a broken nose at the very least, and I know just the woman to serve it.”

Mary laughed, her shoulders relaxing as she watched Daniel smile with her. A rare

grin covered his face, revealing a tiny dimple in his left cheek and his beautiful white teeth. She could watch him all day. If only Louisa hadn't been a ninny, he might have been hers. The notion felt cold.

Daniel pulled out a pair of dice. "I have a surprise for you, but you cannot know what it is, unless you win the game."

"What will it be today?" she asked.

"We both call a number. If my number is closer, you take three bites. When your number wins three times, even if not in a row, I will play a song on that dusty pianoforte in the corner." The candlelight caught on the sparkle in Daniel's eyes.

"A fresh take on the game. All right. Eight."

Mary consumed the requisite quantity of stew, each mouthful easier to swallow.

When she won three times, she tapped her bowl with the spoon. "Your turn to perform, Daniel. What will you play?"

"Whatever you like."

"Anything but a ballad about senseless youths running off in the name of love."

"I could not agree more. A surprise, then?"

"I love a surprise. And that will make two, for I have not forgotten you have something in your pocket for me."

He winked at her, and despite herself, she blushed.

Daniel stretched his hands and fingers over the pianoforte in big showy gestures, gathering the attention of the room. He was a quiet man, sometimes to the point of awkwardness, so his playful showmanship surprised and delighted her. His fingers trilled up the keys before he began playing “Blow, Ye Winds, Blow,” which was a trick because half the song was meant for a woman—did he intend Mary to join him? At least it was a benign song about a shirt. No words of love to set Mary trembling. Though the pianoforte was dusty and out of tune, Daniel’s baritone made up for what the instrument lacked.

After swallowing the last of her dinner, she stood to join him. Before his part finished, several men joined in, and to Mary’s relief, when the female part began, she was joined by the few women in the room.

Two sisters of perhaps twelve and ten who appeared to be traveling with their family danced around the room, urging their parents to join. They did, along with several other couples, until right before Mary’s eyes, the finest soirée she’d ever attended formed around her.

An older gentleman, nudged Daniel off the bench and began to play “The Seeds of Love.” Daniel took Mary by the hand, and they joined the others in the dance.

“You are a miracle worker, Daniel.” His performance transformed the gloomy dining hall into one bright with festivity. Mary easily followed his lead and spun in and out of his arms.

“I’ve done my job, then. You are smiling.”

Was she? Like a young lady falling in love? She settled her visage into something more befitting her station, serene and genteel, but her face would not comply.

“Thank you,” she said. “I owe you a great deal of gratitude for accompanying me on

this chase.”

He sobered.

“Even if it proves fruitless,” she said, “your kindness means everything.” His company and efforts to draw her from her worry were as much an elixir as writing. Without him, she may have crumbled in despair.

“We are stronger together. And soon enough I will be wooing you for the benefit of my parents, so we are even.” He was breathless from the dance, and his words took on an intimacy she was certain he did not intend.

They spun, holding hands, stepping close together as the dance required, and she could not stop another blush from rising. Since an honest courtship was not possible, she would enjoy this pretend one. “I cannot wait,” she said with a tremulous smile. She may as well practice flirting with him. The better to convince his parents.

When the song ended and another began, Daniel led Mary back to their table and picked up her bowl.

“Empty, as you see.” She held out a hand for the prize. It was juvenile, but she loved this routine. When Daniel asked around the villages through which they traveled for news of Louisa and Savage, he never failed to stop somewhere to bring her a gift.

He reached into his satchel, which was draped over his chair and took her proffered hand. “I’ve looked for these across all of England.” His fingers circled her wrist, and the gentle pressure on the sensitive spot beneath her palm sent a wave of pleasure up her arm and down her body. He placed a pink box tied in pale blue ribbon in her hand.

She untied the gift and removed the lid to expose a collection of acorn-sized white

balls. “Cream filberts! My favorite. How did you know?”

He lifted a shoulder and took a bonbon from her hand, popping it into his mouth. Their eyes held as they chewed sugar coating and found the hazelnut inside.

“Delicious,” she said.

Spending an evening at Daniel’s side was sweeter than any trace of sugar on her tongue, and she wanted to savor it. Tomorrow they’d reach Mr. Savage’s hunting box. It was her last hope of finding the couple and repairing Louisa’s situation.

Feeling bold, she took Daniel’s hand and led him into the middle of the still-dancing crowd for a final jig before bed, telling herself it would help her sleep.

It didn’t. The possibilities of the next day haunted. She dreamt that Daniel challenged Mr. Savage to a duel. Daniel shot Mr. Savage dead. At his collapse, Louisa rushed to Savage’s side, her white muslin gown soaking with crimson blood from the fallen man’s chest while Mary embraced Daniel, took his face in her hands, and kissed him. It was not a chaste kiss, and she woke aching for his arms around her and his mouth against hers. The dream told her more of her feelings than she had yet admitted to herself.

Fully awake, she rose and dealt with her anxiety in the same way she always had. Under the yellow glow of a candle, she trimmed her quill, obscured the tip with ink, and waited for inspiration to strike. Instead of the next lines of the story, Daniel appeared. She wrapped her arms around herself, placing her hands exactly where Daniel’s had rested during their dancing. The combination of his laughter and the music, the tilt of his head when he laughed, the pull of his leading hand on her waist, each were threads, capturing her, drawing her to him like he was her sanctuary. It must be the lateness of the hour. She was not so fanciful in the light of day. But he was thoughtful of her in a way no one had been in years—decades even. Had she

learned drawing instead of writing, she'd have sketched his face, if only to rid her mind of it. Instead, she leaned into her own craft, painting a portrait of Daniel with words. She did not spend time making it poetic. It was meant only to take him from her mind and leave him on the page.

His lower lip is fuller than the upper. She ran a finger along her own sensitive lips, wondering what Daniel's felt like. His emotions are not found in the movement of his mouth, but in his eyes . When he gives a gift, his eyes are soft. When he speaks of his family, they are tight. When he looks at me across the small space in the carriage, they are dark and hold questions I cannot fathom and fear to discover.

The following morning, Mary arose, still trying to wipe the glistening dew of the night's visions from her mind. She could not meet Daniel's eyes over the breakfast table. Instead, she examined his straight nose. The shadow of a dimple on his left cheek. His hands, the same hands that brought her confections and lifted her into the carriage.

"You are quiet this morning. Did you sleep?"

"I am nervous for the day ahead." She glanced up, at last catching his eyes, soft and understanding. Concentrate on your porridge . She tried, but it congealed in her mouth.

Daniel eyed her. "At least drink your tea." He understood her.

Before long, they set off toward Chesterfield. The horses settled into a familiar rhythm, clomping over barely dry roads in a refrain fraught with trepidation. Mary wished to skip past the confrontation and move straight to the problem, whatever that turned out to be. If they were there, they must be married. If they were not there, it would be more waiting. She would go to Daniel's castle and pretend to be in love with him. Easy.

Or perhaps not. Her dream and the words she'd written about him last night mocked her hasty agreement to pretend she was in love with him. This farce could wound her when they parted ways. However eager to recompense him for his aid in finding Louisa, Mary regretted agreeing to his scheme.

"We are nearly there," Daniel said. "When we arrive, I will go in while you wait in the carriage."

"Nonsense. I will go with you." She paused. "Better still, you wait in the carriage."

"Mary, we have no idea in what state we will find them."

She caught his meaning. "I am no spring chicken." She used her most ladylike inflection.

He did not reply, but when the carriage rolled to a stop, he took her hand and helped her out. For a moment, they stood shoulder to shoulder, taking in the squat edifice. The thatched roof sagged and was black with mold in places, green with moss in others. Tufts of straw puffed around holes where the vermin had made their nests. Broken bits of carts, rusty traps, and old furniture littered the overgrown garden. Save for a feather of smoke from the chimney, it seemed abandoned.

Daniel pulled Mary's arm through his and leaned toward her. "Ready?"

"No." Mary whispered, pausing a moment to glean strength from his resolute eyes.

He half-smiled. "You could wait in the carriage."

"Never."

They stepped toward the house but paused when their attention caught on a once

beautiful carriage lying askew at one side of the house. Daniel's landau. Two missing wheels gave it a lopsided appearance, and the body was now cracked and crooked. Daniel ran his fingers through his hair, cursing under his breath.

"I am very sorry," Mary said.

"The villain. He must have run into a ditch and had the thing dragged here."

Daniel bent over his broken carriage, tracing marred blue lacquer, as one might touch a dying pet. "To affect any good here, I must keep my temper." He spoke to himself. She put her hand on his shoulder, and he surprised her by taking it in his own. She gave his hand a sympathetic squeeze.

Daniel stood, retaining Mary's hand, and tugged her forward. Together they approached the door.

Chapter Twenty

M ary knocked on the splintered wooden door, behind which they hoped to find Louisa. They heard not even the scurry of a mouse in response.

Mary waited for three thunderous heartbeats and then pounded her fist against the door. “Louisa? Let me in. It is your aunt. Please?” The longer she and Daniel spent looking for the girl, the more Mary’s anger at her niece swelled. She swallowed her fury but continued abusing the door, knuckles burning, until a rustle sounded from within the house. “Someone is there.” She met Daniel’s eyes, drawing a measure of comfort from his apparent calm. “Thank you for not interfering with my outburst.” She rested her forehead against the door and closed her eyes as much as to forestall tears as to listen to what might be going on inside.

The door opened. She rubbed her knuckles and took in the man who stood before her. Clothed in dirty linen shirtsleeves and stained breeches, he wobbled before her, unshaven and unwashed. Before she could stop herself, she covered her nose. He smelled like a pig in a distillery.

“Where is Louisa?”

“How should I know?” he slurred.

Daniel stepped forward, his fists clenched, but Mary stopped him, her ladylike scruples buried in fury. She would handle Savage.

“You took Louisa and left Bath.” The dream from the night before still worried her.

What if there were guns in the house?

“She spurned me, an unnatural, repulsive woman.” He took three unsteady steps back and stumbled into a chair, placing his head in his hands. He cried like a toddler who’d broken his toy.

“Let me help him remember.” Daniel’s eyes were flinty.

Mr. Savage took Louisa, but he’d also stolen Daniel’s horses. She would not begrudge him his revenge, but she didn’t like violence. “Don’t hurt him,” she said. “Not too much, anyway.”

Daniel strode into the house and clattered around the hearth. Would he find a poker and strike Mr. Savage over the head with it? Instead, he came forward with a bucket and dumped the contents over the drunken man’s head, grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and slapped one cheek then the next.

Mr. Savage blustered for a moment. “Stop!” he shouted at Daniel, who released him, sending Savage to the floor.

“Where is Louisa?” Mary asked again.

“I don’t know. She is possessed. I’ve never met such a vile creature.” His red eyes narrowed on Mary, as if it were her fault.

“Now we are getting somewhere.” Mary remained calm. “Tell me what happened. I want to know everything.”

After a little cajoling on Daniel’s part, Mr. Savage began his tale, stating that Louisa had begged him to take her to Gretna Green and then locked herself in a room at an inn in Stroud. Though no one could ever say Louisa was shrewd, under the

circumstance, she had done well for herself.

“You left her in Stroud?” Daniel asked.

“At the Fox and Hound.” Savage was more himself now.

Stroud? They’d passed through the town, not stopping because their horses hadn’t needed rest. Oh! If only they had stopped. “Why leave her behind after ruining her, a gentle young lady with little idea of the world?”

He met Mary’s inquiry with a full sneer and scoffed with a dismissive puff of air through his lips. “I ruin a lady? Louisa is no lady. She ensnared me , and my intentions were purely for marriage.”

Mary did not want to believe it, but she wondered.

Daniel snorted. “You are nearly twenty-five years old. Are you telling me that a chit of only seventeen tricked you into running off with her with the intent of escaping from you afterward? You did it for her money, to pay your debts and restore your sister’s dowry.”

Mr. Savage looked away.

“What will you do now?” Daniel’s voice was gentler.

“I can’t go back home until I’ve money. I can’t go anywhere.” Savage’s tone was bitter.

Daniel rubbed his chin. “I can get you employment, but the position may take you overseas. It won’t pay much at first, but it’ll get you on your feet, and if you do well, you will return to the country with your pockets lined. I’m certain you have

something you can sell for your sister's dowry, and you'll employ someone to look after your estate." With a sharp glimmer of hope, Mr. Savage's eyes met Daniel's. "The minute you enter a gambling house, I will charge you for horse theft. The manager has eyes everywhere and will know. You cannot afford a misstep." Savage looked at the floor and nodded. "I will return tomorrow to discuss details. In the meantime, you need a wash."

Daniel took Mary by her elbow, and together, they walked through the door and repositioned themselves in the carriage.

Mary sank into her seat. "She is not with him. I do not know how to feel."

"It is a good sign, I think," he said.

"Thank you for sending Mr. Savage far away. It is very generous."

"I only wish I could do more."

Nothing else was said for a quarter of an hour. He must have sensed her need to digest her thoughts. He patted her arm and, when a tear slipped into Mary's lap, gave her his handkerchief.

This was the first time Mary had cried over Louisa, in relief as well as in disappointment, shame, and worry. Once she began, she could not stop, though humiliated by her squeaking sobs. Daniel endured with admirable fortitude, behaving just as he ought, asking only once if he could do anything for her, stroking her back from time to time, but for the majority of the time, pretending there was nothing amiss. His response was just what Mary wished.

When her tears were spent and she was able to speak, she said, "Tomorrow morning, I must return to Stroud and see if Louisa is there."

“Yes, of course. And I must remain and see how my father fares.”

Mary nodded and looked out the window. She would miss Daniel. “How long until we reach your castle?” Mary asked when she could again speak without making herself a fool.

“An hour.”

Might she be introduced as Daniel’s prospective bride in the few hours she spent with his parents? She scratched at a prickling on her forehead. What had she committed to? It had seemed harmless, even fun, but now there was only an hour until the moment she would meet his family. She chafed all over and wanted to escape the ordeal by crawling out of her skin. But she would follow through with her promise. It was only for an afternoon, and how could she do otherwise when Daniel had done so much to help her?

“What do you expect of me?” her voice cracked.

“You mean...” He seemed unable to finish.

“With your family. I am to pose as your...”

Daniel cleared his throat. “You really needn’t. I can get along without the charade, and you must find your niece.” His eyes told a different story, and she could not deny him. He was her friend. He’d helped her, sacrificed his time and resources, delayed his return to his ailing father. She would keep her word and succor her aching heart afterward.

“I would like to help.”

He looked out at the passing trees, then spoke to the window. “Depending on how I

find things at home, I may need to introduce you as my fiancée and come up with some explanation for your departure in the morning. I will be sorry to see you go.”

Mary sucked in a breath. Would he ask her to return?

“But we need only tell my father.” He frowned and looked at his knees.

“Won’t he tell your mother?”

“You are right. He would. But it may not be necessary. If he is well, I will have more time.”

Time for what? To find a more suitable wife than she? She swiped at an errant tear that trickled down her cheek. Ridiculous, foolish show of emotion. And for what? Mary’s stomach burned, jealous for the woman who would capture Daniel’s heart. She acknowledged the feeling, regained her composure, and, with equanimity, stamped it out. For a few hours, at least, he would be hers, if only in pretense.

Daniel’s arm slid around Mary’s shoulder, angling her toward her window. “We are nearly there. Look through the trees.” He leaned over her, pointing out landmarks with animation while being either unaware or careless that his chest pressed against her back. Conscious of every brush of his body against hers, she swallowed hard and concentrated on the view. A turret’s crowned head stuck through the trees, the first glimpse of the castle. The carriage followed a bend in the road, the trees cleared, and a great edifice emerged in the distance. A mighty, balanced piece of architecture, save for the lone turret that lent the castle’s otherwise solemn facade a touch of whimsy.

“A moat? King Arthur may bound over the draw bridge at any moment.”

“Keep your sword about you. It may well be Mordred.” Daniel’s smile pulled at the ache in her throat.

They rode over the drawbridge, through the gatehouse. Mary's eyes followed the turret. So fanciful. Perhaps a dragon resided in the tower. She would like a sojourn in the tower, the perfect place wherein to write a novel.

The carriage crunched to a halt in front of the house, and Daniel squeezed Mary's hand, scanning her face with a darting look she could not decipher. "I am indebted to you for this," he said, taking a deep breath before exiting the carriage and offering his hand.

Walking toward the door, a spark of anticipation tingled down her spine. The place was magic. Ivy covered one side of the castle, and wisteria hung over a front window. A rock wall, dark with age and covered in places with moss, enclosed a wild rose garden. Bees hummed around a row of lavender. She bounced on her heels, but only once. She was still a lady, even if she'd just entered an enchanted fortress where anything was possible.

They stood in front of an enormous armored door, its black wood splintering around ornate iron reinforcements. From his satchel, Daniel pulled an enormous brass key and slipped it into the lock.

Daniel looked at her, his palm on the door. "You're excited?"

"Who wouldn't be?"

He pushed, and the door creaked open to a circular entrance hall, cool and dim, with an earthy scent. It was perfect.

"You must go to your father," she whispered, though she couldn't tell why. Her voice reverberated around the hall in shushed tones, then all fell silent.

"Fix it!"

“You cow!”

“Ouch!”

Each word echoed off stone walls. Mary raised a brow at Daniel.

Daniel grimaced. “Trouble among the servants.”

“Go to your father,” she repeated.

“You don’t mind showing yourself around?”

“After riding in a carriage for nearly a week? Not at all. I will go to the kitchen for tea and then explore.”

“Follow the shouting, and you will find your tea in no time.” His lip twitched into an almost smile, but his brows drew together. Of course he was thinking of his father, anxious to discover his condition. With another apologetic look, Daniel disappeared into a dark hallway, his footsteps muffled by a red and black rug that seemed as old as the castle itself.

Alone, she scrutinized rows of portraits that decorated the entrance hall. She expected a servant to appear. But beyond the valet and the coachman who were carrying their trunks inside, there was no one.

The shouting hadn’t ceased, so Mary did as Daniel suggested and followed the noise down the same hall into which Daniel had disappeared. With meandering corridors, it was a wonder their voices carried all the way to the front door. Mary trailed after the shouting until she found the stairs that descended into a refurbished kitchen. A hearth spread over one wall, complete with a bread oven, and an array of pots, pans, and cooking utensils organized just as they ought. No kitchen was ever so neatly

arranged.

Three women in white aprons and mobcaps surrounded a flour-strewn worktable. They looked up at her as one, and indeed, to Mary they were identical. Stick-thin with too-big blue eyes and thin lips, each scowled at her as if she'd poked a hole in a rising loaf of bread.

"Good afternoon." Mary smiled and cast on her most ladylike demeanor.

"Who are you?" one of the women asked.

"I am a friend of Mr. Fletcher. He went to see his father, and since I did not see a servant, I came for my own pot of tea."

The women glared at each other. The scowls turned to nudges. And from there, they began whispering "You do it" to one another.

"I am very well able to get my own tea, thank you." She began by opening jars and poking around the shelves. She rearranged the burlap bags of dry goods.

"No, no. Let me help you."

"I would never think to ask you." Mary put up a hand and feigned innocence while unhooking several implements from the wall and exchanged their positions. She may as well teach these girls a lesson. Poor Mrs. Fletcher did not need insolence at this difficult time.

She pried open the canister of tea and spilled a few leaves while spooning them into a teapot. Water boiled over a fire, and she ladled it, steaming, into a pot.

The sisters sprang into action. No one complained, and they worked together in

amiable cooperation.

The tea was steeped by the time Mary's mess was clean. She wrapped her fingers around her cup, soothed by its heat, and sipped slowly, sitting in a corner chair that faced the women, who returned silently to their various tasks.

"That is better. If I hear you fighting again, I will make my own pudding tonight."

Their eyes narrowed, and Mary smiled. One of them laughed, at first nervously, but when Mary's smile did not falter, the others followed.

"Don't think I won't." She dropped her grin, wanting them to know she was serious. "How is Mr. Fletcher doing after his accident?" The maids eyed one another but did not speak, a sign of their loyalty. "What are your names, and how long have you been with the family?"

Mary was relieved that through the conversation, their demeanors changed. They were at once respectful and welcoming and fell into pleasant banter.

"Mary...er, Mrs. Allen." Daniel interrupted a story one of the sisters was telling about when she had taught her younger sister to make a cake and what a disaster it had been.

She followed him out the door and into the corridor, eager for news of his father.

"He is alive. But broken." Daniel's stoic voice did not hide his anxiety. "For three days after the accident, he did not open his eyes. Even now, he stays in bed most of the time."

She put her hand on his arm. "Will he recover?"

“They are unsure. He seems to improve but falls into sudden fits of pain in his head and is tired all the time. Most distressing. He was walking alone. No one knows the cause, only that he hit his head.” Daniel rubbed his eyes before turning his uncertain gaze upon her. “He wishes to meet you.”

Chapter Twenty-One

“Y our father wants to meet me? Now? Already?” Daniel’s scheme abruptly lost its appeal. Pretending to be in love in front of his dying parent was wrong. But Daniel’s eyes were pleading. She had promised. He led her through a hall and into a library that smelled of dust and time. An array of mismatched and threadbare furniture scattered among piles of books.

“Mother said he would be awake only a while longer. I decided to tell him while I could. You should know that the moment I mentioned you, they assumed our engagement. I’m sorry.”

Mary’s chest tightened, but she said, “I am ready.”

He looped her arm through his, leading her through halls too narrow for both of them. He gripped her hand, and they ascended in tandem. Mary stepped in light elation through the dim passageway, enjoying Daniel’s touch even while her insides gnawed in anticipation of meeting his parents. At the top, a single open door sat ajar. Daniel steered her in.

The room glowed in bright light from two large windows. Mary blinked and examined the room. On a bed covered in red velvet lay a grey man, his white hair bristling out of a sleeping cap.

A woman, whom Mary had not noticed, emerged from a shadowed corner. She wrapped wiry arms around Mary’s shoulders and rocked her side to side. Mary stiffened, unable to match the enthusiastic greeting.

“I have yearned for this moment.” She must be Daniel’s mother. Her hold did not slacken until Mary sank into its warmth and found real comfort. She could not remember the last time she’d been held. Not since her own mother passed years before.

The woman pulled back and took Mary’s face in her hands. “Oh, and you are lovely. Daniel, you did not tell me how exquisite she is.”

Mary tried not to cringe. She was no youthful beauty in her first bloom, though the dimness of the room might disguise it.

“Miss...oh, dear, I forgot your name.” The older woman put her hand over her mouth.

“ Mrs . Allen. And you are Mrs. Fletcher?” The other woman’s eyes widened. It seemed Daniel had not told his mother that Mary was a widow.

“Yes, but you must call me Florence as we are soon to be related.” There was a girlish rising of her voice that accompanied the exclamation, and she twisted her hands together under her chin. She leaned forward while Mary stepped back from her examining eyes. “A bit old, Daniel. She is not what I expected, I own, but I suppose she will do.”

This was far worse than Mary imagined. The candles were bright enough to show her wrinkles after all.

“Come over here, my girl.” Daniel’s father spoke from the bed. “I would like to see you, love.”

Terms of endearment already? She glanced at Daniel, who shifted on his feet but mouthed, “Thank you.”

She made her way to the bedside, where Mr. Fletcher, despite his illness, pulled her to sit beside him and kept her hand in his. A very affectionate family. “I had lost hope.” His voice was weak, and Mary did not think anyone else could hear him. For her part, she remained silent. How could she respond?

“Well! And so let us see you together.” Mrs. Fletcher flapped her hands, waving Daniel and Mary to stand beside each other.

The sun shone from behind them, casting shadows of their stiff silhouettes on the floor and up the wall.

“Take her hand, Daniel,” said Mr. Fletcher.

Daniel did. His large hand enveloped Mary’s with tentative care. His ungloved skin warm against hers was a comfort. Mrs. Fletcher bounded over and pushed them together until Mary’s shoulder pressed into Daniel’s arm.

“There, now. They are an ideal pair, Roger.” She sighed, head cocked. “Save for her age.” She said this more to herself and added, “Let us hope she can bear children. We shall invite your sister for a special dinner and announce the engagement,” Mrs. Fletcher said.

“We wish to wait before making the announcement,” Daniel said.

And what a relief that he spoke. Mary had no wish to spread the farce farther than the walls of that room.

“Whatever for?” asked Mrs. Fletcher.

“Father is not well, for one thing.”

“Pooh! I am strong as an ox,” came a brittle voice from the bed.

“But we want you well at the announcement,” Daniel said.

“I am sure to be able to leave the room tomorrow.”

“No, he is right, dearest. Perhaps another week.” Mrs. Fletcher wilted and went to her husband’s side, and after some moments, he began quietly snoring with his wife’s hand on his brow. She turned to Mary and Daniel, who still held hands. “We will tell the family without the dinner party.”

They could not make a formal announcement. That was beyond what she had agreed to, and the more people who knew, the harder it would be to extricate herself. Mary could see this getting away from her but did not wish to appear unladylike in front the strangers. She nudged Daniel.

“We have a particular wish to wait,” he said.

Mrs. Fletcher’s eyes lingered on the elbow Mary had used to prod Daniel. “You’re old enough to know your mind.”

Mary bristled.

“And if Emma comes to visit, how will you explain Mrs. Allen’s presence?”

“I am a friend from Bath come to help whilst Mr. Fletcher is ill,” Mary said.

Mrs. Fletcher laughed, but she was not pleased. “Then you could not have come at a better time. Truth be told, I spend my days here and have little idea what the servants are doing. Half the time, no one responds to the bell. They were an unmanageable bunch before Roger’s injury, and I’ve no idea what they are up to now. Do let me

know when you are ready to make the engagement known.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Fletcher.”

“Florence, remember?”

Mary did remember, but she would not be addressing that woman as anything but Mrs. Fletcher. Under the circumstances, it would be indecent.

Daniel took Mary’s arm. “Come, I will give you a tour.”

“Let’s walk outside. The weather is lovely.”

“There is a pond on the west side of the castle. I’ll show you.”

They left the sickroom and made their way into the entrance hall, where Daniel paused and said, “I feel a fool for not predicting my mother’s response. I will tell them the truth.” He raked his hand through his hair.

“Your father is not well.”

“True, but I cannot see that the deceit is worth the prize. He would be furious.”

She liked his parents. They were both so full of joy, so different from their quiet son. This charade would hurt them if they knew, so they must not find out.

“I leave in the morning. You can make up an excuse for my departure and prolong the pretense until you find someone to wed, though you must act quickly. Then, tell them how awful I am, and they can loath me from a distance. You will keep your castle and not upset your parents.” She swallowed, aware that finding a wife was not the work of a few days.

A maid approached, "A letter for you, ma'am." She extended a folded page and left Mary and Daniel alone in the entrance hall.

"I will leave you to your letter," Daniel said.

Mary scarcely heeded his departure. The letter was from Agnes. She snapped the seal.

Dear Mary,

I have Louisa. She is safe and whole, though rattled. I will bring her to you.

It was postmarked three days earlier, meaning they would arrive in a week.

"Daniel!" She stood and began running down the hall. He turned and rushed toward her. "She is found." In a few paces, she embraced him, faint and needing to be held. She closed her eyes and exhaled the gust of the worry that festered over the past weeks. No matter that his arms remained at his sides, his touch allowed her to sink into the news. All may be well. His arms lifted, forcing hers around his neck. His hand pressed between her shoulder blades, the other on the small of her back. Against his chest, the steady thump of his heart reassured her more profoundly than anything else. His breath threaded through her hair as he rested his chin on her head. His embrace was a warm fire on a cold night, the first bite of food after skipping a meal, a soft pillow to a tired head.

She could remain there forever, but she pushed away enough to look at him, ready to discuss Louisa. The words were lost under the force of his gaze. He pulled her to him once more with a gentle but urgent force. Something shifted. This was not the chaste hold of a friend.

"Mary, I am so relieved." His voice emerged in a coarse whisper, but it snagged, reminding her that this meant the pretense of their engagement must continue until

Louisa arrived.

“I presume we have a little longer to play this little game?”

He stepped away from her, turning away. “I suppose.”

Was he displeased? “I can stay at an inn, if that is better.”

“No.” He blurted. “Let’s continue. If you would? My father may improve over the course of the week.”

“Yes, of course.”

Daniel ambled around the pond with Mary at his side, holding her arm beneath his like he might collapse without her support. If she noticed, she said nothing. Since reading the letter, Mary’s step was light and her smile easy. She commented on the clear sky. He mentioned the temperature.

His thoughts would not settle but vacillated between regret and the joy of Mary’s shoulder brushing against his. Guilt grew like a tangle of ivy, strangling his chest. This deceit made him sick. No one deserved being lied to, not even a liar like his father. But if he told the truth, Mary would leave. She would leave anyway, but he had her for another week.

When she ran into his arms, the fullness of her body pressed against his, the world righted. Everything that seemed unfair rectified, his ten years of labor at Smith’s Bank, Miss Jensen’s jilt, the many cracks in the castle walls, even the pain of his parents’ poor treatment of him eased. He could not let her go. Once Louisa arrived, she would have all Mary’s attention, deservedly so.

He regretted not telling Mary that Louisa was his intended, but the arrangements

weren't settled, and when Louisa ran off, it became irrelevant. Now he feared his parents would reveal it. He had asked them not to, saying he did not wish Mary to believe she was anyone's second choice, but they were not reliable. And now Louisa was on her way. What would his parents think when she arrived? He would not tell them yet but say Mary's friends were coming.

In less than a week, he had to convince both his parents and Mary that she was his best match. When she agreed to be his wife, after everything was settled and announced, he would tell Mary about Louisa, and his parents that Mary and Louisa were relations.

When he first told his parents he'd brought a lady with him, they'd questioned him about Mary's dowry, and he told them about her estate in Ireland. It was their first question after making it clear they preferred Louisa Thorpe, and it made him suspicious.

Mary stopped. "Look at the reflection of your castle in the pond. I cannot shake the feeling your Almey is enchanted. Whoever becomes your wife will be a very fortunate lady. Perhaps she will be an artist."

Was she teasing him? Flirting?

They continued in a long but comfortable silence, making their way around the pond to a crude bench, made by Daniel's father, crumbled in rot. It had been a present for his mother, who loved the aspect of the castle as mirrored in the pond.

They paused to absorb the view.

"Your parents are sincere and..." She seemed to search for a word. "Effusive."

"You mean they are very different from me?"

She laughed. “I suppose one could say that. You are slow to express your opinion.”

“Effusive and impulsive are good words for them.”

“You are fortunate to have affectionate parents.”

“They show their love in odd ways.” He did not wish to talk of his parents and began walking again.

Her step faltered, and she pulled at his arm to steady herself. “Pardon me. The roses are so captivating, I did not heed the path.” Her voice was soft as she looked ahead of her at a tangle of red and pink that climbed over an ancient rock wall. “What a wonder that garden is! A surprise at every turn.”

It delighted him to experience the castle through her eyes. What would it be like to keep her here? The thought burned his cheeks. Her high praise of her late husband made it impossible to imagine she wanted a second marriage. She thought him too young to consider, teasing him about their age difference.

Now that he was home, the responsibilities of the castle could consume every waking moment, but he would not allow that to happen. He must take time for Mary, show her how happy they might be together. He must convince her to stay forever.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Mary's quill scratched over the page, a sound that almost calmed her rattled insides. This unbearable charade with Daniel put her off balance, and she did not know how to proceed. Spending time with his parents tortured her, blackening the deceit, and scrambling her nerves. Aware of their misuse of Daniel, she was disposed to dislike them, but their affectionate natures set the abuse of their son at a counter position. She understood Daniel's frustration with them, for they were irresponsible, even silly. Eccentric. She did not want her interest in them to increase and complicate the situation.

She took long, solitary walks and hid in her room writing. The story she wrote unfolded with a rapidity and clarity absent from her other work. Words appeared on the page as naturally as the blooming of a flower. It was the effect of enchanted Almeria and the recent unsought-for adventure that ignited her imagination. While a little self-reproach accompanied the writing down of those escapades, it helped to sort out the situation.

Her eyes fell on the full bouquet of roses she'd found in her room after dinner. Daniel attached a note probably meant to thank her for agreeing to pretend they were engaged. Even so, she opened it and reread his simple missive to conjure the pleasant flip her heart made at his words.

Dear Mary,

I enjoyed your company in the rose garden. You are a bit like a rose, beautiful and sweet, but not without your defenses. I admire both your softness and your thorns.

Daniel

And it did not come without a pang. He did not fancy her the way a man does when he loves a woman. To him, she was an agreeable companion. And how could she expect anything different? She was a widow of middling years, seven years his senior. Though she did not think herself unattractive, she was not the kind of woman with whom men fell in love.

Even if he did love her, which was a notion that barely warranted thought, they could never marry. She would perish if unable to continue writing, and confessing her secret was out of the question. If he responded with Lord Allen's flippancy, her heart would break. She was being dramatic, but she knew that without her pen, she was miserable. Despite having written a book that caused senseless girls like her own niece to behave foolishly, she was pleased her writing was being consumed by the masses. If the publisher wanted more, maybe she should give them her manuscripts. The thought held her attention, tempting her like a bowl of cream filberts. In Bath when suspicion had fallen upon her, she evaded and disavowed enough that she did not think anyone still believed her an author. She escaped that situation almost unscathed. If it weren't for Miss Barry, no one would have guessed. If she stayed away from Bath—and she certainly planned to—and avoided writing characters who resembled herself, she might publish freely.

Could she continue writing in anonymity, bearing the anxiety that her identity might be discovered?

Muffled shouting erupted from below stairs. Mary's room was situated on the same side of the house as the kitchen, and it seemed the sisters were at war once more. Mrs. Fletcher surely did not have the emotional strength to handle their aggression.

Mary folded Daniel's note and tucked it under a rose leaf before leaving her room for the kitchen where, as expected, she found the three cooks in a squabble.

“Good morning. I thought I’d make myself a bit of toast and jam.” Mary breezed into the kitchen, noting the way the cooks stiffened, and their argument ceased.

“No,” they said as one.

“Don’t mind me. I do not wish to disrupt your work. I’ve a hankering for coffee as well.” Mary hummed as she made her way around various canisters and baskets, upsetting and displacing them as she went. The bread keeper was in plain sight, and while the coffee percolated, Mary made a show of cutting an uneven slice of bread. She moved to the hearth, changing around the various tools before removing a toasting fork, pulling up a stool, and sticking her bread into the open flame while the three women rushed to straighten the mess.

“What do the three of you bicker about?” Mary asked.

“Betsy is bossy, always telling me how to do my job, though she’s less experienced.”

“Only because you’re an imbecile when it comes to puddings.”

Mary wished she hadn’t asked. In half a second, the three women were in an uproar again. Mary put her stick deeper into the flames until it caught fire. She let it blaze a moment before waving it into the kitchen. “Help!” She waved the bread as close to the cooks as she dared.

The sisters turned toward her and leapt into action. One took the cloth from her shoulder and waved it at the flame while another grabbed a bucket of water.

Before anyone could put out the flame, the door opened. “What is going on?” Mrs. Fletcher stood at the door. Mary tossed the bread into the fire.

“It is nothing, really, Mrs. Fletcher. I apologize for disturbing you.” Mary’s face

burned over the mischief she'd caused. Who was childish now?

"Are you in need of refreshment?" One of the cooks asked.

"I have a headache from listening to all the shouting. What is the meaning of this mess?"

No one said anything. The cooks looked at the ground but threw surreptitious glances toward Mary, who replaced the toasting fork to its proper place.

"Mrs. Fletcher, let me bring you some coffee," Mary said. "Rest in the parlor, and I'll join you in a moment."

As soon as she'd gone, Mary turned toward the sisters. "Are there biscuits?" After filling a tray with every good thing that could be found, she made her way into the parlor with a tray laden with a seed cake, a pot of coffee, and an apology.

She poured Mrs. Fletcher a cup and offered her cake. "I am sorry, Mrs. Fletcher. I was trying to teach your cooks a lesson, and it failed. It is not my place to try to correct them. You must pardon my interference."

"Correct them? You mean keep them from fighting?"

"Yes. I can see they keep a clean work area, so when I hear them arguing, I make myself a nuisance by upsetting their organization. It worked the first time, but only for a day."

Mrs. Fletcher's eye sparkled. "You have done more than I have ever managed. If they weren't so adept at baked goods, I'd have sent them packing long ago." She bit into her cake. "Divine," she said, her eyes closing.

Mary sampled the cake. Mrs. Fletcher was right. It was delicious. Nutmeg and citron mingled with butter and sugar in perfect proportions. “Their skill might be worth the trouble.” Mary sipped her coffee and nearly spat it back into the cup. “The coffee, however, is not. But that is my own fault, since I made it myself.”

Mrs. Fletcher laughed, rang the bell, and bid the cook bring another pot.

“The cooks answer the bell?” Mary hoped her question was not impudent.

“Yes. I know it is an odd arrangement, but their mother served here before they did, and they all wanted to work together, so I hired them with the understanding they would all cook, clean, and serve. They all like cooking best, and I believe that is the source of their disagreement.”

Mary nodded and eyed Mrs. Fletcher’s wan, shadowed face. She needed help. It was too much to run a household and care for an ailing husband, a plight too familiar to Mary. “You are overtaxed. Would it be too presumptuous of me to speak with them? It cannot be comfortable to bear the relentless squabbling.”

“You shall someday be mistress of the castle. I would take it kindly.” She eyed Mary over her cup with a deflated expression Mary could not interpret. Was she suspicious? Grateful? Or exhausted?

Mary eyed the ink stains on her fingers. They kept her from becoming the mistress of any house, save her own.

“Tell me, Mary—I will call you that, though you refrain from addressing me as Florence—what is your age?” Though rude, she spoke casually, ending the question with a blithe smile, so Mary took no offense.

“I turned forty not three months ago.”

“Daniel wishes for children. Are you still having regular courses?”

What was this? A medieval union wherein fertility was determined before marriage? Heat crept up her neck as she envisioned herself with Daniel, tumbling in the hay before the wedding to determine if her belly would quicken.

The questions were no longer charming and deserved an impertinent answer. Mary had one ready but vanquished it, opting for politeness. “Do you enjoy gardening?”

Mrs. Fletcher waved the question away. “What attracted you to Daniel?” She leaned forward and stilled, reminding Mary of a cat listening for the sound of a mouse.

She may as well tell the truth. “I saw him first as he entered the ballroom. From that very first moment, he seemed everything a man ought to be. I sensed the sort of man he is.”

“And what kind is that?”

Mary flinched under Mrs. Fletcher’s tight, examining eyes. “Perceptive. Thoughtful. Kind. And he is so handsome.”

“You may say that about any number of men. What in particular do you admire?”

“While many men may be called kind, I have never met one so caring as Daniel. It is not kindness alone. He is perceptive of my needs. He senses when one is in distress.” Mary’s face warmed at the memory of all Daniel did to lift her spirits during their journey. He remembered what she liked and went out of his way to please her. The roses in her room testified of his consideration. “He makes life better. That can be said of few. He is one of the best and most sincere people I have ever met. He a man of character.” A dam broke, and she could not stem her words. “He is polite, excellent at conversation, intelligent, the best companion. But you know all of this.

You are his mother.”

Mrs. Fletcher’s attention flicked to the door and back to Mary. Without looking up, Mrs. Fletcher said, “And you, Daniel, what did you notice about Mary?”

Daniel stood in the doorway with an expression she dared not study. Her heart plummeted to her shoes. She busied herself pouring his coffee and cutting cake, while he settled in a chair between herself and his mother. A man whom she complimented with such effusion could not doubt her infatuation. After all, she had stopped writing a novel and begun a new one when she became aware that she unwittingly cast him as the love interest. In that novel she described with effusive abandon his selfless deeds, his fine figure, his well-formed lips, at which she stared this very moment. She looked down at her cake.

“Her charming face, of course,” Daniel said, but his voice was tight. “It’s the first thing one notices. But then I saw that she is a commanding woman.” A forward statement. Mrs. Fletcher’s eyes grew wide. And Mary coughed. It was Daniel’s turn to blush. “I mean, a man likes to be useful to a pretty lady, but I watched Mary take care of herself with admirable aplomb.”

Mary laughed. She was not certain it was a compliment, but she was flattered he’d noticed, even if her treatment of Mr. Bateman, however necessary, had been deplorable. “He is referring to my discourteous behavior toward a gentleman.”

“Not only that. She is independent and clever. After dancing with so many ladies whose heads seemed full of feathers, I was immediately attracted to your frank intelligence.”

He leaned toward her, his pale blue eyes an invitation. For what? Mary swallowed.

“Well, I must see to your papa.” Mrs. Fletcher interrupted their staring match but

stood with a question in her smile. “Daniel, take Mary to visit the tenants and bring her upstairs to visit us before dinner. Your father wants to know her better.” She left the room.

“Pardon me. I did not mean to listen to your conversation. I happened to come by and?—”

“Do not worry yourself.” She shifted in her seat and dabbed her tingling forehead with a napkin. His compliments affected her, and she did not know whether to take them to heart or brush them off as show. For her own part, she meant every word.

“Would you care to join me, as my mother suggested? I would appreciate your company, but you have no obligation, of course.” He rubbed the back of his neck, as discomfited as she.

How could she refuse? Even if she wanted to, she could not say no when her whole being yearned to be near him. She bit the inside of her cheek. It was not in her best interest to spend more time with a man who had only fictional interest in her. Save for the publication of her book, the past years had provoked very little emotion in Mary.

Over time, grief for her husband had mellowed into an ache that she accepted and lived with. Her emotions rose and fell in joy and sorrow while watching other people fall in love, find happiness or failure. Since losing Lord Allen, her feelings had comprised of other people’s experiences, some real, others she imagined for her stories. The giddiness that fluttered through her in that moment was all her own. She savored the fleeting delight of it, feared its inevitable conclusion. This pretense was driving her into raptures only love could bring. She could not say no to its thrill while available. For that moment and every moment until it was no longer offered, she would take it.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Daniel waited with Mary in front of the house for the stable hand to deliver the horses that would take them to see his father's tenants. A slight breeze threaded through Mary's hair, ringlets kissing her cheeks. He envied those curls, though she stood rigid beside him, the conversation he overheard reverberating between them. He shoved his hands into his pockets, his mind a jumble of Mary's flattering words. He tried to still his fluttering heart. Fluttering heart ? Where did the phrase come from? A Woman Who Loves . He smiled at his foolish adoption of the novel. Yet it was true. When she told of his kindness, his heart stilled and then swelled with each thud against his rib cage. He never deliberated over a compliment before, but he cherished each of her words, memorizing exact phrases. He hoped she was sincere.

While traveling together, entertaining her required little effort. He'd wanted to distract her from their dire quest. Learning how much it meant to her made him want to guess her every wish and present it to her before she knew her own desires. Louisa would appear within a few days, and he had very few ideas on how to convince Mary they were far better suited than he and Louisa. He made a point to spend more time with her—taking her with him when he went out, accompanying her on walks, and keeping her room filled with roses—but was not foolish enough to believe his presence was enough. Her independence, which he admired, demanded little of him. Until he overheard her talking to his mother, he believed her wholly indifferent. Or worse, that she thought of him as her little brother.

Was it possible she cared for him? Beside him, she tilted her face to the sky until the sun breached the shadow of her riding hat. Since receiving news of Louisa's safety, Mary had become more tranquil but also retreated. The day before, he saw her only at

mealtimes. When passing by her door, his tread slowed, and the temptation to find out what she did in her room all day overwhelmed. Of course, he resisted.

“I feel terrible about your landau. Were it not for my niece, you’d be driving it today.”

“Horses are faster. I rarely used the carriage. Tobias Savage is the only person I hold responsible for its demise.”

They slipped into a thick silence.

“Again, thank you for the flowers,” she said.

“Yes. Well, thank you for being so obliging.” He bit his cheek. What an idiotic thing to say. He was no good with words. For being so obliging, as if pretending to be his fiancée was the same as borrowing a book.

“Tell me about your tenants.” Mary smiled at him, sending blossoming pleasure through him. He felt his cheeks lift in answering grin, unable to respond in any other way. From their very first meeting, she had drawn such grins from him. Bath had disinterested him until she arrived.

“Truth be told, I know very little. Since I’ve been away, the steward manages everything. I met with him several weeks ago but have had little opportunity to see with my own eyes how things are going. You are familiar with farming and tenants, running an estate, I understand,” Daniel said, finally able to ask a coherent question. “Who manages your land in Ireland?”

“The steward runs everything.” She gave him a half-smile and looked away. “He does well.”

“But you resurrected the property.”

“It was in my best interest, my livelihood. That is not to diminish the pleasure I felt in fulfilling Lord Allen’s dream.”

Of course, she would mention that angelic man. His hopes of obtaining her regard tumbled. They stared with steadfast intensity into the landscape. It was all Daniel could do not to look at her. Unable or unwilling to share how he admired her, he could think of nothing to say.

“Are you sorry to have left the bank? Did you enjoy your work there?” she asked, squinting up at the sky.

“I was good at it and was fortunate to have a friend who trusted me to do the job. My work and investments in the bank made it possible for my family to remain in the castle.”

“But you did not like it.”

“I feel most at home at Almerey.” He turned and gestured to the surrounding property. “Though we have more than enough land to farm, it has not been properly run. As I am certain you’ve noticed, the castle is in disrepair. I want it to continue passing through generations, but it requires constant renovation. My parents don’t care about the state of the house. ‘What is a leaky roof when love abounds?’ my mother would say.”

Mary laughed. “I can hear her voice when you say that. A romantic notion.”

Daniel’s heart quickened. Perhaps she understood. “Exactly. One cannot live off such sentiment. Love is good, but if it causes a person to neglect important things, it can be detrimental.”

Mary's smile faded and a crease appeared between her brows. "Must one choose? Their actions are more due to their characters than to love."

The horses arrived. Daniel took Mary's hand and helped her onto a mounting box, considering her words. Perhaps she was right. He admired Mary, but his feelings would not prevent him from doing what was best for his castle.

During the short ride to the tenant cottages, Mary exclaimed over the beauty of the countryside. "There are so many trees. And so tall. In Cornwall, we have bushes, shrubs, and heather, but not so many lofty trees."

Daniel pointed out various landmarks, the road to the village, and his favorite places to play when a child. Soon they arrived at a cluster of cottages. They appeared well-kept with everything in order. A young couple, married only a year earlier and expecting a child, told them, "I do worry about space with the young one coming so soon." Daniel made a note to construct an additional room onto their cottage.

They stopped by the shepherd's home and visited the bailey. There were few complaints and no problem that could not be easily mended. Before leaving for home, Daniel wanted to see Old Mother Spencer, the woman who'd given him treats when he was a boy. He'd not seen her since leaving home.

He knocked on the cottage door. There was shuffling inside before the top half of the Dutch door opened. Mrs. Spencer was as hunched and white as she had been years earlier.

"Daniel? Have you come home?" Her gnarled hand reached out and patted his cheek.

"I have, Mother Spencer."

"Come in, then. And who is this? 'Tis about time you brought your lady love." Daniel

turned to Mary, her cheeks tinted pink, but she smiled and took the older woman's hand in greeting. Mother Spencer pulled her in to kiss and pat her cheek.

"Sit down, sit down." She waved them toward the table and began bustling around the hearth. Daniel pulled out half a fruit cake from his satchel while the old woman made tea.

"This boy was full of light and mischief in equal measure. No one could be angry at him when he scattered the sheep or trampled fresh-planted barley because his countenance was always as bright as the sun." She went on to embarrass him with stories of his youth.

Mary leaned forward, absorbing each word. Was this out of politeness to Mrs. Spencer or honest interest? Mary broke into laughter, folding in half, then slapping Daniel's thigh. Entirely absorbed in watching his companion, he had not caught the joke. Her nose crinkled, and she placed her hand over her stomach and leaned back, unafraid of hearty laughter. Tittering was not for Mary. At least, not in this moment. He could watch this all day.

On their journey back to Almerey, Mary said, "There is an easy solution to your problem, Daniel."

His breath caught. The only problem he could think of was his bachelor state. "Which problem is that?"

"Mother Spencer's cottage is too large for her. She struggles to keep up with it. So, move her into the smaller house and give the larger one to the young couple."

"Why should you think Mother Spencer cannot care for her space?"

"She keeps only one window clean, and it was sparkling. The upper shelves were

dusty and empty. Her pots and pans, though tidy, were piled in one corner rather than hung on nails. The hearth is too large for her needs.”

“So long as she is amenable to the change.”

“Yes, you would not want to disrupt her if she does not wish it, but tenants often do not ask for what is best for them. We must notice for them.”

“You are very wise.”

“It comes with age.”

He grinned at her, and when she smiled in return, his back straightened, and he imagined leaning over and thanking her with a kiss. Perhaps a kiss would persuade her to become his wife.

That evening, Daniel and Mary sat with his mother. Conversation stalled and started with Daniel regretting that he subjected Mary to all the impertinence of his mother, who persisted in questioning Mary on everything from her favorite color to the intimate details of her first marriage. Daniel tried to persuade her to retire for the evening, but she declined.

“Mary, what made you decide to remarry? I could never do such a thing myself, having been so happy with Robert.” Mary stiffened, Daniel cringed, but his mother went on as if they were speaking of the weather. “It appears you are financially secure. Is it loneliness?”

After blinking several times, Mary coughed a little. “Like you, my marriage brought me such felicity that I never imagined wishing for a second marriage. I live close to my sister and my brother and spend time with my nieces and nephews.” It seemed Mary would not answer the question.

Daniel's mother leaned toward Mary. "Why marry? Please, I am curious."

Mary took a deep breath. "I am astonished at your question. As the mother of such a man, you are well-acquainted with his charms."

"Daniel convinced you, then?" His mother sat back, her eyelids lowered in an air of indifference, but Daniel knew better. She was suspicious, dissatisfied with the praises she pried out of them earlier. Perhaps they needed to work harder to prove they were indeed in love. His mother made it no secret that she believed Mary was too old. Perhaps she searched for a reason to oppose the match.

"How could any woman resist?" Mary smiled and patted Daniel on the arm as she might an obedient dog. His mother took in the gesture. It would not do. They must show her. But how?

"Did you know our Daniel used to play the pianoforte so charmingly? And sing, too."

Daniel groaned.

"Yes," Mary said. "I have heard him sing and play."

His mother's eyes flew open. "That is something." For the first time that evening, her smile was sincere. Turning to her son, she said, "You have not played since...well, for a very long time."

Daniel knew exactly the moment he'd stopped playing, and so did his mother. It was right after he discovered the amount of money his father had lost in his investments. From that time on, he'd dedicated himself to stabilizing the family fortunes.

"Play for us now, dear," his mother urged.

Daniel obliged, if only to remove himself from the conversation.

“I shall turn the pages for you.” Mary stood and walked with Daniel to the pianoforte.

“What is happening?” Mary whispered. “She seems to doubt us.”

“We must try harder.” He took her arm in his and held her as close to him as he dared for the remaining steps to the instrument.

“Pull your chair closer.” He told her, hoping his eyes spoke an apology. She did. And not only that. Her shoulder leaned against his arm, and her rose perfume captivated him. He chose a familiar song. Though he had not played for years, other than at the inn, his fingers remembered where to go.

“I think it is working,” Mary said. “She is smiling.”

“Do you play?”

“Only the basic requirement for a lady. When my mother tried to teach me, I hid. I was rather wild as a girl, without patience for practice. With two older siblings, it took a great deal of effort to keep up with them. I had little time for music or drawing.”

Daniel warmed at the picture she conjured of a little girl, chestnut curls flying into the woods as her mother called for her to practice her lessons.

“I daresay your time was better spent.”

“I have no regrets.” She turned another page of music, her nearness intoxicating. He played with increased passion, praying his song would distract him from the thoughts that urged him closer to her, that yearned to hold her rather than merely sit next to

her.

“My dear boy, I have never heard you play with such feeling,” Mrs. Fletcher said.

Later that night, he entered his father’s room. From a chair near the bed, he watched the rise and fall of his father’s breathing. Daniel could not sleep. Thoughts of Mary invaded his mind and kept him from rest. With each passing moment, his dread for her departure increased.

“Daniel.” He had not seen his mother resting in her favorite chaise lounge. “You are thinking of Mary and cannot sleep?”

How are mothers so adept? “Something like that.”

“Do you know she is the one who settled the squabbling below stairs? She is capable and independent, but far too old.”

He far preferred a capable woman to an unequal miss.

“I can already see that without her you would be lost, but there is something uncertain in your behavior—and hers. So,” her voice cracked, “you’d better tell her you love her. You never know when she might be taken from you.” She dabbed at her eyes.

Her apt assessment made him uneasy and led him to think his admiration for Mary might develop into the same sort of blind love his parents had. “Father is improving. The two of you will have many years yet to worship each other.” He’d meant to make his tone light but could taste the bitterness that slipped into the words.

“You think it is folly to love as your father and I do. We are not without our faults, but loving deeply is not one of them. The delight I have in your father is the deepest treasure of my life. I won’t deny we’ve made mistakes.” She adjusted a blanket that

wrapped around her. “Perhaps you are right to hold a grudge against us for what you saw as neglect, but we did everything out of affection for our children and for one another. The best gift we gave you and your sister was the love we have for each other.” Her voice became lower, more serious. “That same joy can be yours. She is down the hall. While I’ve mentioned only her gift for practicality, she is a romantic pining for adoration. She sighs when you read aloud. Her hand rests on her heart when you play the piano, and she even wipes a tear when you sing. Don’t allow your silly notions about love get in the way of the one thing that matters. Much as it pains me to have no grandchildren from you.”

She was right. If he wanted Mary to stay, he must be open about his feelings. Flowers in her room were not a confession. He wished his mother good night and stepped into the hall. With a pounding heart, he slipped out of his boots and walked to Mary’s door, though he had no clear idea of his intention.

Soft light came from under her door. He leaned against the wall trying to imagine what she was doing. What feelings had his mother’s words evoked? Dare he become a fool who loved so deeply it suffocated him? A person who sacrificed his own best interest for another’s happiness?

A soft scratching sounded through the door. She was writing. He could see her in his mind’s eye, quill in hand, a thick braid coiled and shining over her shoulder, her lips pressed together in a kissable pucker, the way she did when she was thinking.

He closed his eyes, listened to the scraping of her pen, and thought of her face, soft in candlelight. If she asked him to leave home in search of Louisa, he would do it. If she pined after a particular bonnet she fancied in a Bath millinery, he would fetch it for her. If she spent a night in tears and sorrow, he did not want the person at her side to be anyone other than himself. If she wanted a telescope and the price was an endless winter of potatoes and dried pork, he would get her the telescope.

He loved her.

And it was nothing like what he'd felt for Miss Jensen, a love rooted in the idea that having his own family would offer the comfort and security he sometimes lacked with his parents. His feelings for Mary were not so selfish.

He craved that fool's errand and wanted her to need something that only he could give. A tiny smile tickled the corners of Daniel's mouth. His heart thudded out an anthem to his adored, a booming and joyous song that he never imagined himself capable of. He, of all men, had found his match. And what a treasure she was. She was not a burden or an obligation forced upon him by his parents. Dynamic and intelligent, beautiful, and clever, Mary elevated him.

He watched candlelight flicker across the hall, his hands and feet growing cold. A patter of feet sounded from inside her bedroom, followed by the rustling paper. The light from beneath the door was snuffed, leaving Daniel to wonder over his intentions. Though he wanted to open the door and express all he felt, to enter the room of a lady whilst she was abed was not to be thought of. At least one tried not to think of such things. Without a sound, he went to his own room, taking his boots and a heart and mind full of Mary.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Mary strolled through the garden arm in arm with Daniel, determined to enjoy their final days together. Their farce was almost over, for Louisa would arrive in a few days. Grass grew between the flagstones of the narrow path that ambled between an overgrown lavender hedge and rosebushes that spread their blooms in reckless expanse. This prolific, wild growth made it her favorite area of the castle grounds. She moved closer to Daniel, keeping her skirts out of reach of thorns, her hip brushing then pressing against him. He held her arm tight beneath his. The gentle swish of her skirts harmonized with humming bees and birdsong. With chivalrous Daniel beside her, and among gnarled branches heavy with blossoms, Mary began listening to the garden whisper romantic tales, and she believed the fairy tales.

Daniel stopped walking, and he faced her. "There is something I must ask you." He rubbed his chin and would not meet her eye. "I am fond of you, Mary." His words came in a rush. "For some time, I have thought of you as...a dear friend. Your company is pleasant. You are capable and clever. I hoped you..." He took a deep breath. "I have made our situation awkward, asking you to pretend an engagement, but I want to make it real. Would you consent to be my wife?"

Mary's breath came as fast. She pulled her hand from his and stepped away. Over the past few days, even during their journey together, Daniel showed signs that he cared for her, but his actions were calculated to charm her into accepting a make-believe proposal so he could regain his inheritance. Weren't they? While painfully aware of her own infatuation, she thought there was a chance, even a small one, that his regard for her changed. Even a sliver of affection would have been enough for her. Though nothing about this proposal indicated he loved her. Pleasant company, clever and

capable. Those were not the words of a man to his lover. Perhaps she loved enough for them both.

The pleasure of his companionship was a surprising gift that she had not known she wanted. It was like being wrapped in a blanket without knowing she'd been cold. It was eating a spoonful of jam after years of swearing off sweets.

Mary recalled herself, turning her back to him and stepping away. She was not a pathetic young lady, desperate for marriage. She'd been married before, had her romance, had loved, and was loved in return. Two marriages were too much for one lady, and she did not need a husband. Lord Allen had provided well for her. Daniel should marry a girl like Louisa, someone young, who did not have an illicit pastime, or the habits borne of living alone too long. Refusal was the only solution.

She walked several feet away from him, gathering her thoughts. When she turned to face him, his eyes were trained on his feet, lips moving, arms gesticulating, as if he was practicing a speech. He looked up, their eyes locked, and he froze. His face was heavy with a yearning that stole her breath. He wanted her, and the knowledge struck like lightning, terrifying and magnificent. His gaze flicking from hers to the ground and back again. He strode purposefully toward her.

Mary had never seen Daniel agitated. Even when expressing concern about his father, he was rational and articulate. The bones in her legs softened as she absorbed his vulnerability. He placed himself in front of her, his eyes dark and serious, inscrutable. It was possible he loved her. His look reflected as much, but he did not say it.

She leaned against the garden wall. His jaw worked, and she waited for him to speak. When he did not, she said, "I do not know. Give me time." She didn't want to give him false hope. "I think not, but I will consider."

He took her hands in his and pulled her close. Perhaps he had not understood what

she said. Her eyes met his again, and the protest on her tongue vanished.

He moistened his lips. "I have given you little reason to agree to this marriage, but I am sincere in my proposal, Mary. This is no longer a farce." His eyes fell to her lips, his head bent a fraction closer to hers.

Golden beams of sunlight shone in Mary's periphery, lighting him like an angel. He held both of her hands to his chest, and beneath her palms, his heart raced.

The temptation was great. Too great. Mary wanted his kiss, needed to feel desirable. She quieted her excuses and inched toward him, tilted her chin upward, granting permission. With gentle care, his lips brushed Mary's, and the lightness of his touch sent a thrill through her whole being. His breath caught and he pulled away, looking at her with unblinking eyes. He placed a hand on her hip, and with the other, he ran his thumb down her jaw, from her ear to her chin. The sweetness was more than she could bear. She melted into him, clinging to the collar of his jacket to steady herself. He slid his hand to the small of her back and drew her closer, his mouth finding hers again. Mary thought she might collapse. But no. This was a moment she wanted to live and remember. Her eyes were closed, but she opened them, to see and feel and experience this kiss with each of her senses. His lashes lay thick over high cheekbones, his brow creased in delightful fervor. She touched his cheek, his neck, and pulled him nearer still.

When they broke away, she pushed her hand against her chest and found her locket. She must refuse him but not yet.

Daniel rested his forehead against hers. "Please accept my proposal." His voice was low and gruff, and Mary wanted to bathe in the sound of it.

Even if he did not love her, he seemed to like her. Was it enough that she loved him so completely? Her arms wrapped around his, and she heard his heart beating beneath

his cravat. If they married, she would be central to his life, important to a person as she had not been since Lord Allen's death. Still, doubts prevented her acquiescence. But his body felt so good against her own. Surely this comfort was worth anything.

With her chin resting on his chest, she looked up at him, needing to measure his feelings, wondering if she alone soared above the garden. He looked down at her, and the strength of his focus brought a trembling wave of heat to her stomach. Embraced in the security of his arms and in the depths of his eyes, the words slipped from her tongue as wax drips from a candle's flame. "I will marry you."

His arms wound around her waist, and he lifted her off the ground and spun.

"Stop that, little brother," she said, laughing.

He set her down, sobered. "You must not call me that."

"Are you uncomfortable with my age?" She had to know. Her insides closed, flinching even before hearing his response.

He looked skyward and groaned. "I beg you to stop this talk of your age. I am delighted with everything about you. But my feelings for you are not brotherly."

That was something. He did not love her like a sister.

"Are you ready to return to the house?" he asked.

She was not. Her heart kicked, and every sparkling delight that burned inside her two minutes ago evaporated. She wiped her hands on her skirt. What had she agreed to?

"To tell your parents?"

"We are already engaged, as far as my parents know. I hoped you would allow me to

make the announcement to my sister.”

“When?” She felt dizzy.

“Right away? Tomorrow if possible.”

He smiled, warm and sincere. It lit his eyes, softened his face, and made her want to kiss him again. And again. But her breath came in short gasps, and doubt took hold of her heart and squeezed. The intoxicating pleasure of being desired hit against a hollow in her gut. Muddled with his nearness, her mind failed to recall what was missing. She acknowledged he may never love her as she loved him, but there was something else.

“Perhaps we should wait until Louisa arrives?” she asked. With Louisa, Agnes would come, and with her friend’s perspective, she would see it clearly.

He shifted his weight. “I would much rather tell them now.”

Why? What was so urgent?

“I fear I am not ready.” Her body cooled and thoughts sharpened. Writing. If she married, she would either have to stop writing or hide it from her husband, an option she loathed. Also, the idea that all that was hers would transfer to him did not sit well. This in itself did not preclude her from accepting, but she wanted to know what he would do with her property.

But marriage to Daniel! To awake in his arms each morning, stroll with him through the gardens, help with tenants, run the household together. She would read to him in the evenings, and he would play and sing for her. She wanted to be the center of his thoughtful care, as she had been during their travels, and to show him the same consideration. Marriage to Daniel would mean the companionship she had missed for

twenty years.

But at what cost? From his perspective, their marriage would allot him this castle and surrounding lands as well as her estate in Ireland. And she would gain the company of a younger man who may never love her the way she wished. Was she merely an available woman to him? The most convenient path to his castle?

An aching swell pinched her throat. She swallowed and said, “In fact...I cannot accept your offer.”

What failed?

Daniel asked himself this question all afternoon and through dinner. Afterward, in the drawing room, as Mary disappeared through the door, quick to excuse herself, he questioned himself again. He was on the edge of victory. For those few moments, when he had her promise, all was within his grasp. She was his. The castle was his. Selfish though it may be, he was on the cusp of obtaining all he wished for.

His body still thrilled at her touch, though she was gone. His heart, liquid in his chest, pooled into disappointment. When he kissed her, his passion and adoration emerged with more clarity than he anticipated. And her response. His hands clenched the arms of the chair in which he sat, and everything in him screamed to follow her. She answered his affection. The proposal that stuttered off his tongue did not reflect his love, but the kiss told the truth that burned so hot and genuine, he could not articulate it. He was running out of time and had to try again.

But first, he must speak with his parents. The mass of bitterness he cultivated against them must be expelled before he would be free to explain his feelings to Mary. While their treatment of him was not fair, and he would never trust them, he believed they had done their best. Holding a grudge did no good to anyone. His resentment of Miss Jensen kept him from finding happiness in marriage, a joy the woman herself had

presumably found while Daniel punished himself by insisting on loneliness. It was time to put his hurt aside.

At eleven o'clock in the night, Daniel's father would wake to take medicine before going to sleep. At quarter to eleven, he slipped into his father's room.

"Good evening," he said to his mother, who sprawled at the edge of her husband's bed, clasping his hand. "I wish to speak with you." The words were stuck. He cleared his throat. "I... You are good parents. I want you to know that. And I am...sorry that I stayed away so long." The words washed through him, cleansing him, lifting him.

His mother held her hand out, and he stepped forward to take hold of it. Her face softened as she squeezed his fingers.

His father was drawn and grey, though his eyes still held the same vivacity Daniel remembered from his childhood. If he could find as much joy as his father did, he would be a happy man. He wanted to tell this to his father, to thank him for taking the time to teach him. Most of all, for showing him how to love. In time, the words would come, and Daniel hoped to use them to build a new relationship.

He cleared his throat. "Some things are difficult to express." He rubbed his jaw. "I've not been fair. While I do not regret my time at the bank, I apologize for my attitude. I nursed my resentment too long." He pushed past the ache in his throat. "I remember everything. The fishing and hunting. Digging in the mud. You showed me the world, the sky. You loved me, my sister, and Mother. Thank you." The expression was insufficient for Daniel's depth of gratitude, and he wished to say more but couldn't find the words. His father's eyes closed, and a tear slipped down his cheek. His mother squeezed Daniel's hand, and his father nodded.

He waited for his parents to take some of the blame, but they merely smiled at him, as if proud their son finally recognized his error. His heart twisted. A panicked rush of

anger grasped him, trying to reclaim his resentment, reminding him of the many wrongs they'd done him. But he would not allow it to take hold. They loved him, in their way. They did their best. He would do his best.

"I will leave you. Sleep well." He left the room content. Now, he had only to maintain his courage and speak to Mary.

Though it was past midnight when Daniel stood behind Mary's closed door, a glow on the floor outside her room told him she was yet awake. He hesitated, unsure which version of Mary he would find when he walked in. If it were Proper Mary, he'd be dismissed before speaking. His stomach twisted. If he didn't speak now, he may never have the pluck. He turned the knob and walked in.

Other than her scribbling hand, she did not stir. Covered in a pale blue dressing gown and a shawl, she sat hunched over her desk. Her hair must have been braided, but it had unraveled, framing her head in a fuzzy halo. She looked exquisite, though he could only see a bit of her profile.

Her quill paused. She dropped it, turned to look at him and gasped as she yanked the shawl from around her shoulders and covered her desk with it. What was she doing? He didn't care. His chest ached, caging a slow and heavy heartbeat, and his hands grew hot. I love you. Please, don't leave. I want you. Be my wife, and I will adore you forever.

He remained mute while Mary sat, wide-eyed and still, her arms around herself.

Move .

Before he could second-guess himself, he walked across the room and knelt beside her.

“Mary, look at me.”

She did, her eyes wide and her mouth straight, lovelier than ever, even in her disheveled state with ink smeared across her tired cheek.

“I had to speak with you.”

She sighed and wilted. What if, even after he told her how he felt, she would not have him? Could he bear the rejection?

His speechless pause drew on for too long. Mary raised her brows. “Well? What do you have to say?” She scrubbed at the ink stain on her finger, her hand trembling. Without encouragement, the task felt insurmountable. When he spoke to his parents, at least he knew he was saying something they wanted to hear. He had little indication of her feelings, but she had returned his kiss with as much passion as he felt. Combined with his desperation for her to know his heart, that memory became enough.

“I don’t express myself well, but I want to tell you that I do not, I mean, I did not, believe that after Miss Jensen, I could trust another woman with my heart. I wondered if marriage would be better without love, a rational relationship where feelings could not be hurt.”

Her eyes flitted to his face. “That is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard.”

“My parents love one another so deeply that they sometimes make choices that seem imprudent to me. They indulge each other in impractical fancies.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I thought love was senseless...because I had never felt it.” His stomach grew heavy, but his heart urged him to finish. “I didn’t know what it was like to be willing to do anything for another person with little care for what I might get in return.” He paused, gathering courage. “I know it now.”

She looked at him then, and he held her eyes with his own insistent look. He cupped her cheek with aching restraint, testing her reaction. She didn't move away. He leaned closer. "I am your servant," he whispered.

Her lips parted, and her eyes became caressing, but he did not know if she accepted him, if she wanted his kiss as he craved hers. He would try. He moved a fraction closer, his eyes straying to her lips. She tilted her chin, and with a sigh, he closed the distance, capturing her mouth in exquisite release of his yearning.

"Yes," she said over his lips.

He pulled her face closer, deepening the kiss as she opened to him, seeming to accept all the love he might give her. All he had was hers—all his past and future belonged to her. He would love and cherish and protect and keep her. He would meet her every whim. She sank to the floor beside him, wrapped her arms around his neck. He nearly expired from the sweetness of her embrace, from the passion he did not expect, but that came in every movement of her lips and every caress of her hands, at once gentle, then insistent.

Daniel pulled away and kissed the softness beneath her ear. He whispered, "Mary, whom I adore with my whole foolish heart, will you do me the great honor of becoming my wife?"

Mary pulled her arms from around him, her face pale. Her eyes shifted, the tenderness of a moment before erased, and she transformed into Proper Mary. "What am I doing?" She scurried to the other side of the room. "Here you are, in my bedroom. And I...dressed in...most improper." Her hands shook in front of her like she was flinging water from her fingers. She stopped in front of him. Then she snorted and began to laugh, covering her mouth, and dropping to floor next to him.

It was not proper, but he pulled her to him and cupped her face. "I am telling you that

I love you.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Giddy with this true engagement, Mary tried to suppress her smiles by squinting seriously across a vast dining room table at Mr. and Mrs. Chapman, Daniel's sister and brother-in-law. Daniel wanted to make the announcement before Louisa arrived, since Mary would be obliged to return the girl home. He was, of course, correct. There would be little time to think of dinner parties once Louisa arrived.

She felt Daniel's gaze and turned to him. His smile reassured but did not calm the bees that darted around inside her chest. Roses and candelabras filled the room with warm light and a sweet scent, but there was something disquieting about the ghoulis shadows they threw around the room. On the table, between vases of roses, were extravagant towers of fruit, jellies, and relishes. The party waited in silence for the host and hostess to appear.

"Perhaps we should help Papa?" Mrs. Chapman, Daniel's sister, asked from the other side of the table, loud and echoing.

"He will refuse," Daniel said. "He only allows Mother's help."

How had Mary arrived at this juncture, about to announce an engagement, a true engagement? A second marriage. Who was she to take so splendid a man from a young, deserving female? Mary seized her locket and held it to calm her buzzing heart. She released it and rested hand onto Daniel's leg, a forward move she'd never dreamed of during her courtship with Lord Allen. Daniel's warm hand enveloped hers, and all at once, her humming insides sighed and stilled.

“Brother, how did you meet Mrs. Allen?” Mrs. Chapman asked.

“At a ball. She immediately charmed me.”

This was news to Mary. “Did I? I felt the same for you.”

He turned toward her and trapped her gaze. She could look at him forever, lose herself in his pale blue eyes that returned her look with so much warmth.

“Really?” His question was only for her.

“Of course, but you are so much like a younger brother?—”

“Don’t say it!” His eyes crinkled, and he threw his head back, laughing.

She liquefied as his laughter warmed her chest and dripped hot into her middle. She tilted her head him toward him, and he met her halfway, foreheads pressed together. Surely, his sister could not see over the large bouquet between them. “I cannot resist your smile. Your laughter has me in a passion.” How dare she say these words aloud? They were the sentiments of a heroine from one of her novels. But they were true. She was those women and felt more authentic than ever before.

“Then I shall try my best to smile and laugh all the day long.”

“The vicar says public affection is in poor taste.” Mrs. Chapman blinked at them over a mountain of roses. The vicar, her husband, startled at the assertion, as if drawn from thought, and nodded.

“So it is. You will excuse us.” Daniel nudged Mary’s rib, and she bent her head into his shoulder to hide her laughter.

Unsteady steps sounded from the doorway. Mr. Fletcher hobbled forward, one arm around his wife and his other hand on a walking stick. Even in the dim light, he was pale, and his forehead glistened. He sat at the head of the table, an absurd distance from where the others were. Daniel would have to shout their announcement. Mrs. Fletcher took her place on the other end of the table. Considering all the décor, the husband and wife had little chance of seeing one another during the meal.

“Before we begin,” Mr. Fletcher hollered in a strained, gravelly voice, “I believe Daniel has an announcement to make. We shall hear him first, as I do not know how long I’ll be fit to sit at the table.”

Daniel stood. “Mary has accepted my proposal, and we are to be married as soon as may be.”

Half-hearted expressions of congratulations echoed through the hall, and Mary nodded in acceptance. Some little thrill zipped up her spine. This man, standing beside her, loved her. They were to marry despite any censure from his parents or anyone else.

Spoons scraped the bottoms of soup bowls, which were replaced by knives carving veal. Through dinner, Daniel’s touch anchored Mary. He rested his leg against hers under the table, and when her hand was available, she reached for his knee. Mrs. Chapman coughed any time Mary and Daniel brushed shoulders.

“Have you been to your reflector lately?” the vicar directed his question at Mr. Fletcher, using a booming voice more appropriate for the pulpit but necessary considering the cosmic length of the table.

“Not in my state of health, I haven’t,” Mr. Fletcher shouted back.

Mrs. Fletcher said something, a mere garbled hum to Mary’s ears.

“What was that, my dear?” Mr. Fletcher asked. “What did she say?”

She said something again, but it dissipated in echo.

The effort to speak was too great, and the clank of silverware replaced conversation. When dessert arrived with champagne, Mary sank her teeth into a crisp, light ratafia cake and wished to escape into the rose garden with Daniel. It meant something that she would rather be alone with him than eating sweets.

Mr. Fletcher stood, indicating the conclusion of a suffocating meal. Cane in hand, he wobbled toward his wife, who rushed to his side.

“Is this too much for you, darling? Shall we return you to your room?”

“Take me to the drawing room. We shall all sit a while. No need to linger over port tonight, gentlemen. We’ve had our champagne, and I would like to converse with my future daughter.” He waved away Daniel and Emma, who tried to help him cross the room.

A great fire stifled the drawing room, and Mary pulled Daniel in the direction of the settee near the window where the heat was not so consuming.

“Come sit over here, Mrs. Allen,” Mr. Fletcher said.

Unwillingly, she moved to the chair next to Mr. Fletcher, adjacent to the fire. Daniel sat beside her, an apology in his eyes.

“Well, then,” said Mr. Fletcher. “What do you bring to the marriage? You have some property, I understand?”

“Father, really...” Daniel said, but Mary put a steadying hand on his arm. They

would work this out together. All she had would belong to her husband, unless she arranged it otherwise, and that was not so easily done. There was also the question of her royalties. It was no small sum. What was her duty in this case? Need she be forthright with Mr. Fletcher? Need she disclose all her assets? Dinner congealed in her stomach.

“I have an estate in Ireland, cared for by capable tenants.”

“Ireland tends to be cloudy, does it not?” he asked, his eyes narrowed and fingers steepled under his chin.

“Mine is primarily a livestock farm, located in the west. It rains, but not as much as in the east or south of Ireland. Why do you ask?” Her stomach tightened further. What was he after?

Daniel tensed beside her, leaned forward, and began to speak.

His father spoke louder. “We will sell it and buy something in the south where the sky is more visible.”

“Or nearby,” said his mother, “so we can be near Emma’s children. I don’t believe Mary can have?—”

“When we make arrangements for the wedding, draw up the papers, you will deed us your land in Ireland.”

“Father!” Daniel stood. “Absolutely out of the question.”

Mrs. Chapman and her husband sat on the periphery of the gathering but were not feigning disinterest in the conversation. “The vicar believes,” she said, “that a woman must yield all to husband, and a son must be filial.”

Daniel stood and began pacing before the fire. “I begin to understand why my marriage is so important to you.” His diamond-sharp voice did not ruffle his father.

Mr. Fletcher turned a placid eye to his son. “If you’d done as I’d asked and married that other girl, your mother and I were to move into her estate.”

Mary stilled. There was another woman? Young, no doubt, whose property they had planned to seize for themselves. Well, it was small wonder she disappointed them. They could live on her estate, but she would not allow them to sell. It must come back to her upon their deaths.

“We are tired of this old castle,” Mrs. Fletcher said. “It is over one hundred perilous steps to our rooms. We need a cottage without endless, narrow stairs; we’ve not the means to get it ourselves. While Grandmother did not entail the castle, she made it impossible to sell, else we certainly would.”

A pounding on the door interrupted the conversation. The prickly discussion yielded to the ticking of the clock and Mr. Fletcher’s labored breath. One of the maids entered the room. “Mr. Porter is here to see Mrs. Allen.”

It could not be. “Who did you say was at the door?” asked Mary.

“A Mr. Porter, ma’am.”

The room spun, and her heart pounded in sharp wallops. Mr. Porter, her publisher! Here. She rose to her feet and rushed toward the entrance hall. If she intercepted him before he introduced himself?—

“I am Lady Mary’s publisher, Mr. Porter.” Mary skidded to a stop in front of him. “Mrs. Eliot informed me of your whereabouts.” He took her hand and kissed it.

“There must be some mistake,” Daniel said. “This woman is not Lady Mary.”

“Mr. Porter,” Mary said. “This is a surprise.” Her ears were ringing, and she knew she spoke too loudly. “Let’s go into the library.” She took his arm.

“Lady Mary!” Mrs. Chapman said. “Really? Mama, do you know who this is? Her advanced age is benign by comparison. You have no idea what trouble we’ve had extricating that...that...refuse from the parish.”

Daniel collapsed against a wall; his face tightened into a grimace. Was it astonishment or revulsion?

“I am not surprised,” said Mr. Porter, who resisted Mary’s attempts to pull him out of the room. “She sold more books for Golden Buck Publishing than any release this decade. You should be proud to know her.” He beamed, clearly glad to know her himself. But Mary could not enjoy his enthusiasm with Daniel shaking his head. She shot him an imploring look, but he put his hand up and looked away. Did he find it so disgusting that she should write a book? A book he enjoyed, no less.

Mrs. Chapman continued, “It is an unholy novel. Isn’t it, Mr. Chapman?” Her husband nodded but continued looking out the window, probably at the full moon.

“I knew it was not meant to be.” Mrs. Fletcher clapped her hands, but Mr. Fletcher leaned over and whispered something to his wife. She patted his leg. “Of course, you are right dear, but without another prospect, it does ruin our plans. We must figure out something else. Besides, Mrs. Allen is so very old . We may never get a grandchild out of her.”

The maid appeared in the doorway. “Two more guest for you: Mrs. Eliot and Miss Thorpe.”

Mary spun toward the door. “Louisa!” She embraced her niece, who trembled in her arms. “All will be well, now. I will make sure of it.” Mary squeezed her, trying to imbue all her affection, all hope for Louisa’s future into the embrace, while stabilizing her own ragged breath.

“Louisa Thorpe?” Mr. Fletcher wobbled to his feet unaided.

Louisa stepped forward and nodded.

Mrs. Fletcher’s hand flew to her mouth.

“Are your affections engaged?” Mr. Fletcher asked.

Louisa shook her head.

“Mercy! We have been spared. Miss Thorpe, your father and I are old friends and have arranged a match between you and my son.”

Mary watched his mouth continue to move but heard nothing past the ringing in her head. Daniel and Louisa’s marriage was arranged. He still leaned against the wall, but as her eyes landed on his, he turned toward her, his face closed.

Through the commotion, Mary asked, “Daniel, did you know?”

He nodded and leaned forward, covering his face with his hands.

The world fell from beneath her. She could barely stand. Couldn’t breathe. Had it all been a lie? Was she merely a necessity to get the castle? Could she trust any part of their relationship?

There was no time to wander through the tangle of questions she had for him. As

Louisa's guardian and advocate, she would do right by her to the exclusion of all else. Louisa was pale, her clothes sagged over her frame, and her face blotched red. Mary did not know exactly what her niece had been through, but she looked like a kitten pulled half-drowned from a stream. The poor darling. She wrapped an arm around her waist. "Are you all right?" she asked in a voice so low the others would not hear.

"Oh, Aunt. I am so sorry."

"Say nothing of it. I am only happy you are well. Are you well?"

"Well enough." She bent her head and then rested it on Mary's shoulder.

The room continued to fuss and squawk, and the volume rose in equal measure to the heat gathering in Mary's body and the expanding knot in her stomach. What could be done? Daniel would no longer meet her eye. The Fletchers believed Louisa would resolve their problems. Most of all, Louisa, Mary's responsibility, was hurting. The girl's permanent disgrace was partially her fault. Any hopes Louisa may have had of a suitable marriage were sunk. And here were the Fletchers, offering her Daniel. A tidy fix to many difficulties, but not one she could address in that moment.

"Agnes, I must speak with Mr. Porter. Take Louisa to my room and wait for me. The maid will show you the way." She nudged them out the door and then clapped her hands. "Let us retire to our beds. We will continue the discussion tomorrow when we are well rested." It was not her place to take charge, but now that they knew she wasn't a gentlewoman, it didn't matter. She could not abide the family discussing her all night. "Come along, then." She clapped her hands and shooed them out of the room like some harried nursemaid. To Mr. Porter she said, "We shall go to the library."

With the door open for propriety's sake, Mary tried to settle her thoughts by pacing in front of Mr. Porter, who sat in a chair.

“Why have you come, Mr. Porter? I admit to being more than a little surprised by your presence.”

“You are a poor correspondent, and I want your next novel.” He adjusted his position, leaning toward Mary with a look of earnest admiration. “You have no idea. We cannot print enough of your novel. We need another book, and fast. Do you have anything ready?”

She spun on her heel and faced him. “By the by, why did you publish my book without my permission?”

He emitted a sound that was something between a scoff and a snort. “You don’t remember...the letter you included with the manuscript?”

She searched her brain. What had she written? It was years ago. She only remembered swelling with accomplishment while tying the twine around the thick stack of papers, like she’d climbed a mountain or conquered the world. “I do not, in fact, recall. The manuscript was sent by accident.”

“Your letter was the most amusing and audacious the office had ever seen. I passed it to all my colleagues, and we all laughed at you. It stopped being so droll when I read the manuscript and saw that you were right. At that point, we did as you commanded in your letter and began setting the press immediately.”

“I told you in my letter to commence production?”

“You said we were holding the book of the century, and if we knew what was good for us, we would not wait a moment before setting the press. We had your permission.”

“I wrote that?” The memory was vague, but she could imagine herself composing the

message, a triumphant moment when she had let go of all scruples and written a letter that had never been intended for reading.

“And you were right.”

Was she? Mary settled in front of the window, scanning the landscape. Evening light reflected pink off the garden wall where roses climbed so high that their limbs sprawled over the edge. They were disorderly, untamed, lived by no rules, beyond the aptitude nature gave them to grow and blossom. Was not she the same, born with such desires and abilities? Even if her path was gnarled and a bit wild, it was her own, something within her control that could not be relinquished.

The refined façade behind which she hid exhausted her. Gentility had never been in her nature. She liked large slices of cake and to run outside. She liked to stay in bed and read a love story from cover to cover while her maid brought her meals. When she laughed, she liked to do it with her head thrown back and until her side ached. It was time she cut free. Mary was not a lady. She was an author.

Propriety be damned.

Her cheeks warmed at the curse spoken only in her head. Some decency must remain.

“I have a few novels and several stories, but they are in Cornwall, and I need to copy them. I am not certain they are fit for publication, but I am almost finished with my current work.” If she sequestered herself for a day or two, she could finish. Right now, her heart needed time alone with paper, pen, and her own imaginary world of happily-ever-afters. She would see to Louisa and then go to an inn alone. “I will have it to you in five days, a week at most.”

Mr. Porter slapped his thighs and stood. “The Golden Buck will be pleased.”

Of course they would. Mary recalled Eliza Haywood, who opened her own print shop when her publisher was stingy with profits. “Before you go, let’s discuss the payment contract. Since *A Woman Who Loves* is such a success, I expect a greater advance and higher royalties.” Her heart pounded at her own boldness.

He hemmed and coughed and spewed some numbers that were well below Mary’s expectation.

“If that is the best you can do, I will find another publisher.” It was unladylike to discuss money, even more so to make pecuniary demands. It felt good.

After more blustering, Mr. Porter agreed to her terms, and she signed an amended contract.

When they finished, Mary saw no reason to keep him around. No one needed a reminder of her vocation. “I am quite certain my friend, Mrs. Eliot, will not mind if you take her carriage to the inn,” Mary assured him, while escorting him out of the room to the front door.

“Quite right. I know Mrs. Eliot quite well, having traveled together.”

“But you arrived in advance of her and Louisa?”

“After we found Miss Thorpe, I traveled post ahead of them. The carriage became crowded, you know.”

Mrs. Eliot’s capacious carriage accommodated four passengers, but she comprehended his meaning. The prospect of traveling with two fretting females had disturbed him, as well it might. Gracious! How they’d all met and arrived at Almerey confounded her, but she wished him gone. Agnes would tell it better.

“Goodbye, Mr. Porter.”

When the door clicked shut, Mary rested her back against it to regain her composure. She closed her eyes, dreading the next minutes that would take her to Louisa and then to Daniel.

Clipped footsteps brought her eyes fluttering open. Daniel stood not five feet away.

She stepped toward him, and he met her halfway, his jaw clenching and working. His tense eyes bored into hers.

“You lied to me!” they said in unison.

Chapter Twenty-Six

“What?” Daniel stepped back from the venomous blaze in Mary’s eyes. She lied to him. “You didn’t tell me?—”

“You are the man my brother meant for Louisa? You knew all along and chose not to tell me? You allowed me to fall...” Her voice broke, and she stepped away from him.

Daniel could barely heed her words. “You accuse me when you lied about your very identity? How could you not trust me enough to tell me who you are?” Daniel asked.

“That’s why you are upset? If you can think of nothing else, consider your family’s reaction to the news.”

“You lied. Multiple times, without remorse. I do not know who you are.” Her lack of confidence in him robbed him of the opportunity to be proud of her, to praise her achievement and express his awe over her gift. Most of all, he had trusted her, a sentiment of which he had not thought himself capable. Now, she twisted his actions and made him into the ogre.

“I never lied.”

“You did.”

“I parried the questions. You, however, held a secret that made a difference to me and to Louisa. This is about your castle, isn’t it? Just now you remained silent while your family defamed me, never considering you might speak in my defense because you

are afraid of losing this heap of stone.”

She was right, and hearing it spoken aloud pulled the anger out of him like slipping a flag from its supporting pole. He did want the castle, but he wanted her, too. When noise and chaos surrounded him, coupled with the news of Mary’s betrayal, he did not know what to think or how to act.

“Mary,” he whispered, reaching for her.

“No.” She swiped his hand away.

He ground his teeth. She wouldn’t listen.

“You knew Louisa was coming,” she said, “and yet you continued our fa?ade of an engagement. Why? Because you feared they would find out about her scandal? Hedging your bets!”

“No. Listen. I have not been so false?—”

She held up her hand. “And no one will have my estate. It pains me that the treasured bit of land Louisa’s mother fought to preserve for her daughter should fall to your grasping parents.”

Daniel shuddered, but he breathed away the tightening in his chest. It was not his doing. He held no responsibility for that, but his ever-honest conscience whispered the reality. He would exchange Louisa’s estate—and Mary’s too—for his castle. Shame lit the back of his neck, and no rebuttal materialized.

Mary inhaled and crossed her arms over herself, but her voice rang with more assurance than ever. “This is what we will do. I am going upstairs to speak with Louisa. You shall have your young bride and this castle, and your parents can take

Louisa's cottage. I hate it, but it is our only choice, since my brother promised her to you. It is the proper thing to do. The only correct way to proceed."

She was imperious, Proper Mary at her best, raising her voice in favor of decorum. He walked over to the steps and sat down, pressing his palms into his eyes. "There has to be another way." However precious Mary was to him, he could not lose the castle. His parents must be convinced that Mary was the better choice. But she deceived him. Could he marry her after that?

"There was another way," she said. "Honesty. Had you told us when we met that you and Louisa were intended for each other, we would have toasted the two of you tonight, and she would not have run away with Savage." She fisted a handful of her skirt and whispered, "I blame you for that."

"How can you speak of honesty? I didn't tell you because I did not think it prudent to discuss a match that may not happen. I did not know if she knew of it or if she would accept it. She showed no fondness for me. What was I to assume?"

"There is nothing more to say. I have a deadline. The publisher awaits my second novel." She lifted her chin and paused, as if waiting for recrimination.

He battled the thickness that gathered in his throat and the desire to beg her pardon. He couldn't. Her lies reminded him that he could trust no one. The people he loved betrayed him, and the thought scraped him empty.

She looked down at him. "You have my blessing to marry Louisa. She will be saved from society's censure, and you will retain your inheritance." Her flat tone added weight to the growing pressure in his chest.

Daniel opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, she disappeared around the bend in the stairs.

Perhaps she was right. A marriage with Louisa solved every problem. He would consign himself to a loveless marriage and keep the castle. Though foolhardy and immature, Louisa possessed many endearing qualities, and her goodness had never been in question. But she was no Lady Mary.

How could he settle for that when he knew what it was to love Mary? If the only option was Louisa, he would take her. Mary was right about it being the correct thing for him to do.

With trepidation, Louisa waited for her aunt. She both longed for and dreaded the interview. Most of all, she hoped for the courage to explain her situation. Aunt Mary's opinion on the matter would determine how she moved forward.

For the past hour, Mrs. Eliot had been sitting at Aunt Mary's writing desk reading what they presumed was her aunt's latest novel. She laughed and recited bits aloud while Louisa's stomach churned in sickening dread of what was to come. Over the past weeks, Louisa had become a lady's companion with real responsibilities that mattered to her employer, Lady Halverson. Returned to the clutches of her family, who believed her silly and useless, the independence she achieved by gaining Lady Halverson's trust vanished. She awaited the tribunal, her aunt a magistrate who could send her back to prison.

Aunt Mary entered, pink-cheeked, straight-backed, and taut.

"Have you turned Mr. Porter away?" Louisa asked.

"If you did, I will drag him back. I forbid you to keep this to yourself," Mrs. Eliot said. "This is even better than the last." She turned a page, and Aunt Mary sat on the bed next to Louisa. "But I must go to my room. It is just next to yours, should you need me." She took the manuscript with her, grinning like a thief. "You don't mind if I read this?"

Aunt Mary shook her head.

Louisa leaned into her aunt, eyes stinging at the affectionate arm that squeezed her shoulders. She did not deserve such care.

“I am sorry I neglected you for this past hour. I lost my senses when Mr. Porter appeared. How have you been? Tell me everything. Or everything you wish me to know about...” No one seemed to know what to call the elopement.

“My departure from Bath?”

“Precisely.”

No one knew everything, but Louisa would be as honest as she could with Aunt Mary. She would tell her how she had become a lady’s companion, but not that her employer, Lady Halverson, had a son. A handsome one. Besides, she was through with men.

“It was not long after leaving with...that man.” Saying his name nauseated her. She swallowed. “I discovered that he was not what I had thought. He insisted we share a room, so I locked him out of it, and he eventually went away.” She let out a breath. The hardest part was over.

Mary looked with sympathetic eyes and patted her knee. “Oh, my poor girl. But you are very clever. Well done. Are you hurt? Did he...?”

“He did not. But appearance of wrongdoing and the danger I was in...” Her voice caught, and she paused as both her aunt’s arms drew her close.

This was the validation Louisa needed to continue the story. She hoped Aunt Mary’s approbation carried through to the end.

“When I was left alone, I considered returning to my father, but I did not want him to see my disgrace. I am so humiliated. Try to understand—after that man departed, I was liberated, on my own with no one expecting a thing from me. I stayed a day and night with Nellie in the servants’ quarters and saw that, though they worked hard and were constantly at the whim of patrons and innkeeper, they had their freedoms.” Despite herself, Louisa’s nose stung and her eyes burned. She was going to cry.

“There, there, dear.” Aunt Mary produced a handkerchief.

“I longed to be a little girl, when no one cared what I did, when I had the day to myself and a mother tending me.”

“Yes. I forgot what it feels like to be your age...so many expectations. I did not make it easier for you. Widowhood comes with the advantage of liberty, to some extent.”

While observing the servants, Louisa decided to become a lady’s maid, having cared for her mother while she was ill. “But Lady Halverson found me out. Though I had some skills, she noticed I was not accustomed to service. She promoted me to lady’s companion. In another week, I would have written to you and Father. I was on the verge of doing so when Mrs. Eliot appeared.”

“How did she find you?”

“Mr. Porter is a distant relation of Lady Halverson. Their families lived nearby when they were children. Mrs. Eliot was bringing Mr. Porter here to find you, and when they stopped in Stroud, he suggested staying with the Halversons. It was all a great coincidence, and I am sure both Mrs. Eliot and I were near to fainting when we clapped eyes on one another.”

“A lady’s companion? Really!” Aunt Mary said, as if to herself.

“I was there only a week, but Lady Halverson appreciates me.” Louisa had both relished the employment and been embarrassed by it. A lady’s companion was a post for women without money or marriage prospects. Louisa did not fit into that category, yet she loved the position. For the first time since her mother had died, she felt useful. Lady Halverson sought her conversation and her presence when everyone else only wanted rid of her.

Aunt Mary took Louisa’s hand. “I paraded you around Bath, dragged you to this event and that soirée, never considering your feelings. I am sorry. Now, we must mend it. Your father knew what was best for you. He planned for you to marry Dan—Mr. Fletcher, and so you shall.”

Louisa sucked in a breath. “I do not want to. Please, don’t make me do it.”

“Behavior has consequences. This marriage will set you to rights. When you are married, your propriety will never be questioned. This is what your mother would want for you. She would not approve of you becoming a companion, which would be as good as announcing yourself a spinster.”

Louisa felt her chin begin to tremble. There would be no returning to Lady Halverson. The last thread of hope unraveled and left her unsteady. If she stood, she would puddle to the floor, empty and without resolve. She had fought so long for a shred of independence but could not argue against her aunt’s sensible conclusion. Marriage was the only thing that would save her.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Once the door shut behind Louisa, Mary flopped onto her bed, bringing her knees to her chest. Her heart broke for the girl who was losing her freedom, who walked a path Mary had refused to tread—loss of autonomy, loss of property, a loveless marriage that came packaged with insufferable in-laws. Mary had a choice, and Louisa did not. Stephen determined Louisa's future, and Mary knew what he would do with her. Louisa must wed before word spread of the attempted elopement.

But Daniel. This marriage was to Daniel, her Daniel. Her eyes burned, but no tears came. She was not calm enough for weeping. With limbs too heavy to move, she lay in complete stillness, her mind a cycle of ifs and whys. Against her chest, her heart crashed, as it had when she'd spoken with Mr. Porter, but this time in an agonizing rather than triumphant rhythm. She pressed her hand into her belly where Daniel's betrayal settled into a solid coil. If she could reach in and extricate it, she would, for that pain would accompany her until she ceased to feel.

His thoughtful gifts and intelligent conversation would be Louisa's, and it sickened her. Louisa would never appreciate him, and her youth and inexperience, her dependence would not appeal to Daniel. In a few years, she would grow in understanding. Perhaps Daniel's patience would extend to that point, even while the thought sent a shiver of foreboding to her core. She loved them both so well and hated what she was doing to them, damning them to a life of disappointment. She pressed her knees to her chest, trying to stem the ache. Had he told her, she would never have loved him. Oh! That he'd spared her this grief.

The marriage she anticipated was not to be. Once again, she was left with only one

thing: the stories she created. And that was something to cherish. Had she gone with her first instinct and declined Daniel, had she lived according to the rules set forth in *A Lady's Guide*, this sorrow would have been avoided.

The walls of her room grew dark and unwelcoming. The stone closed around her, stifling and chilled. She hated this castle, which was deemed more desirable than she, which Daniel valued more highly than his love for her. She must leave.

Urging her unwilling limbs to move, she rolled out of bed, holding to the bedpost until dizziness subsided, and made her way across the hall. Light flickered from under Agnes's door, so she let herself in.

Agnes turned at her entrance. "My, my, Mary. You have a story to tell."

"I do, but I do not have the energy for it tonight."

"Shall I tell it for you?"

Mary waived her permission. She didn't care. It would please Agnes, and she was about to ask a great favor. Best to humor her.

"On the road to finding your niece, you fell in love with the man your niece is supposed to marry."

"That sums it."

Agnes stood and walked to the bed where Mary sat. "Your heart is broken."

Her eyes scorched and tears broke free. "Yes," she said, pushing her forearm against her eyes. Louisa had taken her handkerchief.

The gentle pressure of Agnes's arm fell around her shoulders, and Mary's sorrow erupted. "I love him, Agnes. He made me love him while knowing he must marry Louisa."

"Must he?"

"Yes. He only cares about this castle. His horrid parents told him he cannot have it without marriage to Louisa."

"He is a proper rascal. As bad as Savage."

Mary's defenses rose. "Not so bad. I understand how he loves this place. I do not want to live in Ireland, but I love the estate there, the memories, the hardship. I could not give it away." She tasted the lie. The estate meant a great deal to her, but not as much as Daniel did. She would sacrifice it for him, but not to his parents. Her stomach hardened, and tears wet Agnes's shoulder.

"He is selfish. You deserve better. Now that you are famous, he has only to regret his imbecility in letting you go."

Renown did not replace love, but writing remained when all else fell out of reach—and not for the first time. After Lord Allen's death, writing had infused her life with meaning. Even still, more than anything, Mary wished to center her life around another person and be the center of his. She'd been essential to Daniel, if only for a moment.

"I cannot stay in this castle another instant. Will you take care of Louisa? I spoke to her, and she is willing to do her duty. I will leave for the inn tonight and stay only until the book is done. See that the wedding takes place as soon as possible. I can trust you to do your best to look after her."

“I will see to it.”

“And Nellie. I have not seen her, but I assume she is here? Let her remain with Louisa. It will be a comfort to have someone she knows.”

“Of course.” Agnes shifted and pulled at her sleeve. “Mary, I should not have goaded you while we were in Bath.”

“Goaded me?”

“With Mr. Bateman. And telling all the gentlemen to ask you to dance.” Mrs. Eliot’s apologies were not forthcoming.

“It was uncomfortable for me.”

“Yes, well, I saw your loneliness and wanted you to find a husband. I do not always have the best execution, but my intentions are flawless.”

Mary nudged her friend with her shoulder. “I know. You look after me.”

Agnes took Mary’s shoulders and turned her so they were facing. “And I am so proud of you.”

“Proud of me?” She looked at Agnes.

“Your books. Your talent. For years I wondered about the ink on your fingers. I know now that you were composing masterpieces.”

Tears welled again, and Mary sobbed. She hadn’t known how she longed to hear those words. “Thank you. You are a good friend.”

“Speaking of Mr. Bateman, he is engaged to Miss Barry.”

Mary laughed, a tiny lightness tumbling into her chest. She was not so alone. “Finish reading the manuscript tonight if you can. I am taking it with me when I go.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Daniel's mother placed a scone on a plate and handed it to him along with a cup of tea. Without taking a bite, he put it on a table and frowned. She seemed more cheerful than was her custom, which meant her mood bordered on exuberant.

Miss Thorpe sat too close, but it felt desperate rather than romantic. With Mary disappeared, the girl had only Mrs. Eliot to advocate for her. Not that Mrs. Eliot shirked her duty in any way, but where was Mary? Mrs. Eliot would not tell him, and Miss Thorpe did not know.

He awoke that morning with the remembrance of the night before hovering like a black cloud, memories pelting him like a torrent of hail. He had withheld his connection to Miss Thorpe. She had withheld her identity as Lady Mary. While her betrayal cut deep, he expected time to resolve their dispute. After preparing for the day, he went to his study to wait on her return, cursing himself for his stupidity in believing his rash plot would work.

As the day revolved into afternoon, and he ate with his family and their guests in the drawing room, he admitted this hope was illusory. His plan failed, and he was strapped to Miss Thorpe. Even now, arrangements for the wedding rolled forth, earnestly discussed among the party, a disaster that arrived too quickly to subvert. Daniel sat mutely next to Miss Thorpe whose lack of appetite indicated she was also full of nerves.

His sister, Emma, strode into the room, her eyes landing on Miss Thorpe, and took a seat across from her. Miss Thorpe wilted against him, their shoulders touching. This

girl required, even deserved, his care, but he lacked the patience to put her at ease. His thoughts anchored to Mary, Lady Mary, a woman unknown to him.

While Emma procured tea and cake, Daniel asked Louisa, “Did you know your aunt is Lady Mary?”

“Only by accident. I went looking for ink and found a letter from Mr. Porter. You will guess how shocked I was, but also...” She lowered her voice. “She inspired me.” She pressed her fingers against her lips. “Oh. You must not think...I did not mean she inspired me to...”

“I believe I understand you.” This child was not ready for marriage. Could he marry her? Did he have a choice?

“I only mean that it showed me I can make my own decisions.” She pulled a stole tight around her. “Though that lesson proved false,” she added with a frown.

“Miss Thorpe,” Andrew cut into their conversation. “How is it you and Daniel came to meet? Did he go all the way to Cornwall to find you?”

“Oh, no. We met quite by accident. In Bath.”

Andrew squinted at the two of them, likely trying to conjecture Mary’s role in all of this.

Emma gestured for Miss Thorpe to sit by her. With a doe-eyed glance at Daniel, she moved to the seat next to her future sister. Let Louisa answer the uncomfortable questions. Though he knew it was not her fault, Daniel was angry at her, at Mary, at his parents. He needed someone to blame for the catastrophe, and Miss Thorpe was an easy target at that moment.

Daniel sagged deeper into the cushions of the settee. His mother's tittering laughter drew his attention. She and Mrs. Eliot sat with their heads bent in conversation, chatting as if they'd known one another for years. "Mother, can I speak with you?"

She followed him into the library and took a seat in her favorite overstuffed chair, which sagged in pathetic contradiction to its name. Daniel poured a glass of port and sat across from her.

"Mrs. Eliot told me everything," she said.

Daniel doubted that was true. If his mother knew everything, she may not be as joyous over the prospect of his marrying Miss Thorpe, but he would not be telling the tale.

She continued, "It seems Miss Thorpe has a lot of initiative for one so young. Did you know she's been working as a lady's companion?" His mother's prattle irritated him.

"I want to talk about Mary."

"Lady Mary?"

"Yes. I thought you liked her."

"I do. But I want grandchildren. She will not supply many of those."

Daniel groaned. "This is not about you."

"Isn't it?" She grinned. "Well?"

"I would like to release Miss Thorpe from the engagement and wed Mary." As he

said it, a flood of calm washed clear the turmoil that stormed inside.

“You could do that, but your father’s will is written, and you would lose your inheritance. I have a feeling Lady Mary will not sign over her estate to us. She showed last night that she is not the woman we thought.”

“She’s better.” This truth reverberated in his bones.

“Perhaps, but not so useful to your father and me.”

All the animosity Daniel had vanquished a few nights ago resurfaced in a bitter pool beneath his sternum. “Wills can be altered, and you can trust me to take care of you.”

“I watched the way your eyes followed her, the smile that brightened your handsome face when she entered the room. You love her. But your father and I have decided. We have taken enough advantage of you. We cannot accept your help.”

“So, you’ll take from my future wife? Do you hear what you’re saying?” Resentment boiled in his chest. He did not want to reengage with his anger, but she infuriated him. He tempered his voice until it became a whisper. “Mother, why don’t you help me?”

She laughed in her flippant way. “I? Why don’t I help you? You are asking the wrong question, my dear. Why didn’t you help yourself? Did you expect me to declare your love for Lady Mary so you wouldn’t have to? To defend her while Emma called her book garbage? While I criticized her age and your father reduced her to an object whose worth depended on her ability to provide for him?” She demonstrated acute understanding while admitting her part in demeaning Mary.

“I don’t understand you. Why contribute to Mary’s pain?”

“I don’t understand you . Last night, I said what I thought, but you shriveled up. If I were you, I would go after what I wanted. Why is this castle so important to you? Why do you succumb to our manipulations?”

“Why are you manipulating me?”

She laughed. “We are terrible parents. I know this. Your father is determined for you to marry Miss Thorpe. All your choices oppose his values. You went to school when he wanted to educate you. You went to Smith’s Bank when he wanted your forgiveness for his idiotic investments that cost us so much. He doesn’t care so much about Miss Thorpe’s property as he does for getting your compliance.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“Don’t I know it. Though a snug cottage would benefit me to no end.”

It didn’t matter enough to her. For all her talk of the importance of love, she would not advocate for him. “I cannot speak to you if you won’t be serious.”

She took his hand, her smile gone. “I am very serious. This is not a matter in which I can help. I observed your behavior while the woman you purport to love was taken down by the entire family.” She pulled a face. “Myself included. You did nothing. I question if she mattered to you at all. If I were her, I would not think you loved me at all.”

She was right. “What should I do?”

“Tell Miss Thorpe you love Mary. Simple. Get what you want most.”

Now that she was taking his side, his sense of justice rose. “But she lied to me. She hid her identity from me.”

“You are no stranger to deceit, love. What are you willing to forgive? What are you willing to sacrifice? Make the right choice, and it will all come to rights.”

“Miss Thorpe’s reputation is at risk. Our marriage will save her. That is what Mary wants.”

“Does she indeed?” His mother raised a brow. “How do you know?”

“She told me as much.”

His mother narrowed her eyes at him. “Anything else?”

“It is possible she believes the only reason I asked to marry her was to keep my inheritance.”

Now she leaned back and nodded. “Is that not true?”

“You know it is not.” Daniel rested his elbows on his knees and his head on his hands.

“Perhaps you should start there.” She put her hand on his back. “Mary is your equal, your true match. Be brave and tell her how you feel.”

“And Father will alter the will?”

“Doubtful. Or rather, impossible.” She sighed as if she had nothing to do with the decision. “No, the will remains as it is.”

“Forgiveness and sacrifice characterize all my relationships.”

She kissed his cheek. “No, forgiveness and sacrifice describe every good relationship.

You are a lovely boy.” She stood. “Now, I would like to continue talking with Mrs. Eliot. I find her most diverting. It speaks to Lady Mary’s good judgement to have such a friend.” His mother skipped out of the room.

What was the balance between forgiveness and protecting himself? He’d pardoned his parents but could not accept or excuse their behavior. Yet he was accepting it, if he conceded to a marriage with Miss Thorpe. There never was a person both as daft and astute as Daniel’s mother, but it was not as simple as she made it sound. Everything he’d done had been aimed at refurbishing Alмеры. While at the bank, the fantasy of seeing it restored had driven him to work harder rather than spend time on his relationships. Could he exchange Alмеры for a future with Mary?

He wanted her, burned for her, but she was a new feature in his life, while the castle was like a mountain, something that had always been there and would always be, even as it slowly crumbled to dirt. And could he trust her?

His mother’s assertion that he could lie rankled. He cultivated trustworthiness and dependability like a farmer tended to an orchard. But if he had been honest with Miss Jensen, he would have told her at the beginning of their engagement that he would delay their union for years. Instead, he’d made excuses every few months, pushing back the day until she’d made other plans. The years she waited for him must have been hard for her, taking her from marriageable age and into what some considered spinsterhood. She’d likely become desperate.

His throat seared and his skin itched. His greatest skill was deceiving himself.

Perhaps he should have told Mary about his connection to Louisa. He kept it to himself because he knew that he and Louisa did not suit. He did it because of that long, charming look Mary gifted him when they first met. He did it in hopes that he could have a loving marriage and Alмеры. It was a guilty omission, but one he could not regret, not when it brought him Mary.

A readiness to forgive tugged at him. The tantalizing desire to surrender his anger offered to loosen the thorny tension that pricked his soul, but he yanked back the hurt, reeled it in, and cradled it. She withheld a major part of her identity from him. Yes, she would be censured for writing a romance, but not by him. He was half infatuated with every woman in that novel, so it was little wonder he loved the author. Her lack of trust in him cut the deepest wound. Wishing to keep that truth from wagging tongues in Bath, he understood, but once they began to confide in each other, the subject came up again. Ah! And he had made assumptions about Mary in that conversation, had said she would never do such a thing. Hardly a sentiment to induce a confidence. Then he blamed Lady Mary for Louisa's behavior.

His appraisal of the situation wanted clarity. What had he done to warrant her faith? He misled her. His initial interest in marriage to her stemmed from his desire for Almer. He had not examined his motives, and they were not selfless. He must show her his worthiness and earn her trust.

Daniel found Miss Thorpe, a book in hand, staring out the window. His mother and Emma huddled around Mrs. Eliot, who was wide-eyed and gesticulating. Heaven only knew what nonsense she imparted. She was Mary's friend, but he had yet to comprehend why.

"Miss Thorpe, would you care to walk outside with me?" She was pale and could probably use some air. It occurred to him that she must have gone through a harrowing experience with Mr. Savage. His engagement to her was of no help. In Bath, she'd worn youthful insolence layered over a bright spirit. The liveliness he'd witnessed was gone, exchanged for complete despondency.

She acquiesced gloomily to the walk. They strolled mindlessly through the grounds, talking of nothing in particular, until Daniel looked up and realized they were in the rose garden. A pang of loss shot through him. How he missed Mary.

“Miss Thorpe, may I call you Louisa?”

“We are engaged.”

“Do you want to marry me?”

She hesitated. “It is the right thing to do. The only option after...”

“So, you see this as a punishment?”

“Yes.” She looked up at him, shocked. “I mean, it is a duty I fulfill with happiness.”

“If you could do anything, what would you do?”

She laughed, dry and cynical. “No one has ever asked me that.”

Her plight clarified, and Daniel understood her for the first time. “Your father arranged your marriage without asking your consent. Your aunt took you to Bath when you did not wish to go, and now you are being forced into that arranged marriage with a man you do not like.”

“Oh! I do like you. But not for a husband.”

“What do you want?”

She pinched her lips between her teeth and began unravelling a ribbon sewn to her gown. “I want to go back to Stroud and be a lady’s companion.” She blushed and looked at the ground.

“What would your father think?”

She wilted and pulled harder at the bow. "You see, my wishes are of no consequence."

"Let's make them matter."

She jerked away from him. "Don't tease me."

"I would never make light of this, Louisa."

"What do you propose?"

"I suggest we both get what we want."

"Impossible."

"I cannot accept that. Do you know I want to marry your aunt?"

Louisa stepped back, but a tiny smile grew. "You are joking."

"I love her more than life." More than this castle. "What can we do?"

They sat on a bench in silence. The sun lit his shoulders with hope.

"There must be a way to convince your father," he said.

"Well, he is a toadeater. If Lady Halverson approached him, he might accept my employment with her."

"Of whom do you speak?" Mrs. Eliot appeared before them.

"Oh! I was saying that if Lady Halverson begged my father to allow me to serve as

her companion, he might, in his obsequiousness, agree.”

“She would not travel to Cornwall, regardless of how she likes you. But I would be happy to deliver the message to your father.” A flash in Mrs. Eliot’s eye told Daniel the woman before him could hold her own against any stubborn father. “I can bring a letter from her ladyship, with all the superiority of her rank, and convince him that his refusal would be a slight to the peerage.”

Louisa nodded and sprang to her feet. She took Mrs. Eliot by the elbows, bouncing on her toes. “Would you? It would work! I know it would. He would melt before you.” The girl’s enthusiasm bloomed, and her face regained its color.

“Do you trust this plan well enough to end our engagement?” he asked.

“I am willing to risk almost anything,” Louisa said. “Oh, not that you are so unacceptable a companion, but we must consider Aunt Mary.”

Mrs. Eliot sent a sly smile to Daniel. It would work. It must work.

“I will go to Mary, then,” he said. “And I will inform my parents.”

Daniel made his way to the sickroom, where he found his mother reading poetry to his father, reclining on the bed, a mound of cushions behind his back.

“Miss Thorpe and I called off our engagement. You may keep your castle and leave it to Emma. I choose Lady Mary.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The novel's ending buried itself in a corner of Mary's mind and would not be coaxed into revealing itself. A day ago, she knew the entire story with defined clarity. When the hero kidnapped the heroine, she didn't recognize him. He kept his identity a secret, even from her, because he was a pirate, wanted for hanging, and he feared she would give him away. But what made him tell her in the end? And why did she forgive him?

Spotches of ink covered the page like burnt circles that threatened to devour the plot. Shut in her room for a day and a half with curtains drawn and candles blazing, she'd done everything possible to steer her mind from Daniel. Daniel and Louisa. Daniel and Almery. Daniel who loved her but not enough to forgo his castle. She, Mary, Lady Mary, was admired and maybe even loved but not enough. The stories she wrote did not reflect real life, where good husbands died and true love stayed true only when convenient. In life, the hero abandoned the heroine in favor of treasure.

Tears splashed over the ink, smearing her words into indecipherable streaks. She slammed her hand against the page and enjoyed the sharp edges of the paper knife her hand as she wadded it up and threw it to the floor, where it joined the dozens of similarly discarded pages. A slow pulse jabbed at her left temple, and her eyes ached. The story would never end. A happy ending for her fictional characters eluded her when she lived in despair. If she could not write, she had nothing.

At the basin, she rubbed soap over the ink on her hand and splashed water on her face before lying in bed. She could not fall asleep. Her life was upended. And this is what came of letting impropriety take control. At least Louisa would avoid ignominy.

Louisa. Louisa and Daniel.

If she lay in bed and did nothing, if she allowed her anguish to consume her, they would win. They being whom? Maybe Daniel? Maybe his parents? Most definitely the world that censured women if their behavior was not impeccable, that kept them from living fully, that tried to take and take with no intention to give.

A story sparked.

She pulled herself out of bed, extinguished the candles, and threw the curtains wide open. The light seared her eyes, but she pushed open the window and yelled to the passersby, "I am the author, Lady Mary!" When a few turned her way, she waved and smiled, though they edged away from her. Hair certainly askew, and wearing a dressing gown, she mustered every last bit of resolve into keeping that grin on her face. Don't let them win.

With the window open, she sat at her desk and trimmed her quill. Surely there were female pirates. Yes, Jean de Clisson and Grace O'Malley. Beginning with page one, she flipped the characters. Originally, Lord Stealton, peer of the realm, had turned out to be a pirate. In this version, Lady Hollingwood, daughter of the prime minister, became lady pirate, terror of the sea.

The room darkened. She lit candles and kept writing. Candles expired. She lit more. Her mind flashed brighter as the story progressed. She plundered and took captives. She laughed and cried. She fell in love, was loved in return. Their love saved the day.

The manuscript was a mess of crossed out words and re-writes, but calm resided in its completion. She rested the quill on top of the pages and went to bed.

Daniel knocked on Mary's door, but there was no response. Perhaps the innkeeper had not seen her leave. He tried the door, and it slid open. He would wait inside until

she returned. A soft buzz came from the bed. Mary lay on her back, her mouth open, fast asleep. A wild cloud of hair haloed her head, and her nightdress was askew. His hands ached to take hold of her, but he had never seen her so tranquil. He sat at the desk, a neat stack of paper in front of him. On top of the paper was a note, Dear Mr. Porter. Set the press! This is even better than the last! While the pages were in order, the writing on them was not. He began reading, an immediate smile tickling the corners of his mouth. She, Lady Mary, was hilarious and sweet and honest. Between the drama and utter impossibility of the story lay truth. He scratched his chest, to distract from the prickling at the edges of his eyes. Beautiful Lady Mary. How he loved her. How he hoped for her forgiveness.

He turned to look at her and met her eyes.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I hope you don’t mind. This latest manuscript—it’s a masterpiece. I suspect each new book of yours will be my favorite.”

She drew in a shaky breath but sat up in bed with regal calm, clutching the sheets to her chest. “You should be preparing for your wedding. Where is Louisa?” Her words came ever faster, and he wanted to calm her in his arms but did not know if she would accept his embrace.

“Louisa is on her way to Stroud. She did not wish to marry me, so Agnes shall take her back to Lady Halverson.”

“You and Agnes? Who are you to make decisions for my niece?”

“It was Louisa’s decision. I admit your friend is not to my liking, but I found she’s a good sort. She will go to Cornwall and convince your brother that Lady Halverson’s home is the best possible place for his daughter. Somehow, I think she is the perfect

person for the task.”

“But her reputation?—”

“No one knows save family. Savage is in Nottingham and will be sent abroad soon. All will be well.” He repeated his mother’s phrase, but it did little to calm the turmoil that had increased in his chest since she woke.

“Let us hope that is true.” She huffed and grabbed the locket around her neck, brows pinching together.

“I came because...” He walked over to her. She drew away, clutching the sheets up to her chin. “Fear not. I did not come to ravish you, though the thought has crossed my mind.”

She did not smile.

His cheer dissolved into trepidation, but he knelt next to the bed and pulled a ring from his pocket. “Lady Mary Allen, I am sorry for being an arse. Will you marry me?”

She pushed his hand with the ring into his chest. “I most certainly will not. Really! You sneak into my room in the middle of the—” she glanced out the window “—day, interrupting my repose and expect that calling yourself a rude name will convince me to forget that you made me feel less than a pile of dirt?” Her voice hitched. “I am sorry I did not tell you who I am, but it seems I judged rightly.”

“Don’t say that. I understand better now. Let me help you feel like...like a pile of gold.” He pulled a face, hoping to lighten the mood.

She snorted. “Your comparison is lacking.”

“Diamonds?”

“I know my worth. You do not need to convince me of it. But I am not a gentlewoman. I am an author who writes somewhat scandalous novels. I do not need marriage to make my life worth living.”

“Of course not. But would you like to be married? Because I would like to love and adore and cherish you.”

“This makes no sense.” She edged away from him. “I see. Louisa left, and now you need me to obtain your true love, Almery.”

“No. I love you and want to marry you.”

“Your parents agreed to this?”

“I don’t need their approval. I have money, not enough to buy a castle, but we can live comfortably. Perhaps we’ll go to Nottingham, and I’ll resume my work with Smith’s Bank. Or travel for a while.” He remembered Louisa. “What do you wish?”

She sat up. “No castle?”

“What is a castle without a queen? Now, let me put this on your finger?—”

“Daniel, no.” She inched away from him. “You will not be happy without your castle. It’s your dream, your future.”

“You are my dream.”

“I am not suitable. I write romances. I am not the gentlewoman you expect me to be.”

“You can be any sort of woman you wish. I want you the way you are, without pretense or efforts to curb your tongue or bridle your behavior.”

“How did you know?”

“What? That you hide what you think? Do you know how closely I’ve watched you? Since the moment of our first meeting, I have been unable to take my eyes off you. When you say something out of politeness, you squint and take hold of your locket.” Her soft lower lip quivered, and her gaze fell from his. “Right now, for instance, you are thinking how I should not be in your room. Probably because you’re also thinking of kissing me.”

Her eyes flew to his. “I am not!”

“No more lies between us, Lady Mary.”

She relaxed into a smile, her fingers losing their hold on the blankets, but her face tightened again. “If we marry, you will resent me. You worked your whole life for Almery.”

“As soon as you left, it became as hollow and cold as a cave.” She snorted, and it made him laugh. “I am telling the truth. But you will have to pardon my incompetence when it comes to words. This is foolish, but without you, the castle had no light, no warmth. I cannot be where you are not.”

She looked at her hands, out the window, at the writing desk. With his finger on her cheek, he turned her face to his. “To quote your hero from *A Woman Who Loves*, ‘You are my life. My soul is restless without you.’”

She leaned toward him, a slight move, but he hoped it meant something. His hand still rested on her jaw, and he slid it behind her head, his fingers tangling with her

hair. There was no need to pull her toward him. She came, meeting him halfway, and with an answering fervor. She pulled his collar toward her, and Daniel understood the word sublime.

Mary opened her eyes in the darkness of morning content, save for one thing only. Daniel's landau. The destruction of the equipage had niggled at Mary's contentment ever since she'd seen it ruined. She wanted to give him something, a token of her dedication. Restoring the carriage to him would pale in comparison to his abandonment of Almary. To obtain a carriage as a wedding present...well, the idea sent a thrill of pleasure down her spine. He belonged to her, was central to her life and she to his. A second chance at love, and she would treasure every moment with him, the good and the bad.

On the previous day, Mary saw an advertisement for a used landau in a local paper. She slipped out of the room with a prayer on her lips that the innkeeper sat at his desk. He did, and she asked the distance to Brimington.

"It's less than three miles away."

Mary released a slow breath. Not far.

"I would like to borrow a horse."

She left a note for Daniel, telling him she would return soon and not to worry. Thus, before the sun fully emerged, she sat aside Jinx, the borrowed horse, who trotted with terrific speed down the country road and had no trouble taking direction. They arrived in town and found the address written on the advertisement.

She arrived at a sprawling house with the incongruous appearance of having been under construction for generations. The butler opened the door and glowered over a long, pointed nose at Mary.

“Good morning. I have come to speak with Mr. Patterson on very urgent, important business.”

He disappeared without inviting her in, but in a few moments, a gentleman appeared.

“I am Mr. Patterson. How can I help you?”

She explained her interest in his landau.

He eyed her, not with disapproval exactly, but curiosity. Her request was unusual. Women did not involve themselves in these sorts of things.

“Come along, then.” She followed him out to the stable, where he yelled, “Horace. Here’s a lady come about the landau.”

Horace emerged, a bit of straw protruding from his grey beard. “A lady? Well, let’s get to it, then.”

Inside the carriage house, the groom presented the landau with a flourishing arm. It was very pretty, with a high sheen and tasteful embellishments in red and gold that made the otherwise unremarkable black carriage something special. The interior boasted tufted burgundy leather seats. It was beautiful, but Mary had no idea what she was looking at. Carriages had wheels, and horses pulled them. Some were ornamented, others were not. Well, this one looked fine. She would take it. Besides, it was nearing noon, and she did not wish to keep Daniel waiting.

“Let’s go into the house and take refreshment while we discuss the carriage,” said Mr. Patterson.

Thank goodness, for her stomach was growling.

After deliberating over the weather, the church spire, and Mary's lack of familiarity with the area, Mr. Patterson asked, "How is it you have come for a carriage? Pardon my impertinence, but should not your husband be here?"

"I am a widow."

Understanding softened his eyes and he seemed to shrink. He nodded. "I am sorry. My wife passed a year ago, and I feel it every moment."

They shared a long, sympathetic look.

Mr. Patterson took a shaky breath and returned to the matter at hand, saying he would be pleased to sell her his carriage.

Now they arrived at the real problem. Mary had not secured the funds, because it would require writing to her steward in Ireland. The process could take weeks.

"I have a particular desire to take the landau today. However, I have yet to send word to my man of business."

Mr. Patterson's mouth, so compassionate a moment before, reshaped into a hard line. "I am not a charity." He looked at the clock. "Come back when everything is in order."

"It is not the lack of funds, only that it will take some weeks to access them. My property is in Ireland." Mr. Patterson quirked his brow, and Mary could not tell if he was interested or incredulous. "I have something of great value to leave as security." With shaking fingers, Mary touched her locket. It was large enough to fill her hand and hung on a thick gold chain. Embellished with diamonds, seed pearls and gold trimmings, it spoke for itself. She reached around her neck, unlatched it, and removed the accessory she'd scarcely taken off since Lord Allen had placed it around her neck.

He took it from her outstretched hand, rolled it over in his own, and pushed the latch that opened the lock. Lord Allen was inside.

“Your late husband?”

Mary nodded.

“My wife.” He gestured to a portrait that sat in a place of honor between two windows.

“She was lovely.”

“I will put this somewhere safe and let you borrow a pair of horses.”

Mary melted in relief and gratitude, and clasped his hand.

Mary pulled the horses to a stop in front of the inn and searched the bustling street. A boy of about nine ambled by. “Hello, there. You, young man,” she called to him.

He approached and lifted his hat at her.

“Go inside the inn and tell Mr. Fletcher to come out right away, but do not tell him anything else.” She handed him a farthing, and he disappeared into the inn.

Mary’s heart jumped at the sight of Daniel striding out of the inn. He looked around, his eyes skipping over the landau.

“Daniel!” She waved at him.

He met her gaze and paused there, that familiar, adoring smile lifting the corner of his mouth. Those blue eyes captured her and sent her spirits soaring. Was this real?

Could she own such happiness? He approached and grabbed her ankle, then hoisted himself beside her. “When you weren’t here, I worried. I missed you.”

“Trust that I will always return for you.”

He traced her lips with his thumb, cupping her chin.

“Do not tease me like that,” she said. “Kiss me.”

“We are on display for the entire town.”

She reached for his face and pulled him to her. There was no resistance. He gave, and she received. She gave, and he received. His mouth promised a lifetime of acceptance, a shelter where she could be her honest self and expect the same.

“What is this?” He gestured at the carriage.

“Your first landau did not make it to Gretna Green, but I am determined this one will.”

Some months later...

A servant placed a cut crystal dessert bowl containing something chocolate in front of Mary, Daniel, and each of their guests. Mary slid a spoonful of it into her mouth, closing her eyes when a flood of sweet, bitter creaminess melted on her tongue. For their stay in London, they'd hired a temporary French cook, and he surprised her every day.

"What is this, sister?" Charlotte asked.

"Heaven," Mary said. "The chef calls it mousse au chocolat."

Conversation, hitherto enthusiastic, slowed as the party finished their dinner. Mary used the silence to breathe away some of her tension and to calm the swell that rose in her chest and pricked her eyes, ever too sentimental. She reached for her glass of wine, brushing Daniel's arm and catching his eye as she drew the glass to her lips. Daniel's arm circled the back of her chair, and his hand came to squeeze her shoulder.

"It's been a day," he whispered. "We can retire, you know."

She shook her head and smiled up at him. It had been the best day. Unbeknownst to her, Daniel, at the behest of Mr. Porter, had helped plan a lecture in celebration of her latest book, with Lady Mary as principal speaker. Daniel gave her just enough notice that she could cancel, an action she strongly considered. But, just as with the literary society, curiosity won. Mary found herself in a London salon with three-hundred-seventy-two people, thanks in part to Agnes, who dragged in everyone she knew.

It had been wonderful and terrifying to stand in front of all those people, to speak openly about her work, her process, her inspiration. Though she'd anticipated the event with much foreboding, it left her overflowing with love and gratitude, not least for her dear husband.

Best of all, almost everyone she loved traveled to London for the occasion. Mary's brother and sister, Stephen and Charlotte were there, along with Sophia, Philip, and Agnes, who had seen fit to bring her husband. Only Daniel's family was absent on account of the recent passing of his father.

"Mary," Agnes asked. "What do you hear from Louisa?"

"That Lady Halverson is buying her three dresses a week."

"A fortunate turn of events," Sophia, Mary's niece, said. "One could not hope for a better employer."

Sophia did not know the half of it. So far, they were safe from gossip, but should any rumors surface regarding Louisa's infamous attempt at an elopement, there would be trouble.

"I wish she were here," Mary said.

"Yes, I should have liked her to see you in your element, taking credit for your work." Daniel slid his fingers through hers, and in predictable fashion, his touch sent a flood of comfort and belonging, this time so intense that she had to look into her lap.

"You must be very tired after speaking so much today," Charlotte said.

"Yes, but the joy of your company exceeds my fatigue. Thank you all for coming, for

visiting, even when London is so far from your homes.”

Agnes licked her spoon. “You are too weary to entertain all night. We will leave you.”

Mary rose, signaling the end of dinner. Instead of men and women separating, the whole party went to the drawing room.

“Goodnight, then, Daniel, Lady Mary.” Agnes kissed Mary on the cheek and dragged her husband toward the door where they waited for the others, all of whom were staying together in the Eliots’ London house.

“The world knows your name. All is as it ought.” Charlotte hugged Mary.

Mary and Daniel bid goodbye to Philip and Sophia, making plans for them all to reunite on the morrow to enjoy the sights of London.

The door clicked shut, and Mary felt Daniel at her back, his arms curling around her. She twisted to face him.

“Oh, my love!” she said. “Do you know this day could have been very different?”

“How so?”

“If Louisa had never tried to get to Gretna Green, we may never have made it there ourselves. Mr. Porter would have persuaded me to do the lecture, surrounded me with admirers, and then I’d have enjoyed a family dinner. They all would have left me to crawl up to my room and sleep alone.” She reached for his face, resting her hands on his cheeks. “But I have you, the best and sweetest part of my life. You have no idea what your love means to me.”

“I think I do.” He bent and kissed her forehead, the tip of her nose, and then swooped her off her feet to carry her to the bed they shared.

The following morning, Daniel broke into the room and pulled open the curtains. Judging from the sharp sunlight, Mary had slept in, a well-deserved indulgence.

“Mary! Here is a letter from Emma.” “What is it, my darling?” She cleared the morning coarseness from her throat. “Read it to me.”

“I must beg you read it to me, for I scarce understand what she is saying.”

His parents had been understandably upset with the couple’s unnecessary trip to Gretna Green. The newlyweds could not explain the decision, beyond the sheer adventure of it. All came to rights after Mary and Daniel gifted them enough money to refurbish part of the castle’s ground floor for living quarters. Mary and Daniel planned to spend a fortnight at the castle, during which time many conversations began with Mrs. Fletcher saying something like, “You may never have children, but you are a most interesting daughter-in-law.” Ten days into their stay, Mr. Fletcher passed away, with amicable feelings between father and son, though he did not alter the will, and Almerly belonged to Emma and Andrew.

Mary held out her hand for the letter and read:

Dear Brother,

The vicar and I agree that this castle is wretched. We’ve already abandoned it for the grange and are meeting with the solicitor tomorrow so that by the time you receive this letter, it shall be yours as it always ought. You are the only person who could love this pile of rubble. Mother remains with us, and we could not be more pleased with the arrangement. Call on us when you return home.

With love,

Emma

“Darling, all has come to rights.” Mary sprang from the bed into Daniel’s arms. She pressed her body against his, listening to his heart thunder and the unsteady breath that came with surprise. His arms wrapped around her, thrilling her, supporting her, bringing her home. She pushed him away and took both his hands in hers. “This occasion calls for a dance.”

He agreed with a smile and bowed. She curtsied, and together, they skipped and danced until a shower of kisses led them to collapse, laughing, onto the bed.

They left London directly, returning to a vacant castle, a perfectly enchanting location for Mary to create stories, and for Daniel to realize his long fought for aspiration. They each threw themselves into their work, coming together throughout the day and at night with encouragement and laughter.

Chapter One

A dusty border encrusted the hem of Louisa Thorpe's brown linen workaday dress making each step heavier than the last, but every inch toward her destination washed away the grime that weighed upon her heart. Already on the road for an hour, Louisa and her companions must be close to Lundbrook Park where she, daughter of a squire, would beg to exchange her status for freedom. With luck, the only silk passing through Louisa's hands would belong to her new mistress.

Polly, who formerly worked at Lundbrook, led the way, kicking up a cloud of dirt that Louisa inhaled and accepted as penance. Beside her, Nellie, Louisa's lady's maid, covered her nose and mouth with a handkerchief. Despite the pain in her left heel that bit each time Louisa took a step, she pressed the pace.

"You should be more worried, Miss," Nellie said, puffing.

"I?" Louisa asked. "Lady Halverson's fortunes change the day she hires me. No one chooses an ensemble so well as I." She bit her bottom lip so Nellie would not see the fear that made her chin tremble.

"That is not your only duty. How does one remove a wine stain from cotton?"

"Easy. Soap and water."

Nellie sighed. "Be serious."

"I am. I am seriously unconcerned because you will be there to help me." Louisa

grinned, but Nellie's brow furrowed.

Polly looked over her shoulder. "You have one thing in your favor. The mistress is desperate. Lady's maids are scarce in these parts, and Lady Halverson keeps marrying them off. But I'll not recommend you if you're not to do a decent job of it."

"I will do my best. You already know my abilities." Earlier that day, Louisa fixed Polly's hair into a perfect *tête de mouton* .

Confidence in her skills was not unfounded. While Louisa's mother suffered through an illness that would take her life, Louisa dressed and cared for her. Those painful and beautiful days became the gift that allowed her to make this change. She approached a life of her own choosing and would not permit Nellie's apprehension to ruin the moment. So what if each morning she woke before the sun to scrub stains, polish boots, and mend petticoats? Anything was preferable to marriage to someone she did not love. Her course was decided upon her birth, and that plan consisted of one thing only: marriage. A prospect that had lost its appeal. The sufferings of the past months had altered her opinion of matrimony.

Oh! What she'd endured! First, her father arranged a marriage for her, though her heart beat for another man. Then, to avoid that arrangement, her aunt swept her off to Bath where she was primped, polished, outfitted, and set on display for the gentlemen who examined her like she was a new but complicated method for tying a neck cloth. Not that she did not love every new dress and hairstyle, but without the care of her mother, who would have understood her unpreparedness, it felt like she was a marionette, strung along without resolve.

In Bath, she waited in vain for the man she loved to rescue her. When he did not come, she did the only thing within her power. She eloped or attempted to. She escaped from that unfortunate incident with her virtue intact and a great deal wiser. Her stomach soured, and she pushed away thoughts of that man who deceived her.

She would never marry, and the only way to avoid marriage was to avoid her family. Hide. It almost didn't matter what she did so long as it was her own idea and no one discovered her whereabouts.

"Is that it?" she asked. Chimneys protruded above the tree line.

"It is," Polly said. "Not far now."

Louisa's spirits lifted further. Soon she would wash the grime and sweat from her face and know her options.

They approached the servant's entrance, and Polly bid Louisa and Nellie to wait outside while she ascertained if there were positions for the two of them. Nellie leaned against the stone house, head bowed, hands pressed together under her chin.

"Are you praying, Nellie?"

"For you, I am. If I am unable to secure a position here, you will surely be found out."

Louisa laughed. "If there isn't a situation for both of us, we will try the next house."

"She has no idea," Nellie whispered, her eyes toward heaven.

Polly returned with a grin. "Fortune is with us." With their hands in each of hers, she pulled them toward the door.

Before they entered the house, the thud of a horse drew Louisa's attention. A young man reigned in a dark stallion before dismounting and walking the horse toward the stable.

Oh, dear. He was handsome.

Though he did not glance her way, she marked his regular features, his straight nose, his easy, confident stride. His arms hung loose at his sides, and the horse followed him without being led. There was something familiar about him, though she never saw him before. Louisa pulled from Polly's tug, pausing to watch the man until he disappeared into the stable.

"Having second thoughts?" Nellie asked.

"Of course not."

"You are a servant now." Nellie's tone was serious. "Do not look twice at your betters. Best not even once."

Louisa took the reprimand. She fell in love far too easily and would not make that mistake again.

Louisa pulled at heavy fabric that stuck to her chest. Its release brought a wisp of cool air onto her damp skin. Lady Halverson's sarcenet dressing gown left little to the imagination, but Louisa envied its loose, airy weave. A parade of maids carried buckets of hot water up from the kitchen and poured their contents into a copper tub. The vanilla-scented steam combined with a blazing fire made an already hot day insufferable.

The interview with her ladyship, though brief, assured Louisa of her Lady Halverson's kindness. Afterward, Nellie had squealed her over their good fortune at finding a household where the servants appeared happy and the mistress benevolent.

"I am so pleased to finally have a proper lady's maid. The wig is a bore," Lady Halverson removed her hairpiece revealing a copious pile of dark hair. How could

such a mound be concealed? “Since the previous girl left, I’ve had no one to dress my hair. You may begin by washing it, and I’ll need a haircut, of course.”

Where did Lady Halverson purchase her beautifully scented soap? Which warehouse did she find the fabric of her dressing gown? Louisa pinched her lips between her teeth to prevent the inquiries from seeping out. Nellie instructed her not to speak unless spoken to and to never question her mistress. Silence would be the most difficult requirement of the position.

Lady Halverson reposed in the bath while Louisa massaged soap into the lady’s scalp, scrubbing with perfect pressure. Despite the sweat pooling at the base of her spine, everything was going well. No task exceeded her ability, save the haircut. She may as well scrub as long as possible, let her ladyship enjoy this moment and decide Louisa’s worth before scissors came into the balance. She tingled with success and continued working Lady Halverson’s hair.

“That is very nice, but I am sure it’s ready for a rinse.”

Louisa suppressed a groan, pulled soap through the tresses and began ladling rinsing water. Lady Halverson sighed, and her eyes closed. Sweet, fragrant steam rose in a steady cloud onto Louisa’s already damp face. The familiar motion, performed countless times for her mother, hit her defenses. Sharp prickles blossomed behind Louisa’s eyes and nose. She blinked, keeping the tears at bay until a wave of loneliness washed over her. Sweat and tears mingled and dripped from her chin onto her skirt, but she continued to rinse Lady Halverson’s hair, proud of her ability to weep silently.

“Some claim that bathing so frequently is ill advised,” said Lady Halverson, “but I find my head itches if I do not wash at least twice per month.”

Twice per month! That would mean repeating this ritual in a fortnight. Lady

Halverson's hair was so thick it took a full ten minutes to rinse. To style this quantity of hair would take hours.

She dabbed her face with her apron before twisting Lady Halverson's hair. Water erupted from its mass and drained down Louisa's arm, but she straightened and wrung tighter. It did not matter if it took a week to finish this woman's hair, she would do it and do it well. And the cutting could not be so difficult. She was good with hair, even cutting her own on occasion.

After brushing the profusion of hair near the fire, Louisa's gown clung to her as if she'd stood in a rainstorm. Her arms ached and she did not want to lift them from her lap. Still, she took the scissors and shortened Lady Halverson's fringe to the ideal length. It was easy enough, though the hair above her ladyship's left ear fell a little shorter than that over the right. Next, she combed pomade through the hair and powdered until they were both satisfied.

"We are nearly ready for curls. Where do you keep your curling tongs?" Louisa asked.

"I found a better way to achieve the desired look. Papillote curls. We must master the technique." It seemed Lady Halverson liked everything modish, and indeed, the gowns Louisa bought in Bath were provincial in comparison to the lady's sophisticated elegance. Lady Halverson lifted the top of her dressing table and pulled out a pair of tongs that looked like they belonged in the kitchen, the ends round and flat.

"I am not familiar with those," Louisa said, her stomach dropping.

"It is easy. I cannot do it myself, but I'm confident you can." She handed Louisa a book from her dressing table, *The Whole Art of Hairdressing*. "Study this while I fetch curling paper."

It took several minutes longer for Louisa to decipher the method for papillote curls than for Lady Halverson to get the paper, so Lady Halverson set the tongs to heat and rang for a maid to bring lunch.

A plate of cold fowl, hard cheese, bread, and fruit tempted Louisa away from the book, but no food was offered. Of course it wasn't. She was a lady's maid, not a house guest. Her stomach grumbled and her throat parched, but she tore her gaze from a shiny, red strawberry and focused on the page, using the time to rest her arms.

"Are you ready?" It seemed Lady Halverson was, and that meant Louisa must be as well.

As the manual instructed, Louisa began with the middle of Lady Halverson's head, twisting her hair until it formed a sort of knotted snake before wrapping it in paper. While she worked, she studied Lady Halverson, her broad, high cheekbones and straight nose. The man she saw on a horse resembled her in all the best ways. But the lady's incomparable kindness, not her stately beauty or serene countenance, put Louisa at ease, even in their first meeting. After that interview, Nellie exclaimed over their luck at least a thousand times.

Wrapping the curling paper took an hour, but Louisa continued without pause or complaint until her arms trembled with exhaustion. When every strand of hair was tied up, she gripped the papillote tongs and gently applied heat to a coil of hair, counting to ten in her head.

"Tell me about your previous employer," Lady Halverson said.

Louisa jumped at the question, gripping the tongs until the handle pressed sharp against her palm. She searched for an appropriate answer. Smoke curled in a malodorous vine from the hair. She withdrew the implement, and a spiral of hair fell to the ground.

“Oh, my lady! I am sorry.” Louisa picked the hair and looked around for a place to put it.

Lady Halverson gasped but said, “I shall not miss it. I have too much hair as it is.”

This generosity was too much. Louisa’s eyes burned. What could she say that would distract them from the tuft of hair sticking up from the lady’s head? The truth? That there was no previous employer, only a mother who allowed her daughter to care for her. And what of the hair? She stuffed it up her sleeve.

“It was a lady in Cornwall. She was ill.” Truth was best when possible.

“That must have been difficult. I hope she recovered.”

“She did not.” Louisa’s voice broke, and she felt Lady Halverson’s eyes upon her.

“Perhaps you require a break. I daresay you are hungry.” She looked at the clock.

“Dear me, you have missed your dinner. Run down to the kitchen and find something to eat.”

Louisa fled the room without hesitation. In the kitchen, she scanned the room for a rubbish bin, and finding one near the back door, pulled the itching strand of hair from her sleeve and disposed of it.

“You must be the new lady’s maid.” The cook kneaded bread and a leg of lamb crackled over the spit. “By the looks of it, you’re off to a splendid start.” She chuckled and turned her attention to the ball of dough beneath her hands.

“Is there anything to eat?”

“You’ll have nothing here,” the cook said. “If you missed your dinner, you’ll have to

wait for supper.”

“But I will starve.” She felt weak.

“No one dies from skipping a meal.”

“Please?”

The cook wiped her brow and frowned. “There is a crust of bread on the sideboard there, but mind you take nothing else. You don’t know as I’ll need it.”

Louisa returned to her mistress with a growling stomach but ready to perform her duties. She finished curling without a mishap, but when the hair unraveled from the paper, some pieces were straight while others tightly crimped.

“For your first time, it is... acceptable.” Lady Halverson’s mouth tightened.

“I would do better with hair tongs.”

“No, no. We will learn the French way or lose it all trying.” She laughed and fingered the spike of burnt hair, but Louisa could not join her.

Sculpting the tête de mouton remained, made difficult by the bald spot. With her finger covered in pomade, she pressed the stray hair down, but when she withdrew her hand, it stuck straight out of Lady Halverson’s head. She pinned the curls over it the best she could and began the braids with trembling, weakened arms. She pulled one strand too tight, another too loose. Lacking the strength to try again, she pinned the braids in place and attached a handkerchief to the top of Lady Halverson’s head, hoping it would cover the disaster.

Lady Halverson frowned into the mirror, touching the singed hair. The coiffure

looked as though a child arranged it. Between curls, tufts of singed hair poked out like an old paint brush. Louisa pulled out the pomade and tried again, but they would not be tamed. Louisa held her breath, waiting for a rebuke. Why was it so much harder today? Where could she go if she were dismissed? Back to the inn? Might she obtain work as a scullery maid?

“I must get dressed and see my son. Fetch the yellow gown from its hook. Everything is bundled together. Yes. That’s the one.”

Louisa lay the profusion of fabrics on the bed and began dressing her ladyship. This she could do, though the gown’s edge was thick with lace and beading, heavier than anything Louisa had placed on her mother. She fought to keep her hands steady as she pinned Lady Halverson’s gown to the stomacher. Hunger, nerves, and disappointment cut through her. She wanted to run.

“Ouch!”

Louisa pulled the pin out of Lady Halverson’s stomach and continued pinning. “I beg your pardon, my lady.” Louisa’s mother had a very different shape than Lady Halverson and it was difficult to know where the fabric stopped and Lady Halverson began.

“Ah! I will finish.” Lady Halverson took the pins. When she finished, she turned to Louisa. “Sit down.” She pointed to a chair by the fire.

A veil of exhaustion fell over Louisa. Her legs would not move, but her hand found the back of the chair, and she seized it lest she faint. “I will do better. I can learn. It will only?—”

“Hush. Who are you? Clearly not a lady’s maid.”

Chapter Two

James Halverson read and reread the letters he'd received from Lord Tilney concerning the many road and waterway improvements coming for a vote that season. He arranged them according to topic and filed them away with annotated newspaper clippings. This marked his first year as Lord Halverson, and he would make his late father proud.

The clock chimed, reminding him he was meant to meet his mother for tea. In the drawing room, he settled himself on a settee and opened Cicero's *De Republica*. Fifteen minutes later, his mother had not yet appeared. He went to the desk and began composing ideas for his first parliamentary speech.

"Darling, it has been an age." His mother kissed his cheek as she swept into the room, and he caught a whiff of soap and burnt feathers. The clock struck four. She was a full hour late. "I apologize for my delay, but it is quite an effort to tame this hair of mine, and at least I am not wearing that odious wig."

From between her curls protruded a short, straight tuft of heavily powdered hair.

She waved at it. "It'll grow soon enough."

Stepping away from him, she revealed that her gown was askew. The robe secured to the stomacher so that one side hung longer than the other and it gaped at her shoulder. She smiled, gesturing behind her where a young lady stood, hands clasped, stare pinned to the floor.

“This is Miss Louisa Thorpe. She is to serve as my companion.”

The young lady blinked up at him once, seeming to shrink under his scrutiny, before refocusing on his shoes. She curtsied and muttered a greeting, her shoulders drooping and her arms limp. It was not the polished curtsy of a London belle, her clothes and manners revealing an unsophisticated rustic, probably the daughter of a low country gentleman. Another of his mother’s projects.

“Louisa. Do you play?” his mother asked the girl.

Miss Thorpe nodded as if speech were an impossibility and shuffled to the piano forte. She must only be sixteen or seventeen. What could his mother be thinking, taking in this child? Mother was far too tender-hearted and would someday be taken advantage of.

While Miss Thorpe played, if her faltering could be called playing, his mother took him by the wrist and led him to a pair of chairs across the room.

“I want you to befriend Miss Thorpe,” she said.

“Where did you find her?”

“She applied to be a lady’s maid, but I found her out.” She gestured to her hair.

“I hope she makes a better companion.”

“As do I. She has no mother, poor darling. She told me the most pathetic story. I may do her good.”

“I am sure she did, but she is your companion. I am far too busy to attend to her.”

“Tosh. I only want you to take her where you are already going. A walk in the

garden. She can ride Daisy when you take out that beast of yours. I want her to feel like she is a member of our family. She's melancholy, poor dear, and needs a distraction. And she is very charming."

They both looked at Miss Thorpe as if to test the assertion. His mother shook her head, whether at the amateur playing or the girl's morose expression, Halverson did not know.

"At least I believe she will be an amiable companion once she is not so devastated by the loss of her mother. Her father tried to arrange her marriage. Very distasteful." His mother shuttered, drawing attention to the feather-like wisps of hair sticking from her head.

"Be on your guard, Mama. You do not want to meddle in their family affairs."

"I think she was sent here by providence. She needs us."

"It is a risk bringing a person into the house that you know nothing about."

"Time will tell, but I have a very good feeling about her." She turned her attention to the girl who resembled a lost kitten. "Louisa, come have your tea."

The playing stopped mid-song and Miss Thorpe ambled over and collapsed in a chair. Like a starved street urchin, she filled her plate, ate, and filled it again. In horrified awe, he watched as she sucked preserves off her finger but missed a red smudge on her cheek.

"You are from Cornwall, my dear? Daughter of a squire?" Lady Halverson asked.

"Yes." Miss Thorpe answered before she swallowed her food.

"What is it like?"

“Small. With ocean.” Her tongue darted out, seeking the jam on the side of her mouth.

James looked at his mother, who leaned toward him. “We have work to do, my son.”

His mother would polish this girl until she shone in priceless perfection. But he had more important things to do.

Hours later, his mother entered his study and seated herself across from his desk. “Miss Thorpe has just wakened from a nap and is in need of air.”

“Really, Mother. Who is the companion here? Isn’t she to see after your needs?”

“Take her riding. You’ve been in this gloomy study all day and need the exercise, else your heart will weaken, and you will die as your father did.”

He lifted his pen, and a drop of ink marred his notes. With care, he folded a piece of blotting paper and soaked the stain.

“I do apologize for distracting you into making a mess of your notes.” His mother’s apology edged with sarcasm. She probably wanted to dump ink all over his tidy papers.

“I have already taken Goliath out today.” His mother’s rescue held no interest for him. Miss Thorpe was but another stray, the likes of which Mother affectionately collected. The servants’ quarters were full of village children who’d lost one or both parents or were otherwise in dire circumstances and now worked at Lundbrook. But this girl was a gentlewoman.

“So serious. You need recreation.” She stood and began breezing around the room, opening the curtains and fluffing pillows. “Since your father died, you behave as if you’re mid-life instead of at the beginning. Go outside with Miss Thorpe. Both of you

need the company of young people.”

The list in front of him had no order and led him no closer to finishing his speech. Ideas swirled and jumbled in his mind without cohesion. Perhaps a break was in order. His father would not approve of his staying indoors all day. If Miss Thorpe was as quiet as she was at tea, he could think over Lord Tilney’s letters and hopefully land on an idea for his debut address in the House of Lords.

“Very well. Tell her I will meet her in the stables.”

Fifteen minutes later he inhaled the comforting aroma of hay, leather, and horses, reminding him of the hours he’d spent with his father, who’d been an exceptional horseman. The late Lord Halverson’s tack hung against the wall as it always had. Halverson pulled it down and carried it toward Goliath in a fitting symbol of his taking his father’s seat.

“I can do that, my lord.” The groom tried to take the saddle from Halverson.

“Let me. You prepare Daisy. My mother’s companion is joining me.”

Daisy was an old nag and would not keep pace with Goliath, but Halverson felt no compunction to remain with the young lady, who just then entered the stable. She curtsied and greeted Halverson wearing an ill-fitting habit, but she seemed refreshed.

“It’s your mother’s.”

“I see. Jones,” he called out to the groom, “Miss Thorpe is ready to mount.”

Miss Thorpe’s eyes widened when Daisy was brought out. “She is tall.”

She was barely large enough to be called a horse.

When the groom handed Miss Thorpe into the saddle, she blanched and clung to Daisy's mane, the riding crop across her lap. Daisy skittered from side to side, and Miss Thorpe's fingers dug deeper into the hair.

"She doesn't like your hands on her. Here, take the reins." The girl had no idea what she was about. Mother tricked him, and he didn't have the patience for it. "You do ride?"

"Yes." She glanced at her skirt. "But I fell." Her voice was determined though her hands balled around the reins. There was something endearingly fragile about her. He could see why his mother had taken to her.

With an inward sigh that bid farewell to his plan of taking Goliath for a brisk ride, he said, "I will lead Daisy around the yard. She'll move no faster than I walk." A few circles around the green and he would be back in his study in a quarter of an hour.

Miss Thorpe nodded, a spark of gratitude entering her terrified eyes. He took the bridle.

"How long ago was this fall?"

"Oh, years and years. I was perhaps eight?"

"I see."

"Your mother says it is a necessary skill, but it has never been before. When one has a carriage—" She gazed into the distance, her jaw tightening beneath soft pink cheeks. Blonde curls rested against the nape of her neck.

"I am weary of being afraid." She whispered so quietly that he understood only because he was staring at her lips. He looked away, and when his eyes found her again, she seemed different. Older and more capable, though her eyes were too wide,

her mouth too straight, her body so tight that any release might cause her to fall apart. He was projecting his own feelings onto her, but her posture and expression echoed into the darkness of his own insecurity.

“Pick up the reins and the crop. Now, you must use your heel and the crop to urge the horse. Relax your grip.”

“Don’t let go.”

He wouldn’t until she was ready. “You are doing fine. Keep your shoulders back. Just so.” He told her how to guide the horse and within ten minutes, she relaxed enough to ride unassisted. “I shall let go now.”

She nodded and moved away at a snail’s pace.

He shouted across the yard. “The horse can sense your unease. Keep your...er...limbs tight on the pommel. Very good.” She leaned a little to the right and he put his hands in the air as if to straighten her, his pulse hitching. “Hold yourself straight.”

“Not so easy when my legs are all to one side.”

Legs? Limbs? The improper conversation seemed to distress Miss Thorpe not at all.

He continued shouting instructions as she took a wide circle around him. She pulled Daisy to a stop in front of him.

“Well done, Miss Thorpe.” He approached to help her onto the mounting block.

“Oh! I am not finished. Will you tell me how to move into a trot?” She smiled, but it wavered. Was she trying to prove something?

“I am not sure you are ready, but in theory, urge the horse on with your heel and the crop while loosening the reins. Remember to grip the pommel and hold your spine in line with her mane. Once she speeds up, keep your body in rhythm with the horse’s gait. If it begins to feel as if...”

She was smiling down at him, biting her full lower lip.

“You are mocking me.”

She widened her eyes. “Never! Your instruction is superb.” With a swift thrust of her heel, Daisy advanced into a trot.

“Wait! No, no... Do not lean...” But she was already gone, her laughter echoing like a faerie spell, both irresistible and dangerous. If she fell, he would be responsible. “Pull up!” Miss Thorpe’s crop came down on Daisy’s side with an enthusiasm that would have sent any other horse into a canter. Thank goodness Daisy’s age prevented that disaster. Miss Thorpe waivered to one side then overcorrected to the other. “Tighten your middle!” he shouted, knowing she could not hear. He held his breath until she came to a halt in front of him.

Too relieved to scold her, he helped her down. She hopped from the mounting block and skipped in a little circle. “I didn’t think I could ride again, but I did it.”

“You rode very well.”

“Yes, the irony. I am more capable with a horse than your mother’s hair.”

Surprised, he laughed, and she joined him. Her laughter was loud and unguarded, making him feel he did not have to hold back. Her manners left something to be desired, but he was grateful for her authenticity.

“I have never been so humiliated. Well, almost never.” She became serious.

“I’m sorry to hear you’ve had it worse.” He smiled, hoping she would laugh again, but her face became drawn.

“I must apologize for my behavior,” she said, looking directly into his face for the first time, blue eyes piercing his.

“No need, but if you kick another horse as hard as you kicked Daisy, it will bolt. Next time?—”

“Oh, I don’t mean that. I mean earlier, in the drawing room. It’s just, I was so tired and nearly starved from—well, never mind. But you must think me very ill-mannered.”

“Not at all.” Kindness prevented honesty, but her awkward confession did nothing to change his opinion of her conduct.

“I should find your mother,” she said.

“Of course. Same time tomorrow?” Why did he ask her that? He did not wish to ride with her.

“Thank you. I should like that.”