



The Heir (Rags to Richmonds #4)

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Category: Historical

Description: VISCOUNT OAKLEY, THE HANDSOME AND WEALTHY HEIR to the Tipton earldom should have no trouble whatsoever wooing women. After all, there is nothing a society lady likes more than someone of good fortune and family, who will also make them a countess one day, or at least that is how it seems for other young noblemen. And yet, dance after dance, flirtation after flirtation, he is always left standing alone. Somehow, in some way, he always manages to lose his heart to the wrong lady.

THE DISCOVERY OF THREE YOUNGER SISTERS put aside his nuptial worries for some time, intent as he was on seeing them situated in happy marriages. Alas, with that accomplished, all eyes are once again on him, all the family urging him to marry a suitable young woman and begin a family with her. Each of his sisters think they have just the lady for him and so begins a seemingly endless round of parties, each of them designed to present some matrimonial hopeful to his notice.

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PROLOGUE

Stratton Street, London

May 1818

The London streets, though far from busy, were nevertheless not quiet. It was the hour when the ton began to return home, most of them longing for their beds after an evening of revelry.

Not so for James Richmond, Viscount Oakley, and his friend the Earl of Worthe. On Worthe's part, there was important business at hand, most notably delivering a short missive to his beloved Scarlett; on Oakley's part, there was the wish to see a different lady, Scarlett's dearest friend, Miss Bess Leighton.

It had been Bess—and her mother, Lady Leighton—who had aided in the discovery of Oakley's sister Scarlett. They had brought her to town and to Lord and Lady Tipton's home where the association was immediately recognised, on account of Scarlett being the identical twin to Adelaide, Oakley's second sister. Oakley was mightily grateful to them for it but had also found another source of pleasure in the association, that being Bess herself.

Within all the tumult of the family reuniting, he had hardly been able to court Bess properly, but the small snatches of conversation, the private smiles, and the flirty glances they had shared were enough for him to fall in love with her. She was everything good and sweet and charming, and she fit him like his glove fit his hand. He had been teased, often, for his tendency to be in and out of love, beginning at

approximately age nine, but this was very different. His feelings for Bess made him understand that the attachments he had felt before were mere schoolboy infatuations.

The night had not been a good one. Lady Leighton had given a small dinner party, and into that happy occasion, Scarlett's adoptive father had intruded. Reverend Margrave was clearly not pleased by the Richmond family, did not like Worthe—who was quite in love with Scarlett—and by way of threats and lies would remove Scarlett from town and take her back to his home in Stanbridge early the next morning. Or, Oakley supposed, given the hour, this day.

Thus was Worthe returning to Stratton Street to give a footman a note to slip to Scarlett, a note meant to assure her of his devotion and promise her that they would see her freed from her present difficulties.

And Oakley was merely hoping for a glimpse of his own beloved. He peered out of the window as the carriage arrived. Number seven appeared dark; presumably everyone within had gone to their beds. "Looks pretty quiet, Worthe."

"I just need an agreeable footman. I did not expect to see Scarlett herself, although I would not object if I did." He offered Oakley a grin, then moved towards the carriage door. "I shall only be a moment."

"I am getting out as well; I must stretch my legs." Oakley followed him out of the carriage and watched as Worthe disappeared around the building to the servants' entrance. He stood by the carriage, peering up at the windows and wondering which one belonged to Bess. Should he toss a pebble and see whether anyone awoke? What if he woke Bess's father instead? Or her brother? Leighton seemed to be an easy-natured fellow, but not if pulled from his bed at such an hour, surely!

Moments later, Oakley heard the front door open. He looked up to see Bess, peering outside with a lamp in hand. His heart leapt and he stared, scarcely able to believe his

good fortune.

As soon as she saw him, she hastened towards the carriage, pausing only to carefully set her lamp down by the door. “What are you doing here?” she asked with a whispery giggle once she had reached him. “It must be one in the morning!”

“At some point, one stops checking the time because ’tis too painful to know,” he said with a little laugh. “Why are you awake?”

“Oh, I am just so worried for dear Scarlett.” She shook her head, frowning prettily in the moonlight. “I could not have imagined the reverend would behave as he did tonight!”

“I do not know the man, but he seemed rather...well, mad.”

“Stark, raving mad. But does your family believe him?” Bess enquired anxiously.

Oakley was shaking his head firmly even before the words were out. “No. Pray do not be afraid on Scarlett’s behalf. We will find a way to discredit his lies, depend upon it.”

Unthinkingly—because imagining she did it on purpose was too good to be hoped for—Bess grabbed his gloved hands, bringing them to her lips and pressing a kiss on them. “Thank heavens!” she exclaimed as she dropped them. “Scarlett deserves all that is best and brightest in this world.”

A little dazed by her actions, Oakley did not immediately respond.

“Forgive me,” she said, dropping her eyes. “It has been an emotional evening.”

“There is nothing to forgive, I promise you,” he said warmly.

“No, I was too bold. Too brazen... It is not my custom to behave so.”

“Do not trouble yourself.”

“Truly, I am sorry.” Her gaze, warm and sincere, met his.

She looked so apologetic; he could not help himself. He grabbed her hands and brought them to his lips. Unlike him, she was not wearing gloves, and the delicate scent of her rosewater soap tickled his nose as he pressed a kiss to her hands, as she had done to his. He lowered their clasped hands but did not release them.

“There,” he said, his voice husky. “Now we are even.”

“We are,” she said, and though it was hard to discern in the moonlight, he thought he detected a blush.

They stood, doing nothing more than gazing into one another’s eyes for moments that stretched out, too short and yet too long. It was the shifting of the horses near them that brought him back to reality and reminded him they were not alone; Worthe’s coachman was also present, albeit blessedly silent.

“Come inside for a bit,” Bess urged him.

“Inside the house?”

She nodded. “We could sit somewhere and...and talk. Perhaps I could tell you more about Scarlett, things that might help you?”

It was a very thin excuse, wholly improper, and he accepted with alacrity. “Give me a moment to get rid of Worthe.”

“I shall await you in the drawing room.” With another little giggle, she nearly skipped inside.

He was explaining his plans to the coachman when Worthe reappeared, smiling broadly. “Success! I had to pull poor John, or James, or whatever the lad’s name was from his bed, but the coins I gave him made up for that I hope!”

“I am sure they did,” Oakley said with a smile. “I shall bid you goodnight, then.”

“Goodnight? What do you mean?”

“You may go on without me. I intend to remain here awhile.”

Peering at him suspiciously, Worthe enquired, “What do you mean, you will remain here? On the street?”

Oakley gave him a look. “No, not on the street. Do not concern yourself with it, just be on your way.”

“We have come in mine.” Worthe pointed towards his carriage. “How will you get back?”

Oakley shrugged and grinned. “I shall think of something.”

Crossing his arms over his chest, Worthe stared at him disbelievingly.

“I shall conduct myself as a gentleman,” Oakley promised him.

“I really do not think I ought to?—”

Oakley stepped towards the carriage, opened the door, and pulled out the step. “Fare

thee well, Worthe. Would you like me to hand you in?"

"I can manage, thank you." Worthe took a step towards his carriage but paused to give Oakley a stern look. "Pray do nothing to make any of this more difficult than it already is."

"Of course not." With a little salute, Oakley turned and went to the front door, opening it quietly and slipping inside. He heard the horses begin to move as he quietly closed it behind him.

He found Bess seated in the drawing room on a couch by the window. Her lamp had been placed on the table beside her and burned low. That door, too, was closed very quietly, and he went to her on silent feet, taking great care to step lightly. "I had trouble getting rid of Worthe."

"But at last you prevailed," she said in a low voice as he took a seat beside her. Her smile faded and a worried look creased her forehead. "Have I scandalised you?"

"Dreadfully," he said agreeably.

"What must you think of me?"

He reached over and brushed away a curl that dared caress her cheek. "I think you are perfect in every way."

"Far from perfect," she said with a shy smile. "Reverend Margrave calls me 'that flibbertigibbet' and says I talk too much, think too little, and spend too many hours devoted to my own enjoyments."

"I would consider any censure from that man the highest commendation," Oakley replied warmly. "I cannot think of any person whose ideas are more opposite from

my own. And in any case why should a young lady free of the responsibilities of family and home be serious? I want to enjoy my youth as much as I can.”

“I could not agree more.”

There was a very short silence between them—and then they talked...and talked and talked. They spoke on anything and everything, the serious and laughable alongside the mundane nothings of upper-class life. He had never before known a lady so easy to speak to. There was always another subject to be canvassed, always more to say or consider or laugh over.

Oakley could not believe it when dawn’s pearly light began to seep into the room. “I must go,” he said regretfully. “If I were caught here?—”

“You would be stuck with me,” she said lightly. “My father is liberal in many ways but not this one.”

“That would hardly be a punishment.”

His pulse roaring, he dared to lean over, slowly, giving her every chance to stop him. He kissed her thrice— one on her smooth cheek, one near her mouth, and finally one on the soft, silken petals of her lips. “Bess...you must know how I feel.”

“No,” she said in a voice barely audible. “But I know my own heart.”

“I love you,” he said, the utterance sending a jolt of fear and delight through him.

“I love you too,” she said, her eyes shining in the brief moment before he leant in to kiss her again. “I wish you did not have to go,” she said when he pulled away.

“It is killing me that I must,” he murmured, still savouring the sweet taste of her on

his lips. "Particularly as we will likely be away from town for a week or more, dealing with this matter for Scarlett."

"Scarlett! Oh, but I must go to her and explain how you have it all in hand."

"Most of it thus far is Worthe's doing. He will not hear of anyone doing anything that he is not included in. 'Tis for the best—a man likes to be a hero to the woman he loves." Heart still pounding, he added, "Just as I should like to be your hero."

"My hero?" Bess smiled, colour rising in her cheeks. "Shall I thrust myself into a crisis that you may rescue me from?"

He chuckled.

"It will be an excessively long week," she added softly. "I am impatient with it already."

"When I get back, I mean to propose to you." He grinned and stole just one more kiss. "So if you intend to refuse me, you have a week or so to conjure up a reasonable explanation for it."

She laughed, and his heart soared. "I can see no other future than life with you," he added.

"Nor I, you," she promised.

There was, suddenly, the sound of a door closing on the floor above them. Bess and Oakley both jumped as the sound of footsteps above their heads indicated that someone was walking about up there. "The servants?"

"Worse." Bess's eyes were wide. "The reverend is awake. His room is just above us."

Oakley glanced at the nearest mantel clock. "He does mean to be off early."

"You ought to go," Bess murmured. "It could make things worse for Scarlett if we were caught here together. Come, I shall show you the back way so that we can avoid meeting him."

On tiptoes they fled the drawing room, moving slowly down the hall. At one heart-stopping moment, it sounded as if the reverend meant to descend the stairs but then turned away and went back into his guest apartment. At last they managed to get to the back stair, from which Oakley could get outdoors unseen and Bess could, with good fortune, return to her bedchamber.

"May I kiss you just once more?" he asked before he went.

With a little smile, she nodded. He gave one lingering kiss to her lips and departed, thinking that nothing he had ever done before felt as wrong as leaving her.

CHAPTER ONE

Worthe House, London

April 1820

Oakley gazed around the dinner table, taking in the charming domestic scene with no little satisfaction. His sister, Lady Scarlett Worthe, presided over her London table beautifully; she had decorated the middle with a profusion of spring flowers, cherry blossoms and peonies and some white flower Oakley swore he had never seen before, all surrounding the gleaming silver candelabra which marched proudly down the middle. Scarlett's husband, Lord Worthe, smiled at her from his seat at the other end of the table.

Oakley allowed his gaze to roam, taking in Lord and Lady Tipton, Adelaide—now Lady Kemerton—and her husband Lord Kemerton, his baby sister Frederica, or rather Duchess, and her husband, the Duke of Penrith.

And then him. The numbers were matched save for his place. He threw the numbers as he always did. At least, he thought gloomily, Scarlett does not put an empty chair beside me. His other sister Adelaide always did, and then made a great show of having the footman take it away. "I thought you might invite someone," she invariably protested when he mentioned it to her.

Scarlett rose from her seat, wine glass in one hand and her fork in another as she tapped gently to get everyone's attention. "I thought we might forgo the separation this evening," she said with her customary sweet firmness. "Let us all continue to

enjoy our time together in the drawing room.”

With that she moved away from her chair, Frederica and then Lady Tipton and Adelaide trailing behind her, then the men behind them. As the lowest-ranking male, it meant that Oakley entered the drawing room last, finding his three sisters already settling together onto a small sofa, opposite which was one chair. “Sit there,” Adelaide instructed him, with an indelicate point of her finger.

“There? Mother, perhaps you would...” He turned towards Lady Tipton who smiled and shook her head, then took a seat nearer to the fire, beside her husband. The other men also seemed to scuttle into some preordained arrangement.

Leaving him the chair.

He walked towards it suspiciously, sensing that something was afoot, something everyone else knew about save for him. They all looked up at him expectantly, gentle smiles urging him into place. “What is this about?” he asked suspiciously as he sank into the chair. It was a nice, plush wingback; clearly they wanted him to get comfortable.

“Can we not wish to speak to our brother?” Frederica asked innocently.

“Yes,” he said, drawing the word out. “But what do you wish to speak of?”

“Let us get drinks first,” Scarlett said just as her housekeeper and a maid entered bearing the trays with tea and coffee. There was a short silence while everyone was served; Scarlett poured Oakley’s for him, adding a great deal of cream and sugar, just as he liked it. As she handed it to him, he cast his eyes longingly towards the fire where Worthe and the duke were laughing in reply to some tale Kem was telling; Oakley strongly suspected he might rather be among them instead of being spoken to by his sisters like a schoolboy called up by the headmaster!

“How busy the next week is!” Adelaide exclaimed as she took a sip of her tea. “I declare I have received five times as many invitations as I had even last week!”

“As have I,” Frederica reported. “So many invitations!”

“I daresay that anyone who plans to be here for the Season is here now, and I wholly expect the next weeks to be a whirlwind.” Scarlett also took a sip of her tea, her eyes on Oakley above the rim of her cup. “A whirlwind of amusements.”

Oakley looked at the trio, all of whom returned looks of practised innocence. “Yes-s-s,” he said again. “The Season is diverting, but I am not so silly as to imagine that we are having this conference to discuss how much diversion we might anticipate.”

“Oakley, it is time for you to marry,” Lord Tipton boomed abruptly from across the room. “We have shilly-shallied long enough now. Find a woman, marry her, and get started on the next generation!”

His outburst was greeted by despairing looks from his nieces, a not-so-subtle nudge to the ribs from his wife, and repressed guffaws from the other men in the room. Oakley twisted in his seat to look at him. “Sir, forgive me, but my sisters and their husbands have led you to believe it is such an easy matter!”

“It is an easy matter when one does not go scampering about London, seeming to purposely seek out the unsuitable—what?” The last was directed at Lady Tipton, who had more forcefully intervened in the scene, interrupting her husband with whispers in his ear. When his lordship spoke again, he was far less gruff.

“This business of the past years...Damian, the title?—”

“The emergence of an untold quantity of sisters from various cellars and corners of England,” Adelaide added, making them all laugh.

Lady Tipton chuckled. “Happy gossip along with the not-so-happy. In any case, the family has provided ample diversion for the ton , to be sure.”

Lord Tipton rose from his chair. Oakley—and he suspected his sisters as well—watched with fondness at the ease with which he stood. Lord Tipton suffered from rheumatism, and wintry months were more difficult with each passing year. Every winter they all worried it would never abate, and every spring they were relieved to see it did, at least partly. He had one hand on the walking stick he always kept with him now, but leant on it less heavily than he had in recent weeks as he paced towards the mantel.

“What I mean to say is that new scandals, old scandals, all of it has—may I say tarnished?—the family reputation. People do not know whether we are coming or going these days.”

“The ton will move on to the next thing soon, I am sure,” Oakley replied uneasily.

“I still hear so much nonsense,” Lady Tipton exclaimed. “Tales of Damian’s bastard children, hidden fortunes... Why, Lady Abernathy told me that she heard Damian had planned a scheme to have Oakley killed!”

“To be fair, he might have done,” Oakley said cheerfully. “Only it failed because here am I!”

Lady Tipton cried out as if a murderer had just burst into the room, then raised her fan and began to waft herself vigorously. Ever the caretaker, Frederica rose and went to her.

Kem spoke then, and Oakley had to crane his neck a little to see him. “What his lordship means to say, Oakley, is that we should very much like to become uninteresting for a while.”

“Hear, hear,” Oakley said, raising his coffee cup. “To the courting of tediousness!” No one laughed and Oakley lowered his cup. “Well then. How does one go about pursuing dullness?”

“There is one more subject that raises a great deal of tattle among the matrons,” Lady Tipton said. “And that is your marriage.”

“My marriage? Not much to say in that quarter, is there?” Oakley forced a heartier chuckle than he felt. A niggling suspicion had begun to form, and he was wary of it. To get ahead of any demands, he added, “Happily, I am only five-and-twenty, so I have plenty of time.”

Lord Tipton began to shake his head at the word ‘only’. “Our surest hope to take the eyes of the gossips off you—and by extension the family—is for you to settle down. There is nothing to say about a man who has done what men must do: take wives, beget heirs.”

“A titled man who is not married will always be of interest to everyone,” Penrith added quietly. “You simply cannot imagine the things that go on. I had only just begun to take calls of condolence for my first wife’s death when a young lady attempted to put me in a compromising position and make demands upon my honour.”

A gasp went around the room with Adelaide adding, “Hussy!” while Scarlett enquired, “How did she do that?”

“You must marry, Oakley,” Lord Tipton said firmly, overriding the twins’ comments. “There is nothing else for it. Yes, you are a bit young, but I should like to dandle the future earl on my knee before I die, and you never know when the daughters will come first.” He looked fondly but pointedly at Adelaide, whose daughter Susanna had graced Avonwyke’s nursery the previous autumn.

“So now I need to not only marry but begin at once to produce children?” Oakley cried out with mock dismay. In truth, he loved children. He was already enjoying his role as uncle to Penrith’s children and eagerly anticipated the day he could scamper about with little Susanna—at present, he was always terrified that he would squash or break her.

“That is the natural order of things,” Kem added.

“And an agreeable occupation it is.” Worthe came behind Scarlett, bent forwards, and placed a kiss on her cheek. “But one must not presume to imagine the begetting of a child is any easier than finding a wife.”

Scarlett flushed and looked down at her lap as almost every pair of eyes in the room sought her immediately. She and Worthe would be married two years come autumn, and Oakley in particular had forborne to ask for news in that quarter.

Wishing to move the attention away from her, Oakley observed amiably, “Finding possible wives has never been my difficulty.”

“It is not merely finding one,” Lord Tipton warned, and Oakley was relieved to see his little gambit had worked. “It is finding an excellent match, one that will show the ton that the Richmond line is as well regarded as ever it was.”

“No actresses, then?” Oakley asked innocently.

Lord Tipton gave him a severe frown, but it was Adelaide who leapt into the discussion.

“In fact,” she said, with a glance at her sisters, “we intend to help you find someone.”

“I thank you, but no,” Oakley said firmly. “I do not need my younger sisters playing

matchmaker for me.”

“Matchmaker! We would never dream of doing anything of the sort,” Scarlett assured him. “Never!”

Adelaide added, “We only mean to make some introductions.”

“Introductions? To whom? When?”

“As it stands,” Scarlett said, “we each have a particular lady we believe would do very well as Lady Oakley.”

“We are not disinterested parties,” Adelaide added. “She will be our sister, a fourth Richmond lady.”

Frederica nodded vigorously. “And just as you came in search of me, so too shall we aid in the search for her. ’Tis a family affair!”

“Absolutely,” Adelaide said.

“Absolutely not,” Oakley cried out. This entire scheme had taken a turn not to his liking. “Sisters, much as I love you all dearly, I must remind you that it is a brother’s duty to see his sisters settled. It is not, however, a sister’s duty to return the favour!”

“On that point, I fear we must disagree,” Adelaide said smoothly while the other two nodded beside her. “Indeed on both points! Not only do we feel it our duty, we do, in fact, think you need it. Need I remind you of Mrs Marshall?”

Oakley rolled his eyes. “How was I to know that her dead husband was not, in fact, dead?”

“Lady Elizabeth Fairchild?” Scarlett mentioned with a wry tilt of her head.

Oakley huffed angrily. “Or so I believed, yes. Ha, ha, ‘that gudgeon Oakley made love to Lady Elizabeth’s maid who was pretending to be her’. Very droll.”

Worthe, still standing behind Scarlett, grinned as he added, “Miss Huntington.”

“That was not my fault,” Oakley protested. “She was?—”

“A greedy social climber,” Adelaide announced. “Everyone knew it.”

“Everyone but me,” Oakley replied, his pique having disappeared into gloom. It had been the laugh of society it seemed, him making a cake of himself for a lady whose only object was a title, any title, and she did not care what manner of a man was attached to it. Miss Huntington’s family were newly raised from trade, and they were all eager to leave their working-man’s past behind them.

The truth was that when he had courted Miss Huntington, he had done so while nursing a broken heart. Miss Bess Leighton—or Mrs Beamish as she was now called—was Scarlett’s dear childhood friend and was, in Oakley’s mind, the most perfect woman ever to live. Everyone was forever accusing him of falling in and out of love too easily, but with Bess it was different. Vastly different, and the evidence of that was the fact that even now, nearly two years on from the day he met her, he still burned for her as much as he ever had.

Despite the fact that she had gone and married someone else.

With Bess still in his mind, he knew he had wanted to love Miss Huntington more than he actually had. Nevertheless, he courted her with alacrity. He had been on the verge of offering for her, had been making his plans as Lord Tipton’s grandmother’s ring was reverently removed from the vault and sent to the jewellers for cleaning and

the addition of two exquisite pearls. Then the scandal over his title had erupted and the lady had turned tail. Within days she had accepted the hand of a different viscount.

Perhaps I do need help. Oakley again beheld his sisters, each of whom wore her domestic tranquillity like a mantle. Even while he looked, Frederica cast a look at Penrith that seemed to say, ‘ Just a moment more with my mulish brother, darling, and I shall be in your more pleasing company ’.

Would it have been like that with Bess? Would they be here, amongst his family, contented and peaceful, their love for one another proclaimed with every gesture and smile?

Never mind that , he scolded himself. She is married now, and happily so. She might even have a child on the way, or will soon.

“Very well, then,” Oakley conceded. “An introduction or two to appropriate young ladies would not go amiss. But one matchmaker will do! I do not require all three of you working on my behalf. Surely I am not such a lost cause as all that!”

His sisters again exchanged glances. “As it stands it will not be three of us playing matchmaker,” Scarlett said.

“Thank heav?—”

“Four,” said Adelaide. “There will be four. Aunt Letitia insists on being a part of things.”

CHAPTER TWO

“Aunt Letitia wishes to help me find a wife? Or does she mean to push Lady Lenora at me more vigorously?” Oakley asked his sisters.

“Likely the last one,” Adelaide replied matter-of-factly. “You could do worse, you know. Lady Lenora is a noted beauty.”

“Lady Lenora and I were raised like brother and sister.”

“Not in the same household,” Scarlett said. “And many times friendships turn to love.”

“Not this time.” Oakley shifted in the chair, which seemed to be growing harder and less comfortable by the second. “Must I continue to sit here? ’Tis like I face an inquisition!”

Adelaide leant forwards. “Just tell me that we have your agreement? It would be a dreadful waste of everyone’s energies if we were to introduce our very excellent young ladies to you, only to have you spurn them.”

“Spurn! That is a hard word.” Oakley shook his head. “When have I spurned anyone? Yes, I shall meet your ladies, but where it goes from there I cannot say.”

“The ladies we have in mind are so superior, you will not be able to help but to fall in love with them,” Frederica said warmly.

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, Oakley begged to be permitted to flee to the other side of Scarlett's large drawing room to where the gentlemen had naturally gravitated. Lord Tipton had spent enough time on his feet and sank into a chair with a groan. "Oh, I cannot recollect when I last ate so well."

"I believe it must have been last Sunday," Kem teased. "When Frederica and Penrith hosted us all."

Lord Tipton shook his head fondly as he permitted the duke to put his feet on a little stool. "These family dinners are wonderful, an important tradition to hold, but I do not know whether my waistcoats can take many more of them."

"One might practise restraint," Oakley suggested drily.

"Heaven forbid!" his lordship exclaimed. "Where is the diversion in that?"

They were still laughing when Lady Carbrooke and Lady Lenora were announced. Lady Carbrooke was Lady Tipton's younger sister, Letitia. Oakley had recently learnt that Lady Carbrooke had once set her cap at his birth father, Robert, but had been left disappointed when Robert eloped. It had not done her much harm, happily, as she instead secured the affections of an older, doting marquess who spoilt her and their two daughters dreadfully. Carbrooke was wholly devoted to sport, and rarely left his estate, preferring to be in the country wading through streams or shooting at things. His wife was perfectly happy going about London without him, particularly since the eldest of their daughters, Lady Lenora, had come out. Lady Carbrooke was just as devoted to seeing her daughter advantageously married as the marquess was to clearing the birds off his land.

Alas, Lady Lenora had proved more difficult to settle than her mother might have imagined. Though handsome, with an excellent dowry, she was also wilful and had, for reasons of her own, refused offers from seven suitors—or so it had been said. In

truth, it was more like three, but the ton employed a unique form of mathematics in such situations.

Oakley and Lady Lenora had always got on famously, so when she entered, he went to her, taking a seat beside her on the small sofa she chose to sit upon.

“I understand,” said Lady Lenora with a smirk, “that the family are conspiring to see you settled.”

“The news has indeed travelled quickly! I only just learnt of it myself!”

“You know they mean to toss me at you, yes?”

Oakley gave a mocking groan. “Well pray, add me to your list of refused suitors now, then they can all rest easier!”

She giggled. “Shall you be my number twelve?”

“Twelve! You have had a busy week, it seems.”

They both laughed comfortably and then Lady Lenora informed him, “I have already told Mama that it will not do. You have always been the nearest thing to a brother that I have.”

“A pre-proposal refusal, then?”

“Call it what you will,” she replied archly, and he laughed, genuinely, as she added, “Saves us both a bit of trouble, does it not?”

“I confess it is difficult to imagine marrying a lady who once donned my own breeches to ride with me.”

“You and your dreadful, good memory,” she said with a little shove. “But yes, I do believe that people who have spent their childhoods as we did would find it difficult to change those fond feelings to romance.”

“As do I.” Genuine relief swept through him. “But surely Lila must grow impatient?”

Lady Lila had always been in a hurry to grow up. Three years younger than Lady Lenora, she had trailed after them, usually dragging a doll by one arm, begging to be included in their games. She, too, was a very pretty young woman, recently finished at school, and Oakley imagined she was eager for her share of the Season’s amusements.

“Mama intends to permit her to attend a concert or two this Season, just to keep her content. I am certain it will only whet her appetite and before long she will be just as determined as my mother to find me a husband.”

“Well let us see whom I end with, and perhaps she will have an obliging brother willing to shackle himself to you.”

“Such a charming way to think of it,” she said drily.

“But truly Len, you must wish to marry, yes? What is it that prohibits you?”

“Lenora? Oakley?” Lady Carbrooke’s call from across the room interrupted them. “Come and play whist with us.”

Oakley rose, assisting Lady Lenora to her feet. “Money,” she informed him bluntly. “My fortune prohibits me.”

“Your fortune is excellent. Most ladies would consider it an asset, not an impediment.”

“It is too much an asset. I never know whether a man likes me or my fortune. I cannot marry until I can find a man who loves me even without it.”

“Matrimony.” Oakley sighed. “Such a tricky business.”

The pair strolled over to the side where the footmen were setting up card tables. They spent a very agreeable half an hour playing against Frederica and the duke, followed by a less agreeable half an hour against Lady Carbrooke and Lady Tipton. The two sisters were fierce competitors who had honed their skills by regular participation in the not-entirely-secret groups of lady gamblers throughout London. It did not help that Lady Carbrooke immediately wished to discuss Oakley’s matrimonial prospects every time she was not actively taking or planning a trick.

“Lenora thinks Oakley is too much like a brother,” Lady Carbrooke said with a little scoff.

“Well, now we know they are not even cousins,” Lady Tipton replied. “They are no more related than...why, than anyone!”

“I despair of that girl, Louisa.”

Lady Lenora rolled her eyes at Oakley even as Lady Tipton clucked sympathetically in reply to her sister’s words.

After a few minutes of silent play, Lady Carbrooke said, “Carbrooke has a cousin?—”

“Mama,” Lady Lenora interrupted, “Oakley’s sisters have it all well in hand.”

“Of course! Far be it from me to be intrusive—you know I am not that sort of mother.”

“She is precisely that sort of mother,” Lady Lenora murmured in Oakley’s direction. He stifled a laugh.

The marchioness continued to speak. “However, if the prospects that Lady Kemerton and Lady Worthe and the duchess have arranged do not suit, I know a great many young ladies who are in want of husbands.”

“I am certain you do,” Oakley said with a smile. “And I should be very grateful to consult you if needed.”

It was a very short time thereafter that Lady Carbrooke continued, “Carbrooke’s cousin is positively unparalleled on the harp, and she has?—”

“Mother!” Lady Lenora exclaimed. “Leave poor Oakley be!”

“I do not understand young people these days,” Lady Carbrooke said in a huff. “No one wants to marry! They just want to gad about London, tending to their own whims and amusements.”

“When that is our job, is it not?” Lady Tipton teased. “Old married ladies that we are!” This sent the two sisters off into giggles while Lady Lenora and Oakley sighed fondly and exchanged glances.

When at length they had beaten the two younger people thrice, Lady Carbrooke made a great show of yawning. “There is scarcely any diversion here, Louisa. Did we not teach them to play? I was certain we had!”

“We taught them to play, but we did not teach them all of our tricks,” Lady Tipton responded, and the two again giggled like schoolgirls.

“Oh! Speaking of tricks, you will not believe what Lenora heard about Damian,”

Lady Carbrooke said, in a lowered, confiding sort of tone.

“What did you hear?” Oakley asked Lady Lenora curiously.

“Mama! I told you not to mention it!” Lady Lenora flushed and sent her mother a vexed look.

“They are his nearest relations,” Lady Carbrooke insisted. “They ought to know!”

“What ought we to know?” Lord Tipton’s ears had evidently been pricked, and he came to their table as quickly as he could given his affliction.

“I am certain it is nothing, Uncle Charles,” said Lady Lenora. “Just some prison tattle.”

“Prison tattle?” Oakley laughed. “Have you been hanging about the gaol?”

“Yes in fact, I have,” she replied pertly.

“Lenora has become active in The Society for the Discharge and Relief of Persons Imprisoned for Small Debts. They raise money for those in gaol who have no family or money with which to extricate themselves,” Lady Carbrooke informed them all. “I am quite proud to see her doing it, although I cannot think it necessary that she actually goes into the prisons.”

“Seems like a bad idea,” Lord Tipton opined. “Lenora, you ought not to go to such places! What will your future husband think?”

Lady Lenora smiled at him. “One never knows, Uncle, perhaps my husband awaits me in his chains at Fleet Street. Only think of the advantage—he will already be accustomed to leg shackles!”

Oakley laughed while scandalised bursts of chastisement came from his aunt and mother. When it had all died down, he enquired, “Do tell me they have a...a guard or someone of that sort to protect you?”

“I take a footman,” she replied carelessly. “I cannot go in with a retinue of servants, not when half of them are starving.”

“What was said about Damian?” Lord Tipton asked, looking grave.

“Nothing but a pack of nonsense,” Lady Carbrooke inserted firmly. “You must know that some of these men become desperate, willing to say anything they think will earn them money. Lenora, tell your uncle how these men do anything for a coin.”

“I understand,” Lord Tipton replied. “But nevertheless I must ask again—what was said?”

“They said Damian was a jewel thief,” Lady Carbrooke inserted, the gleam in her eye clearly showing that she relished the telling. “Had young gentlemen working all over the place to steal jewels from all the best houses.”

“Nonsense,” cried Lady Tipton. “Damian was a rotter, but I cannot think him capable of such a scheme.”

Lord Tipton laid a hand on his wife’s shoulder. “No, nor I. Idle chatter is all that is.”

“Positively,” Lady Lenora said assuredly. “My mother is right, these wretched souls will say absolutely anything, and very little of it should be given credence.”

“Anyhow, what can it matter?” Oakley asked, rising from the whist table. Scarlett’s housekeeper had laid a light supper, and he found himself surprisingly interested in it. “Damian is dead, and last I knew, the laws do not apply to those who have left their

mortal coil.”

“Just so. Damian is cold in the grave, and whatever he got up to is buried with him.”

Lord Tipton gave a firm nod. “Let us leave it buried.”

CHAPTER THREE

Oakley was more than delighted to leave the rumour-mongering over his recently-departed uncle in the past. Damian Richmond, Lord Tipton's younger brother, had been up to no good from the day he had been born to the day he died, and Oakley did not much care to remember anything about him. Naturally, the family had done as was proper and mourned him—as much as any family could mourn someone who was nothing but a burden and a scandal to them all.

No, he could not concern himself with Damian, for his thoughts were in another quarter, one that caused him pain and pleasure in equal measure: Bess, or as she must be called now, Mrs Beamish. He repressed a shudder that arose just from thinking of it.

He went to the table where supper had been laid, first enquiring whether the ladies at the table wished for anything to be brought to them. "I could not bear to eat another morsel," Lady Tipton declared, and the others murmured their agreement.

"I do not know where he puts it all," he overheard her add as he walked away, her voice sounding strangely proud about it.

The table had been laid with a fine-looking sponge cake as well as syllabub and some marzipan done in the colours of spring. He helped himself to a little of all of it, and a glass of wine, before going to take a seat next to Scarlett. It was not a coincidence; he took the seat believing that, of them all, Scarlett was the least likely to take him to task about marriage for the rest of the evening.

She gave him a smile as he sat down. "Poor Oakley." She reached over and patted his cheek. "Was Lady Carbrooke dreadfully impertinent?"

"No more than she usually is—only the subject was different." Oakley grinned and took a bite of cake. He angled his body towards her and lowered his voice, hoping no one would overhear him. "Do you think it strange that Bess and Beamish have not been in town? I think it is peculiar that they are hidden away in the country. Bess was such a friendly sort of girl, I am sure she would much rather be enjoying the Season."

Oakley could never deny that the moment he beheld Bess, he loved her. He loved the softness of her, from the gentle pink of her cheeks to the sweet dimples on her elbows. She would be Lady Oakley now but for one thing: a dastardly man called Beamish. Contrary to every custom of his past, Oakley had not fallen out of love with her. If anything, he had found that unrequited love burned hotter.

"Newly married people will often disappear a bit to enjoy each other's company," Scarlett replied with a warm smile in Worthe's direction. Worthe gave her a little wink in reply.

"Beamish's home is in Hertfordshire," Oakley protested. "A few hours' travel to London, and I have heard, myself, Beamish boasting of his horses. They might have come in for a play, a party...anything. And he has a house here, does he not?"

"I believe Beamish let his house last Season, and Bess's family certainly did. However, I do believe we might see her here for at least a short time in the coming weeks."

Oakley's heart gave a little jump at that, although in truth he knew not whether he anticipated or dreaded such a circumstance. "Indeed?"

Scarlett gave a quick little nod to emphasise her certainty. "Would you like to read

her most recent letter to me?”

There had been a brief period, after Bess neglected to invite Scarlett to her wedding, when their friendship had faltered. Not surprisingly, Scarlett had been hurt that her oldest and dearest friend had hastily married without much of a notice to anyone, and without asking her to stand up with her.

Last summer, Oakley had been called upon to deliver a note of warning, written by Scarlett to Mrs Beamish at her husband’s estate. With what had been transpiring at the time, Scarlett and Oakley and indeed all the Richmond family had worried she might be in danger of Damian harming her.

It had been the last time Oakley saw her, and Beamish had been strangely absent, off in some other city. Part of him yearned to see them together, for until he did, it just did not seem possible that she was lost to him forever. Perhaps if he saw the testament of Bess’s happiness written in her own hand, then he would finally believe it. “Yes, I would like that,” he said, finally replying to his sister’s query.

Scarlett rose and went to the adjoining small alcove where, she informed him, she liked to read and write letters. Oakley watched as she pulled out the drawer and extracted a small bundle of letters, removed the topmost, and then replaced the bundle in the drawer. “I confess, she has written far fewer than I should have imagined,” Scarlett said cheerfully as she returned to him. “We used to talk every day! But that in itself is proof enough of her happiness. She is too busy with her husband to write, even for me.”

Oakley only half-heard Scarlett’s words, having unfolded the pages she handed him.

My dearest, darlingest Lady Worthe,

What a delight to address you as such! I only hope you are half as happy in the

marriage state as I am with my beloved Beamish. I am a poor excuse for a friend, I know, in having neglected my reply to you for so long. So long that you were required to write to me twice to elicit my return letter! I am fortunate that you have such a forgiving disposition.

Oakley exhaled gustily as he read the rest of the missive which, in truth, was not very extensive. There was a report of a dinner party Bess was planning for her neighbours—people he had never heard of—followed by a paragraph on a horse that Beamish was considering for her, some intimations of a possible house party in the autumn, and a vague mention of indefinite plans to be in town.

“When I replied, I told her they positively must come to town and stay here,” Scarlett said. “We have ample room, and I should be delighted to have a party for her. But we will see what she says when she replies.”

Her face clouded a little then, and she added, “If she replies, that is. Sometimes I do not hear anything from her for months. The Season might be over before I have another letter.”

“Perhaps you should write again? Tell her more urgently that she must come to town.”

Scarlett looked at him pityingly. “Oakley, darling, you really must?—”

“I know, I know! Put her aside!” He shoved one hand up through his curls and sighed. “You know you once told me that when you met Worthe it was like the piece of a map dissection falling into place. There was no need to look further—you had your fit. Well, what is one to do when some absolute noddy comes along and steals your piece? ’Tis not so easy to just slot another in the gap.”

Scarlett reached out, putting her hand on his arm and squeezing sympathetically. “Did

you ever consider proposing to her? I know your acquaintance was very short.”

Oakley swallowed, wondering whether he ought to confide in his sister a small secret he had held close to his heart for some time. “I...I did propose to her. In a manner of speaking.”

“What does that mean?”

“You will recollect, of course, the night of the dinner her mother gave—the one where Reverend Margrave arrived so suddenly with Sir Humphrey?”

Scarlett shuddered. “Good lord, how could I forget?”

“We...Bess and I...well, we were up all night that night.”

Scarlett gaped at him.

“Quite indecent of me, I know.” He gave her a lopsided grin.

“But you left! Everyone left!”

“I did, with the others, but Worthe, as you recall, returned to give one of the servants a note for you. I accompanied him, and it so happened that Bess came upon us. She...asked me to remain, and so I did.”

Scarlett still looked absolutely astonished. “You might have been caught!”

Oakley barked a laugh. “Would that we had been! But no, obviously we were not. I told Worthe to go on—which he did, very reluctantly—and I remained until we heard the reverend beginning to stir about in the bedchamber above us. It was all quite innocent I assure you! We did nothing more than sit in the drawing room, talking, and

at length...”

He sighed and scrubbed his hand through his hair again. “I told her I could see no other future but one with her.”

“And what did she say?”

“She told me she loved me.” A smile came over his face as he remembered it. “I believe she did, too.”

“Bess would not bandy about such words lightly,” Scarlett agreed. Then her face fell. “Oh. But then you had to leave town because of me.”

“Family comes first,” Oakley said staunchly. “I did what I needed to do, what it was my duty to do.”

“You must have thought her dreadfully capricious, though?” Scarlett asked worriedly. “To be caught kissing Beamish in so short a time after you left!”

“She said the very same thing the next time I saw her, when I went to Hertfordshire to warn her about Damian. She told me she hoped she might still count me among her friends and said that her attachment to Beamish had been of long standing. It was all very cordial; resentment is simply not in my nature, so of course I forgave her at once. I am sure it was my own fault. She must have heard how I am in and out of love so readily. She likely did not think I was in earnest.”

“Oh, my darling brother.” Scarlett squeezed his hand. “And to know now you have been suffering heartbreak all this time, and that it was all my fault!”

Oakley was shaking his head firmly before the sentence was complete. “No. Scarlett, you must not feel responsible for this in any way. Beamish is an elephant-eared

fopdoodle?—”

Scarlett laughed. “Elephant-eared! His ears are large but not as large as all that!”

“—and he stole her from me. Plain as that. And I...I simply must accept it.”

Resolution suffused him as he recognised the truth in his own words. More determinedly he said, “And I shall. I shall accept it and move on. Pray to Almighty God I can fall in love with someone else—and soon.”

CHAPTER FOUR

The next day, Oakley stared with some dismay at the note in his hand, one with the Kemerton seal embossed on the top edge. The summons was not unexpected even if the rapidity with which it had been dispatched was.

Lady Kemerton requests the honour of your presence for dinner followed by Coriolanus in her box in Drury Lane on the sixth April at promptly five o'clock.

He tapped the card against his hand absently, thinking of what he knew of the lady Adelaide intended to introduce to him. Lady Charlotte Ivy was a golden-haired beauty with twenty thousand pounds and connections to the Duke of Ardmore. What troubled Oakley was the vagueness with which Adelaide explained the lady's connection to herself and Kemerton.

"Kem has known the family for ages," she had said, her attention on her baby, Susanna, who happened to be in her arms at the time. "Very kindly people, or so he says."

"Yes, but what can you tell me about her," he persisted, prompting Adelaide to laud her beauty and accomplishments. "No, but...will I like her? Is she agreeable?"

Adelaide had simply shrugged that off. "No one knows anyone until they come out, do they? And her coming-out is now, so we shall all get to know her better together."

In other words, I am being introduced to a lady whom even Adelaide does not know. Any lady with a dowry and the ability to draw breath is considered a fair marriage

prospect for me.

Tapping the note against his hand again, Oakley sighed. “Well,” he said to the empty room, “there is no sense in going up against my sister when she has her mind set to something, so Lady Charlotte, here come I.”

On the appointed evening, he presented himself into his man’s care. Jepson seemed exceedingly eager to attire him, tucking and tugging and brushing until Oakley cried out, “It will do!”

“Of course, of course.” Jepson immediately stepped backwards, although his eye still roamed Oakley’s form.

“’Tis only a meeting,” Oakley grumbled. “I am hardly on my way to propose, although it would put an end to this caper if I did.”

Jepson chuckled, then offered, “I have heard it said that the lady is very agreeable.”

“Well you know a vast deal more than I do, Jepson.” Oakley gave himself a last look in the glass and then turned. “Unto the breach, then.” With a nod, he quit the room.

Adelaide and Kem lived close enough that Oakley would walk over. As he descended the few stairs between the front door and the street, a memory came to him, well-worn but not less poignant for it: the first time he had ever seen Bess. The day he had met Scarlett.

Naturally the frisson of attraction between himself and Bess had been put aside for the more astonishing and life-changing understanding that he had another sister, a twin to the one he had so lately discovered. Put aside, but certainly not forgotten. Bess’s attention had been on her friend that day, and she had been so kindly, so loyal as she laid her hand on Scarlett’s back for support as mistaken identities and

exclamations resounded through the street.

“It does not signify,” he muttered, causing a passing maid to give him a worried look before hurrying away from him. “Bess is married. Cannot forget that.”

He determinedly put the past out of his mind and hastened his steps towards his sister’s home. If there was a lesson to be learnt from the meeting on the street that day, it was that one never knew when destiny might intervene and change everything.

At the Kemertons’ townhouse, he was greeted by Scarlett in the vestibule. “What is this?” he asked her. “Did you think I would turn tail?”

Scarlett laid her hand on his arm. She had an insidiously kind way of steering a fellow right the way she wanted without seeming to apply any pressure whatsoever. “Of course not,” she said soothingly. “I happened to be passing through. Anyhow, I was eager to tell you how much I have enjoyed knowing Lady Charlotte already. I daresay you will find her very agreeable.”

“And you say that based on how long an acquaintance? Has it been a full quarter of an hour?”

Scarlett laughed. “Oh, Oakley, pray do not turn churlish, it does not suit you.”

The door to the drawing room then opened and he could say no more. Adelaide rose, her face eager and expectant. Scarlett’s light hand was replaced by Adelaide’s more firm grip, and he resisted the urge to squirm as she steered him towards the younger lady sitting with a woman he supposed was her mother on a divan near the window. The ladies rose as he and Adelaide approached.

Oakley immediately disliked how very thin Lady Charlotte was. When she curtsied, the way her arms and elbows extruded reminded him of the wings of a chicken. She

briefly laid her hand on his arm, laughing at something he said, and he could not discern the weight of it. Her collarbone looked like it might poke right through her skin!

Not like Bess. Bess had been charmingly rounded and dimpled, everything about her bespeaking comfort and affection. A woman ought to be soft and curvy , Oakley decided. Otherwise, they are too much like men, all sinew and muscle and bone.

He immediately chastised himself for being so uncharitable. As Lady Charlotte's mother scurried to the opposite side of the room to allow him to take the other side of the divan, he resolved himself to look at Lady Charlotte on her own, not in comparison to Bess.

Think of Lady Charlotte's amiability, not her looks , he scolded himself. And in fact, she is quite beautiful. He smiled at her, trying harder to appreciate the pale, golden-red curls on her head and the light dusting of freckles across her nose. Time spent outdoors , he thought approvingly.

"Do you enjoy riding?" he enquired, angling his body slightly to avoid the peering gazes of Adelaide and Scarlett. His question was enough to set things going. Lady Charlotte loved horses, and her father permitted her to ride to the hounds whenever he had a hunt.

"Liberal, is he?" Oakley glanced over at her father, a tall, cadaverously thin man who presently had Worthe trapped in a corner and appeared to be talking his ears off.

"Not always," she giggled. "But I can be persistent."

Persistent. Is that word for me?

Their conversation was pleasant enough through dinner, and Oakley thought

Adelaide appeared mightily satisfied with herself by the time they were entering the carriages to go to the theatre.

“A real catch, is she not?” Adelaide murmured in his ear. Then, more warningly, she added, “But she is by no means without other prospects, so you will really have to?—”

“I like her,” Oakley replied quietly. “But pray allow us to digest dinner before you read the banns, hm?”

She gave him a little poke. “Very well! I only mean to tell you not to dawdle, lest you miss your chance!”

“I shall do my level best, dear sister,” he said, and handed her into her carriage.

It being the first Wednesday after Easter, the theatre was crowded. Oakley offered Lady Charlotte his arm as they made their way through the crowd, he gallantly shoving or elbowing as needed to provide her clear passage. She was appreciative, if her little flirty peeps above her fan were any indication. When they had at last gained the Kemerton box, Lady Charlotte’s merry green eyes met his, seeming relieved.

“I do not know how I should have navigated that without your assistance!”

“’Tis rather a crush, is it not?” he said, helping her into a seat. The others had made their way in behind them, each exclaiming about the number of people, their anticipation of the play, and the excitement of the Season being well and properly under way.

This could do very well. He had spoken to Lady Charlotte’s exceedingly garrulous father a bit after dinner—a good man, very amiable if a bit too enthusiastic on the subject of steam engines which he believed would completely change life as they

knew it. An excellent family, all of whom seem to get on well with my family, a fine fortune, and a daughter who is charming without being excessively deferential. What else does a man need?

He knew he was far too prone to falling in love; his family teased him for it routinely. It was partly why they wished to see him married off. They had not said so plainly, but he knew they constantly feared he would make a cake of himself for a lady, or bring home someone unsuitable, or in some way bring scandal to a family that had already had more than their share. Indeed a proper marriage to a proper lady of good family would go a long way towards erasing the notoriety that had already come recently.

“Tell me, Lady Charlotte, are you fond of reading?” he enquired with renewed determination towards wooing her. It was the first thing he thought of; Adelaide and Scarlett, having been denied books in their younger years, were positively voracious about books of any kind.

Lady Charlotte winced a bit. “Will you think me a simpleton if I say no?”

He laughed, loudly, at the unexpected rejoinder. “I shall not!”

“The seminary where I was educated was forever pushing the most ponderous tomes upon us. Milton was evidently my teachers’ favourite.”

Oakley moaned dramatically at that.

“I declare I never read a thing that was enjoyable until I was at least sixteen, and by then I fear it was too late. Reading was already impressed upon me as a chore, not a pleasure.”

“I dislike it heartily myself, though my reasons are less clear to me.” Oakley

considered it a moment as the musicians began the warm-up, squawking and squeaking below them. “Perhaps it was because I was far too eager to be outside when I was young. To sit in the schoolroom with a book was a punishment no matter what the book was.”

As the evening wore on, Oakley found more and more that he had in common with Lady Charlotte. Outdoor pursuits were preferred no matter the weather. They were both very fond of music—“Listening to it more than playing it, in my case,” he told her ruefully. Lady Charlotte had been rigorously instructed on the harp and pianoforte, though her proficiency, she said, must be left to the listener to judge.

“My sister has told me your singing is much to be admired,” he told her.

She blushed and looked down at her hands. “Lady Kemerton is too kind. I do like to sing—perhaps the next time we are in company you will hear me.”

“Perhaps I shall,” he agreed; and it was that precise moment when—his eye drawn by some movement in the boxes opposite them—he saw her .

Bess.

She was staring at him, watching him make love to Lady Charlotte, but as soon as his gaze met hers, she jerked it away, pretending fascination with whatever was happening on the stage. His heart began to pound as he drank in, finally , the sight of her.

Beside him Lady Charlotte had begun to say something else, a story, some nonsense, but he could barely hear her over the sound of his own blood roaring through his veins. Before he knew what he was doing, he had risen to his feet, stumbling a bit over the legs of the chair as he pushed past her.

“B-beg pardon,” he said to Lady Charlotte, interrupting her in the middle of whatever she was saying.

She immediately smiled although her eyes were curious, if not outright alarmed. “Are you well, sir? You look very pale suddenly.”

He had already turned his back to her. “I see someone I must greet...pray forgive me.”

Kem rose and followed him, stopping him just after Oakley had pushed through the curtain to exit the box. “Where are you going? It is not the intermission yet.”

“Bess,” he told him urgently. “I saw her. She is across the theatre with her mother.”

Kem’s eyes widened but his tone was evenly amicable. “Surely you can wait and greet Mrs Beamish after the play? She will not be going anywhere before then.”

“Make my apologies to the others.”

Kem laid a hand on his arm. “Brother, Lady Charlotte?—”

“Must go.” He shook off Kem’s hand, turned his back on his brother-in-law’s look of warning dismay, and hurried down the hall.

There were hordes to press through, chattering theatre-goers who possessed little interest in the theatre, but he made his way to the opposite side of the theatre as quickly as he could. Alas, no matter his haste, when he arrived at the box where he had seen her, there were but four empty places. He stood, trying to catch his breath, staring at the chairs as if his gaze could will their return.

Other chairs within the box were filled with an assortment of people and he nodded,

seeing Mr Edgar Sebastian, a gentleman whom he knew from school. “Ho, Seabass,” he said.

“Oakley!” Sebastian waved him over. “Sit, man, I have not seen you in an age!”

Oakley sat, carefully avoiding looking towards the box opposite wherein sat his family and the lady he had so rudely abandoned mid-sentence. Instead, he chatted lightly with Sebastian for several minutes, finding that he was lately engaged to be married and had recently purchased a pair of hunters. Of the two, he appeared more enthusiastic about the hunters.

“I believe you were sitting with a friend of mine,” Oakley said when the pleasantries had concluded. “Leighton? Were the family sitting here earlier?”

“They were indeed,” Sebastian replied. “Sir Humphrey is my father’s friend, and he had invited the Leightons as our guests tonight.”

“They left in a hurry, it seems?”

“The daughter took ill, rather suddenly. I thought her brother might remain but?—”

“Her brother? It was Leighton who was with them? Not a Mr Beamish?”

“Who is Mr Beamish?”

“The young lady’s husband,” Oakley said.

Sebastian shook his head. “Sir Humphrey introduced him as Mr Oliver Leighton and the lady as Miss Bess.”

Beamish is forever absent and the family introduce her as Miss Bess? Oakley

wondered at the meaning of that but, seeing the curiosity which had arisen in Sebastian's aspect, recognised he ought not to seem so keenly interested in the matter. "Ah well. No matter, only I had not seen them in some time and wished to enquire after their well-being."

Sebastian nodded and said agreeably, "They all seemed well enough to me, save for the young lady, and even she believed she might have got some bad fish for dinner."

The matter was best dropped. Oakley remained with him for a little while after, directing the conversation into this and that matter of no consequence—just so it would not look like he had come tearing over there seeking the Leightons. Which in fact was absolutely true but made it all the more important to seem that it was not.

Why had Bess run off when she saw him? Did she mean to avoid him forever? You do yourself too much credit to imagine the lady is keeping herself away to avoid you, Oakley thought grimly. She is newly married, enjoying her husband, as Scarlett said.

Then where, for the love of all things holy, is Beamish, the other side of his mind argued back directly. A lady can hardly enjoy her husband when her husband seems determined to be off to all corners of the world without her.

When the play ended, he bade farewell to Sebastian and moved to rejoin his own party on the other side of the theatre. Lady Charlotte and her parents, he noted, were no longer among them. Guilt washed over him, particularly when he noticed that Adelaide, in particular, would not look at him.

He tugged at his collar while Scarlett informed him they were waiting for the throng to dissipate slightly before leaving. They had all risen from their seats but were milling about the box, watching as the crowds below slowly made their way out of the theatre.

Oakley moved closer to Kem, hoping to find a sympathetic ear. “Did, um, Lady Charlotte and her family?—”

“They left. Lady Charlotte felt a headache coming on.”

Oakley grimaced.

“It was not well done,” Kem said, more quietly. “But perhaps you did not see much to interest you in that quarter?”

“That was not it at all! She was perfectly lovely, and I enjoyed her company.”

“Then what, Oakley?” Adelaide snapped, placing one hand on her hip. She had given up ignoring him it seemed.

“I saw Bess sitting in the boxes opposite,” he said plaintively.

“Mrs Beamish,” Adelaide said, uttering each syllable very distinctly.

“Mrs Beamish, yes.” Oakley held out both hands in a gesture of supplication. “Pray do not be angry with me. I shall call on Lady Charlotte tomorrow with a posey and some marzipan for her mother. Will that do?”

Adelaide sniffed, but Oakley could see she had been mollified a little, at least. “You ought to be bringing me the marzipan. Have you any notion what it is like to forward a man to a lady, only to have said man tear off across a crowded theatre in pursuit of another woman? Another married woman?”

“I cannot disagree. It was quite stupid of me. Wholly unforgivable.” He offered his most winsome grin to her. “I intend to throw myself on Lady Charlotte’s mercy straightaway. She may box my ears if she wishes to.”

It appeared to work. With a little sigh, Adelaide said, “Are all elder brothers so impossible to stay angry with? Just make it up to her at the Duchess of Sedgwick’s ball.”

“When is that?”

“Friday night. Wear your green waistcoat—it does marvellous things for your eyes.” And with that, she swept away, looking every bit the countess she was.

CHAPTER FIVE

Balls given by the Duchess of Sedgwick were always well attended, if not outright crushes. Having been instructed to arrive early—in no uncertain terms—he did, having also donned the prescribed green waistcoat. Adelaide's eyes swept over him as soon as she saw him standing in the duchess's grand ballroom. To his relief, she gave him a small smile and a satisfied nod.

"Shall I pass, Lady Kemerton?" he asked with a quirk of his brow.

"Oh, Oakley." She linked her arm through his. "I only want you to be happy! No—not merely happy. Incandescent!"

"Just as she is," Kem added, bending to put a little kiss on Adelaide's cheek. Adelaide rewarded him with a little tap of her fan.

"Yes, in fact, I am . Happier than I ever imagined I could be, to be sure. I just do not see the use of despair! We are the fortunate ones, blessed by an accident of birth to have all the finest things in life. We owe it to those less well-situated to at least enjoy our blessings!"

"I shall do my best," Oakley promised.

"Dance with her twice," Adelaide advised. "Thrice even! Leave her in no doubt of your regard."

"Thrice? Let us not provoke another scandal," Oakley replied with a laugh, just as

Scarlett and Worthe, having only just arrived, found them. Scarlett gave Adelaide an expressive look, and suddenly they all seemed to have reasons to leave; all of them save for Scarlett who drew him over to one side to get out of the way of those who were thronging into the ballroom at greater numbers with each passing minute. They found themselves a little corner by an enormous potted fern.

“What is this about?”

“Bess called on me yesterday afternoon.”

Curiously, the news did not send Oakley’s heart into a gallop—more of a dread-filled canter. “With Beamish?”

“Beamish did not call with her, no, but she says he is very well.”

“Is he? Then why is it that he always seems to be somewhere else?” Oakley leant in. “You say she is busy enjoying her husband and yet the husband does not seem to sit still long enough to enjoy the wife.”

His voice had risen towards the end of the sentence, and Scarlett shushed him, then glanced about. “Beamish’s whereabouts are not your concern, they are Bess’s concern, and she tells me she has never been so happy. Happy and...hopeful.”

“Hopeful? Hopeful of what?”

Scarlett gave him an expressive look. “Hopeful in the way every newly married lady who wishes to give her husband an heir is.”

“Oh.” The words hit Oakley like a fist to the chest. “Then I suppose Beamish has been around, at least once or twice.”

Scarlett gave the obligatory weak titter to that. “In any case, it is likely Bess will attend tonight. There is some connection between the Leightons and Sedgwicks.”

“Then I shall eagerly anticipate renewing our acquaintance.” The words tasted bitter in his mouth, and he turned, looking about for someone with a drinks tray or the like. “Where are the servants? I find myself desperate for a glass of ratafia.”

For what felt to be hours, Oakley strolled about, ostensibly seeking Lady Charlotte but in truth, hoping to catch a glimpse of Bess. He was due for disappointment in both quarters. With Lady Charlotte it seemed he had made an unforgivable misstep.

“Oakley, you must dance,” Lady Tipton murmured from behind her fan when he passed her. “The duchess is impatient with any bachelor who is not squiring somebody about on the floor at all times. And not your sisters! They are all married!”

“Whom shall I dance with, ma’am?” he enquired. “Or shall I be so fortunate as to make my own selection?”

“That young lady over there”—Lady Tipton pointed discreetly with her fan—“is the Duke of Sedgwick’s niece. Come, I shall introduce you and then you can ask her to dance.”

Lady Hortense Seifert was pretty, and her gown was made up in the latest style; those things in addition to being the duke’s niece were matters which had formed within her a lofty opinion of herself. She gave an exceedingly gracious nod to accept his offer of a dance—one that seemed designed to impress upon him the favour she conferred in so doing—and then did all she could to impress him with her consequence thereafter.

She first discussed all the house parties she had attended in the autumn, including one at Chatsworth, and continued with what high-ranking noblemen she had danced with.

A viscount, Oakley surmised, was well beneath her notice, and he was meant to feel lucky for securing her. The set was excessively long, it seemed.

Following the dreadful dance with Lady Hortense, Oakley was relieved to partner Lady Lenora who, with her customary spirit, had asked him to dance. “If I have one more titled oaf step on my toes, I cannot be held responsible for my actions.”

“What makes you so certain this titled oaf will not step on your toes?” Oakley asked as he steered her towards the forming set. “You know dancing has never been my foremost talent but what I lack in expertise I make up for in enthusiasm.”

“True, but I have grown accustomed to your shuffles and missteps. They are easily anticipated.” She grinned up at him.

As ever, it was easy to dance with Lady Lenora. She acquainted him with whatever gossip she had learnt, including some bit of tattle about his behaviour at the theatre. “What are they saying?” Oakley enquired. “I assure you it was likely far less than it sounded!”

“I have heard that you left her on the street while you mounted a horse and galloped after Mrs Beamish, that Lady Charlotte pulled a pistol on you while you ran after Mrs Beamish in the street, and that Lady Charlotte herself ran after a man while you were left behind.”

Oakley groaned. “I hope it is far less serious than it sounds. I should not like Lady Charlotte to suffer for my ill-mannered impulses.”

“Even the gossips know they are being silly,” Lady Lenora confirmed. “No one really thinks anything of it.”

“Good, good. Still, I wonder whether Lady Charlotte will speak to me again.”

“Likely not. Was she not meant to be here tonight?”

“She was,” Oakley confirmed. “I have seen neither hide nor hair of her.”

As he said so, his eyes made another sweep, going up and down the long line of dancers. He might not be in love with the lady but, given the opportunity, it would be best to lay to rest the gossip by dancing with her and showing the ton they were on amicable terms—at least he hoped they were. He would not like to make an enemy of her or her family. Alas, no matter how many times he looked, he saw no sign of Lady Charlotte.

Whom he did see was Bess, standing off to one side with her mother. The sight made him inhale sharply.

She was beautiful in a gown of palest pink silk which flattered her complexion wonderfully. Her hair, her jewels...even the manner in which she held herself all bespoke a contented, happy woman. For a moment he imagined her in the Tipton countess’s tiara. He shook his head to clear from it such impossible notions.

The music ended just then, and he gave Lady Lenora a deep bow fit for a queen to make her laugh. Then she said, “I see your friend is over there. What say we both go and greet her? It will save you the effort of humiliating me by dashing off to her while I stand about stupidly.”

Oakley would have laughed at that had he not already begun steering her through the throng of departing dancers. “If people would simply wait to join the next set until everyone from the previous group had left...” he grumbled into Lady Lenora’s ear.

“Like swimming against the tide,” she agreed.

Oakley barely heard her. His gaze was fixed on Bess, willing her to remain just where

she was while he pushed and poked his way towards her. Happily, it seemed she would stay. Her mother was talking to an older lady who stood beside them, but Bess was not involved in their conversation. Her gaze roamed about the room, only occasionally lighting upon him.

When they at last arrived, Lady Leighton paused to greet them. “Lord Oakley! How good it is to see you.”

He bowed to her, murmuring, “Lady Leighton, Mrs Beamish.”

Bess held out her hand to him, saying warmly, “Oakley, how delightful—Oh!”

The last was said as her ring, presumably her wedding ring, went flying off her finger and skittered across the floor. There was a brief bustle as Oakley bent to find it just as it slid beneath a passing lady’s skirts and then that lady’s escort also bent to retrieve the ring, his head bumping against Oakley’s...but at length the offending article was retrieved. Bess thanked him, her eyes twinkling merrily as she placed it back upon her finger.

“Surely the jeweller could have sized that for you?”

Lady Leighton hurriedly inserted, “She has lost weight, the poor dear! I keep telling her—eat something! But she does not and now she is skin and bone!”

“I am not skin and bone, Mama,” Bess murmured, colour rising in her cheeks. “I have been busy, no more to it than that. I am not starving by any means.”

“I think you are as beautiful as ever,” Oakley said warmly, revelling in seeing her grow even more pink as a result.

A pointedly cleared throat just then reminded him of his own companion. “Ladies,

my cousin wishes to know you, if you would like.”

He made the introductions. The ladies greeted one another and then were in the midst of a feminine exchange of ‘did I see you at this lecture’ and ‘do you know Lady Such-and-such’ when Lady Carbrooke arrived.

“You made a fine pair on the dance floor,” she informed her daughter and Oakley before turning to Lady Leighton and Bess. “How do you do?”

“Lady Carbrooke, this is Lady Leighton and Mrs Beamish. Ladies, my aunt, the Marchioness of Carbrooke.”

The ladies again were called upon to curtsy, but Lady Carbrooke’s gaze had been caught by Bess’s jewels. They were rather magnificent, Oakley had to admit, although nothing compared to the twinkle of her eyes, or the gleam of her smile.

“My dear, your parure is simply lovely. Is it pink topaz?” Lady Carbrooke asked.

Bess flushed the faintest bit, her hand rising to touch the necklace. “Yes, ma’am, I believe it is. It was part of my husband’s family collection.”

“Was it?” Lady Carbrooke leant forwards slightly and peered at it closely again. “It looks very much like a pink topaz parure from the Crowle collection.”

“A topaz parure is not so unusual,” Lady Lenora replied in a somewhat guarded tone. She offered Bess a kind smile and added, “It looks very lovely with your complexion.”

“An Imperial pink topaz is certainly out of the common way. Who are your husband’s family?” Lady Carbrooke enquired, her gaze shifting between Bess’s countenance and the necklace and bracelet of the parure.

Bess's hand was still on the necklace, her fingers playing with the main stone in a nervous sort of way. When it became apparent that she meant to remain silent, Oakley offered, "The Beamishes are from Hertfordshire, Aunt."

"The Beamishes of Beauvis in Hertfordshire," Lady Leighton added brightly. "A fine, old family."

"I do not know them," Lady Carbrooke mused. "Beamish, hmm? Who are they connected to?"

Oakley interrupted the conversation, addressing Lady Leighton and Bess. "Will you be in town for the Season?"

"My plans are not fixed," Bess murmured, dropping her eyes while Lady Leighton murmured something similar.

"You know," said Lady Carbrooke to Lady Lenora, "the Duchess of Crowle reportedly had her parure stolen. Somewhere along the way, someone replaced it with a paste copy and the original is gone."

At this, Bess's eyes flew up, wide and stricken as she gasped. Lady Lenora and Lady Leighton gasped as well.

"Mama! Think of what you say!" Lady Lenora scolded with an uncomfortable-sounding chuckle. "The way you speak makes it sound as if you accuse Mrs Beamish of being a jewel thief."

"Or at the very least, of wearing stolen jewels," Oakley chastised. "Really, Aunt."

It was Lady Carbrooke's turn to be aghast now. She was never the sort to be malicious, only thoughtless. "Heaven forbid!" Lady Carbrooke cried out. "Dear Mrs

Beamish, I assure you I meant nothing of the sort. I am sure the parure has been in your husband's family for centuries!"

Bess's eyes showed clearly her dismay, but she managed, very admirably, to say, "I should hope so."

"I am sure if one held the two sets side by side, they would be very different," said Lady Lenora.

"Positively! Very different indeed!" Lady Carbrooke agreed with far too much enthusiasm. "In fact, now that I look again, it is really not very similar at all. Quite different."

"I have not seen the Crowle parure, so I cannot say, but given the relative fortunes of Beamish versus Crowle, I would suppose that the Crowle set has far more jewels, and likely larger ones as well," Lady Lenora asserted.

"Just so," Oakley agreed staunchly.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs Beamish, I assure you I meant no harm in my idle comments. I simply was not thinking before I spoke." Lady Carbrooke held out a hand and Bess accepted it. "You must allow me to heal the breach! You will come to a dinner I am giving Monday next, you and Mr Beamish both."

Oakley noticed that Bess stiffened at that and dropped the marchioness's hand. "Forgive me but Mr Beamish will be away from town on business."

"My nephew will escort you," said Lady Carbrooke, blithely sailing from one étourderie into the next. "I shall send over a note with all the particulars. Oakley, you must call for her at about half past five, for drinks in the drawing room will commence at six. Lenora, I see Lady Shelton and I have not greeted her as yet. Are

you acquainted with her, Lady Leighton? Come along, I shall introduce you to her.”

Oakley watched the three ladies walk far enough away to be out of earshot before turning back to Bess with a rueful smile. “She means well,” he said.

“I am sure she does.” Bess studied him, a faint smile playing about her lips. “You are looking well, Oakley. How have you been?”

He inclined his head. “It has been a tumultuous time of late, but I daresay we have come through it now. And you, madam?”

“I am well,” she replied, one hand reaching up to again alight on the necklace. “I have lately been introduced to your new sister, the duchess. She is very charming.”

“Ah yes, Frederica.” Oakley smiled. “She and Penrith both are delightful additions to the family. I confess I never imagined myself amid so much family, being raised as I was, but I find it very agreeable.”

“I was excessively sorry to hear about your uncle and all that nonsense that came before it.”

Oakley shrugged. “Yes, well...all has worked out for the best, I hope. It is a comfort to know that whatever weaknesses I might have, once I am the earl, I shall still do better with it than Damian could have.”

She laughed. “That is true. I only met him once, but it seems he was an absolute scoundrel.”

“You met him?” Oakley furrowed his brow. “When was that?”

“I believe it was my wedding breakfast, positively ages ago,” she replied, her

attention momentarily drawn away by the nod of a passing acquaintance.

“Your wedding breakfast?” Oakley drew back. Even Scarlett had not been to her dear girlhood friend’s wedding. And Damian had?

“Oh!” Bess’s attention snapped back to him and she tittered, sounding nervous. “Did I say my wedding breakfast? I mean a wedding breakfast. Someone else’s joyful day, though I cannot immediately recollect whose it was.”

“I see.” Oakley studied her. She seemed uncommonly agitated for such a commonplace conversation. Her eyes never remained on his very long, and they skipped and danced about the room erratically, landing in every place but his face. Was it him? Did he make her uncomfortable?

He cleared his throat. It was not the gentleman-like thing to make her miserable, no matter how much pleasure her presence brought him, and so he would leave her. “I believe I am engaged for the next,” he began, waiting to see whether she would utter any syllable to delay him. She did not. “Um, about Lady Carbrooke’s dinner?—”

“I should be delighted to attend,” said Bess quickly.

“And Beamish will not despise me for escorting you?”

With a wry tilt of her head and a brief quirk of her brow, she said, “I do not feel obliged to tell Beamish everything. Pray come to collect me at five and we will have a little visit first.”

With that, she turned to leave him.

“A moment!” he called after her, and she turned back. “I have no notion where you stay.”

“Silly me.” She shook her head and gave him her direction. It was a fashionable address, Dover Street, very near Prince Lieven. He wondered if Beamish owned it or had let it.

“Until Monday, then,” he said with a bow.

CHAPTER SIX

O akley was at sixes and sevens the day of his aunt's dinner party, unable to content himself at his club, positively itching while he was at home, and wholly disinterested in being anywhere else. The hours dragged by mercilessly until half past four, which he decided was near enough to five to begin the short journey to Dover Street to collect Bess and take her to Grosvenor Square, where Carbrooke House stood.

Two surprises awaited him in Dover Street. The first was that the housekeeper was familiar to him: Mrs Norris was her name. What was so peculiar about it was that the good lady had been Lady Leighton's housekeeper. Had she gone with Bess after her marriage? Not uncommon for a maid to do, but a housekeeper? Then again, even servants had their own reasons for doing things.

As she led him down the hall from the vestibule, he enquired, "Have you changed houses, ma'am?"

"Beg your pardon, sir?"

"You are here, in Mrs Beamish's house. Did you leave Lady Leighton's employ?"

"Forgive me sir, but no. This is Lady Leighton's house, for the Season anyhow."

"Oh, I see." In fact, he did not see. Why would Bess be at her mother's house instead of her own? Did it mean she had not wished him to see where they lived? Or perhaps she and Beamish both stayed with Lady Leighton?

There was little time to consider it, for they came to the door of the drawing room then, overhearing the sounds of a shocking row within. A male voice shouted, "...think for a moment that I do not know what he is about and as God is my witness I shall see him swing if I must!"

The door was flung wide from the man inside, and Mrs Norris leapt backwards with a yelp as it nearly hit her. Oakley laid a hand on her back to steady her, although for himself, it was not the sudden opening of the door which amazed him as much as whom he saw framed within. It was Mr Hanson, once his friend, once betrothed to Adelaide, and now despised by all.

Hanson fell back a step, looking disconcerted by Oakley's appearance. "Forgive me," he muttered.

Oakley peered past Hanson and saw Bess, alone and undeniably stricken-looking, standing in the middle of the room. It roused a powerful protective instinct in his breast. One large, quick pace brought him into the scene.

"What are you doing here?" He grabbed Hanson's lapels, pulling him closer. "How do you know Mrs Beamish?"

Hanson shoved him backwards. "I should think the question is whether you know Mrs Beamish."

Bess laid a hand to her chest, and Oakley could see her visibly trembling. Mrs Norris pushed past the men, moving towards Bess, but Bess said, "Mrs Norris, you may go." The housekeeper did not require a second invitation to do so.

Oakley ignored Hanson's cryptic remark. "You have clearly upset the lady," he said, his tone low and menacing. "And I am afraid I must insist you leave at once."

Hanson had been ostentatiously straightening his coat but stopped, looking at Oakley with slitted eyes. “By whose authority do you insist I do anything?”

“By the authority of decency. You cannot storm into a lady’s house and distress her! You are a gentleman, are you not?” In truth, Oakley thought not, but it seemed to have the desired effect.

Hanson pursed his lips and cast another look towards Bess. Very slowly, he went past Oakley in the direction of the door. “My apologies if I have caused you distress, madam,” he said to Bess. “It was not my intention. The matter between us?—”

“There is no matter between us,” said Bess, suddenly thrusting her chin forwards, though it was clearly feigned bravery. The hand at her chest still trembled, and her voice shook a little. “Only Mr Beamish has what you seek of him. I am not a party to his business dealings.”

“Business.” Hanson gave a scoffing chuckle, but he left. Moments later, they heard the door close behind him.

Oakley could not stop the questions that tumbled from his mouth. “Good lord, what was that about? Are you alone? Where is your mother? Where is Beamish?”

“O-oakley,” she said weakly. “F-forgive me, but I am not feeling well.”

He shook his head. “Of course, forgive me. Here, come, you must sit.” Placing one hand on the small of her back, he steered her towards the nearest chair. She sank into it, looking grateful.

“I shall send word to Lady Carbrooke,” Oakley said, moving towards the escritoire. “She will understand completely if you are unable?—”

“No, no.” Bess shook her head firmly. “I am dressed and prepared to go. I need only a minute to collect myself.”

“Shall I ring for tea? Wine?”

Bess again shook her head, closing her eyes a moment as she did.

He was helpless and wished, above everything, that he had punched the expression off Hanson’s face the minute he saw him. He knew not why, of course, but that Hanson deserved something of a violent nature was certain. Then again, that could only have distressed dear Bess even further.

He took a seat, sighing as he did. Bess was in an abject posture; having retrieved a handkerchief from some pocket, he supposed, she had covered her eyes. Did she weep? He knew not, nor did he know what to do about it.

After what seemed like many long minutes in silence, he said, gently, “I am sorry you have been treated so infamously by Hanson. He is a dastard and a fool.”

Bess made a small noise that sounded like agreement.

“How do you know him? I was not aware?—”

“I do not know him.” Bess suddenly stood, her posture firm and upright and her voice bright. “Shall we go? Come, let us go.”

Taken aback by the sudden shift, it took Oakley a moment to find his feet. “Are you well enough to?—”

“Quite well!” she exclaimed brightly. “Come, forget Mr Hanson, let us go and enjoy the evening.”

He glanced at the mantel clock. “We are somewhat early?—”

“Then we will walk! Or drive! We can go through the park; it will be lovely.” Again, that bright, forced smile. It was charming but...false. And baffling.

“Are you certain you are well? My aunt would understand?—”

Bess’s smile was beginning to appear somewhat maniacal. She beckoned him to follow as she made quick paces towards the door to the hall. “I am not only up to it, I am positively mad to get there. I have heard such wonderful things about Lady Carbrooke’s art collection! Dear Scarlett will be there, too, I hope?”

“Um, yes I do think she will, and Frederica, as well.” Confusion made him speak and move slowly as he trailed behind her into the hall, trying to gather his wits.

“But not Lady Kemerton?” she enquired over her shoulder.

“The baby...Susanna...something about her teeth?” Oakley said. The click of Bess’s heels on the marble made him realise he had better pick up the pace, lest she charge right out of the front door without him as it seemed she might do.

“Her teeth? I suppose you must mean that the baby is teething?”

“I believe that is it, yes.” He chuckled, this time more genuinely. “I must say, until I saw Susanna, I had no notion that babies did not come with teeth.”

That made Bess laugh. “Oakley, you are too droll. Good thing for the wet nurses that they do not!”

They reached the front door and the footman there leapt into duty, though he did give Bess a curious look as he did. It made Oakley realise what was amiss.

“Your pelisse, Mrs Beamish? And I presume the ladies are still wearing gloves to go out?” He forced a laugh.

“Oh goodness! Look at that. I was so eager to be gone... Norris, can you imagine? I very nearly went into the street without being properly attired.”

The housekeeper had arrived with Oakley’s hat and gloves, a maid behind her carrying Bess’s pelisse and gloves. Oakley donned his hat and was pulling on his gloves when he heard the maid ask, sounding confused, “Your earrings, ma’am? Did you wish for them?”

It was then he realised that Bess wore no jewellery at all. No earrings, no necklace, no bracelet...not even a brooch. It was not improper, of course, but it was odd. Even the maid herself had a small cross on a chain around her neck.

Bess raised her hand to touch the naked earlobe. “Oh...yes. Will you go and get, from my bedchamber, the pearl set I brought with me from Stanbridge?”

Mrs Norris and the maid exchanged looks. “If you do not mind me saying so, ma’am,” Mrs Norris ventured, “dinner with a marchioness might require a bit more than your girlhood pearls. Perhaps you might?—”

“The pearls,” Bess said very firmly. “Necklace and earrings. They will do.”

“Very good, then.” Mrs Norris turned and hastened away, the maid following her.

“Despite what her ill-considered comments at the Duchess of Sedgwick’s ball might have made you think, I beg you would not be distressed by my aunt’s questions about your necklace,” Oakley said. “She meant nothing by that.”

“I assure you, I am not distressed at all,” Bess replied lightly. “I simply prefer to wear

my pearls.”

“Good, good.”

It was an excessively awkward pause after the servants left. Even the footman seemed to have melted away as all the best footmen did. Bess stared at nothing, and Oakley tried not to stare at Bess while the ticking of the mahogany longcase clock sounded excessively loud, or so it seemed. It was impossible not to admire the glow of her complexion, the way one lock of hair fell gracefully against her neck, and the elegance of her mannerisms and gestures.

She caught him out, looking at her, and appeared pleased by it, meeting his gaze with a shy smile and cheeks that grew pink. He did not attempt to hide what he felt, what he knew must show in his expression. When she dropped her eyes, he knew: she still had some attachment to him, perhaps not as much as he did to her—but it was there.

He took a step towards her, helpless against the draw of her. “Bess?—”

She took a step backwards and said, brightly, “Adelaide seems very devoted to her child.”

“Devotion is something we Richmonds excel at,” he said very gravely.

“Oakley...”

He held up his hands. “Married woman. I know. But the night I visited you on Stratton Street?—”

“Does not signify.” With a deep breath, she said, “The baby’s name is...Susan?”

And with that, Oakley understood. They would not discuss it. Frustration, an

uncommon feeling to him, burned in his chest, and he realised his fists were clenched. He released them slowly.

“Susanna,” he replied with a determined smile. “And yes, Adelaide is an exemplary mother. I should imagine their early, motherless experiences must have made all of my sisters eager to do better.”

“And so they shall,” Bess replied lightly as Mrs Norris came bustling back into the vestibule. Oakley watched while the simple strand of pearls was fastened around Bess’s neck and the equally simple earrings were placed in her ears. In truth the simple jewellery was perfect. She was beautiful enough without being ostentatious, or wearing an elaborate parure.

Oakley offered his arm as they exited to his carriage, trying not to think how right it felt to have her on his arm. The faint whiff of her scent teased his nose while they traversed the short distance and he handed her into the carriage. His pulse leapt as she smiled at him in gratitude for his assistance; he only wished he had the right to give her far more.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Scarlett! Dear Scar!” Bess practically fell into Scarlett’s arms when they saw her in the drawing room at Carbrooke House.

Scarlett laughed delightedly. “How good to see you, my darling Bess!”

“I have missed you.” Bess pulled away and, for a moment, held Scarlett at arms’ length, appearing to examine her.

“Missed me?” Scarlett laughed again. “You only called on me two days ago!”

“I know, but recollect all the mornings we spent together as girls?” Bess smiled fondly. “Remember the tree where we used to hide from the reverend?”

“I remember the stripes I got for hiding from him,” Scarlett said with another laugh. “It took me quite a while to learn just how long I could be away before he noticed my absence.”

“I long for those days sometimes,” Bess said dreamily. “Do you not?”

Oakley’s eyes met his sister’s; Scarlett’s brow was furrowed as his no doubt was. They were, in fact, not happy times for Scarlett to remember, and Bess knew that better than anyone.

“Forgive me!” Bess tittered anxiously. “I did not mean you should repine the days with that evil man over you! I mean, I long for it to be as it was with you and I. We

saw each other every day!”

Scarlett’s brow cleared. “Of course. Of course I miss that! But here we are, two happily married ladies. No doubt we will both soon be mamas, clucking over marital prospects and come-outs!”

“Heaven forbid!”

Scarlett’s brow wrinkled once again at that reply, but before she could say more, Worthe approached their small group. He kissed his wife on her cheek and bowed to Bess before saying, “Oakley, I hope you enjoy your evening of respite.”

“Respite?” Oakley asked. “From what?”

“Silly!” Scarlett tapped his arm with her fan. “From your search for a wife! I had hoped to be able to introduce you to my friend this evening, but she was unable to attend.”

At this most unfortunate of moments, Oakley met Bess’s eyes. She hurriedly dropped her gaze, then murmured something to Scarlett and left them. Dare he hope that meant that she disliked hearing about him marrying another? Then, he hardly wished for her to be miserable, even if he was miserable every time he thought of her married to Beamish.

He watched her walk away from them, utterly beguiled by the swish of her skirts and the sway of her dangling curls as she made her way across the room with grace and poise. A group of older ladies seemed to swallow her, and he turned back to his family to find all of them staring at him with varying degrees of dismay on their countenances.

“Dear brother...” Scarlett began.

“Pray do not say it.” He held up one hand and heaved an enormous sigh. “Scarlett, tell me about your friend and when it is that I might be able to meet her.”

One never saw a dining table laid as the table was laid at Carbrooke House. The length of it was precisely half a foot shorter than the Queen’s own—Lady Carbrooke thought it would be unseemly to have one longer, or equal. Enormous arrays of flowers, feathers, candles, and sculptures made viewing those across the table impossible, but being that Lady Carbrooke took great care with her seating arrangements, one generally did not wish to.

Lady Carbrooke was fond of as many courses as she could possibly stuff down her many guests’ gullets, and she also indulged herself in a strange practice by which the men changed seats between each one. Oakley supposed it was an advantage; if one had a tiresome partner, one only need endure it for a course rather than for the entire dinner.

As each course ended, Oakley hoped to find himself seated by Bess, but he was due to be disappointed. Likely for the best, he reflected towards the end of dinner. The scene with Hanson had plagued him all night, and he could only hope he had succeeded in being an agreeable partner to the ladies beside him. He did not understand the connection between Hanson and Beamish, nor the bit of argument he had heard emanating from the Leightons’ drawing room.

Nor does the lady want you to understand it , he reminded himself. She was very clear on that point.

“That Mrs Beamish is utterly charming,” said Lady Lenora as Oakley joined her for the last course. “The sweetest creature I ever knew!”

“You were sat near her?”

Lady Lenora nodded and then thanked him as he filled her wine glass.

“I just find it all so accursedly peculiar.” Oakley topped up his own glass, then took a deep, contemplative gulp of it. “Who in their right mind leaves a new bride alone so much?”

Lady Lenora shrugged. “Someone with active business interests?”

“And what should that signify? Take her with you, then!”

“Maybe she would rather be in town.”

Oakley grinned at her. “Why must you always make so much sense?”

“A curse we both must bear,” she replied with a smirk. “I shall say it is curious that she asks everyone and anyone to call her Bess. Most married ladies I know are eager to claim their new appellations.”

“There are a great many things about Mrs Beamish’s life and choices that are unusual to me. Alas, I am told continually to disregard her eccentricities, for it is nothing to me how she lives.”

Lady Lenora inclined her head in acknowledgement. “I cannot disagree with that advice.”

He sighed. “Nor can I.”

The night drew long as Lady Carbrooke’s guests finished dining and repaired to the drawing room for the usual sort of diversions. The unmarried ladies all had their turn at the instrument, playing and singing with varying degrees of success, and the men slowly seeped into Lord Carbrooke’s book-room to escape it.

Oakley's uncle, Lord Carbrooke, was a genial man, the sort who had been thrust into society but had not much use for it. Even now, for his wife's very elegant dinner, he wore attire better suited to sport and hunting. He was short, and his hair was mostly gone, although even in its finest hour it had been scraggly-looking. But he was very kind and as one of the wealthiest men in England was thus powerful and respected. Oakley found him commanding the room in his reedy, old-man's voice, speaking enthusiastically about his new fowling piece. While the other men crowded near to listen, Oakley took a position against a wall that he might observe silently while thinking of Bess.

"Has he spoken of the spaniels yet?" Worthe had drawn near to him.

"I only just arrived myself and might have missed them," Oakley replied, and Worthe chuckled, joining him in his place against the wall. They said nothing for a few minutes, save to accept a glass of port when it was offered by a footman.

"You remember Hanson, do you not?" Oakley asked nonchalantly.

"I do. Quite the insolent sneaksby."

"Just so. I found him at Bess's, um, Mrs Beamish's...well in truth, she stays with her mother. Hanson had called there prior to my arrival this afternoon, and I found him and Mrs Beamish amid a quarrel."

"A quarrel?" Worthe took a drink. "About what?"

Oakley shook his head. "I did not hear enough of it to understand anything. He wishes to see someone swing, presumably Beamish."

"Seems a mite impudent, even for him, to walk into a woman's mother's home and say he wishes to see her husband swing."

“That it does.”

“What did Mrs Beamish say in reply?”

Oakley considered that question a moment, then said, “I do not believe she said anything at all.”

“She was likely very frightened. She was alone with him?”

Oakley nodded.

Worthe shook his head, his disgust clear. “A gentleman would have come back another time and conducted whatever business was at hand with her husband.”

“I think it damned strange that Beamish seems always to be away,” Oakley said. “Where does the fellow go all the time? And why does he not take his wife with him?”

Warming to his subject, he edged closer to Worthe. “You know her wedding ring does not even fit her finger? Did Beamish not have the thing fitted? Or has she, as her mother claims, been put off eating? Either way it makes no?—”

His brother placed a hand on his arm, and that, together with the expression of pity on his countenance, made Oakley halt his discourse. Worthe opened his mouth to say something, but Oakley continued speaking, for he already knew what Worthe was going to say.

“Yes, yes, not my business, do not concern myself for it, et cetera, et cetera.”

Worthe grinned. “That obvious what I meant to say?”

“It is what everyone says to me these days.”

“I do not blame you. Indeed, I pity you.” Worthe’s eyes were nothing but kind. “Scarlett told me...well, the matter you had confided in her about the night, when we both returned to the Leighton residence to leave my note for her. I knew something must have transpired, but I could not have imagined that you had proposed.”

Oakley shrugged. “Water under the proverbial bridge now, hm?”

“It is.” Worthe nodded, very firmly. “I remember something I once heard from a professor. If you wish to continue your story, you must turn the page—even if it means leaving the matters in the previous chapters behind.”

He gave Oakley’s glass a little clink with his own. “To continuing your story.”

“To continuing my story, indeed,” Oakley said and then drained his glass.

It seemed apt that when he returned to the drawing room, he found that Bess had arranged her own escort home and left him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“ I cannot comprehend how she thought it sound to simply leave,” Oakley told Scarlett for what was likely the tenth time in their brief conversation. He was following his sister about her drawing room the next morning as she nipped and tucked at her brightly coloured floral arrangements.

It had been a severe disappointment to find Bess absent from Lady Carbrooke’s drawing room last night. Disappointment had turned to real concern, even disbelief, when it seemed no one present knew where she had gone, nor when. She had not taken her leave of his aunt, she had not told Scarlett she was leaving; even the footman at the door did not recollect her quitting the place, and he had surely not called a hack for her. It was as though she had melted into thin air.

“What of her safety? London is no place for a woman to be alone and unaccompanied—as should have been made plain to her when my aunt sent me to collect her before the party.”

Scarlett tilted her head to examine a wayward rose, but even so, Oakley could perceive the air of resigned patience in her. “Do not concern yourself. I had a note from her this morning, so I know she is well.”

Scarlett walked over to the other side of the room where a lopsided-looking fern resided, and Oakley trailed behind her. “Do you think she merely did not wish me to see her home?”

“Perhaps,” Scarlett acknowledged gently with a brief glance in his direction.

“Perhaps she worried Beamish might be home and get a wrong idea about it.”

“I should think Beamish might have some concern that his wife was gadding about London alone at night!” A vehement thrust of his arm nearly sent the fern tumbling off its stand. “Forgive me.”

“You ought not to be so distressed. Bess is a grown woman,” Scarlett chided, fixing the position of her fern. “It is wholly possible that Beamish came to collect her himself.”

“He may have done,” Oakley agreed. “Except the footman at the door did not say so.”

“In any case,” Scarlett said brightly, “she is not your wife and therefore not your concern. Ah, Husband! There you are!”

Oakley turned to see that Worthe had entered the drawing room. He strode across the room to kiss his wife’s cheek and greet his brother-in-law. “Have you told him yet?” he asked his wife.

“Told me what?” Oakley asked suspiciously.

“I have not,” Scarlett replied to Worthe, lightly dusting off her hands. She gestured to the gentlemen to join her in taking a seat. “We have been discussing the manner in which Mrs Beamish quit the party last evening.”

Whereas Scarlett was subtle in her discouragement, Worthe was not. “Come, man. You must forget Mrs Beamish and her comings and goings. Concentrate on finding your own wife.”

“Or at least liking the ones we find for you,” Scarlett said. “I think you will genuinely admire Lady Emma Lovejoy.”

“Is that the next?” Oakley asked dispiritedly.

“In a manner of speaking,” Scarlett said. “’Tis not yet a done thing, but there is a walking party?—”

“A walking party?” Oakley slumped his shoulders dramatically. “Walking to where?”

“To nowhere,” Scarlett said cheerily. “We will all have a nice ramble through the park and see all the beautiful flowers in bloom and then return to her sister’s home for tea and cakes.”

“Why not ride? Or drive?” Oakley asked hopefully. “A nice curricule ride is fun for all.”

“Walking will not kill you,” Scarlett replied.

“It might,” Worthe said with an easy grin. “He does so little of it, we really cannot say how much will prove fatal. And then there is our dear Scarlett who once considered walking to London from St Albans—are we absolutely certain the pair of you are related?”

“I thought of walking only because I was desperate,” Scarlett said with a laugh. “Happily my knight in shining armour appeared to rescue me, so it remains to be known whether I am capable of such a distance on foot.”

“I think you are capable of anything you set your mind to, my darling,” said Worthe lovingly and got an equally loving look in reply.

His lovemaking finished, Worthe turned back to Oakley. “Only think of this: if you and Lady Emma Lovejoy do not get on, you can feign a leg cramp, or stumble over a rock, and return home.”

Scarlett rewarded that suggestion with a poke to her husband's chest. "Pray do not give him ideas! But I think you will find much to admire in Lady Emma. She is a beauty, not excessively fond of reading?—"

"Good, good," said Oakley.

"—is never one to thrust herself forward to play the pianoforte, and is perfectly useless on the harp?—"

"Even better," Oakley said, already warming to the lady.

"—and she plays cricket! Better than most gentlemen, I am told."

Oakley smiled, feeling the faint stirrings of interest. "Does she ride?"

"All the time," Scarlett assured him. "I am told her seat is excellent."

"Her seat on a horse? Or her own personal seat? Surely the matchmakers do not put about the state of a woman's posterior in these discussions?" Worthe asked Scarlett with mock outrage.

"You are being terrible," Scarlett informed her husband with another poke. In truth, Oakley appreciated it. This business of wife-hunting should be approached with levity if not outright hilarity.

"She enjoys games and being outdoors," he concluded hopefully.

"She does. I hear she routinely wins archery competitions as well."

A lady he could play games with. He had never before imagined himself on the lawn at Chiltern Court, playing lawn bowls against his wife, but it might be diverting.

Long afternoons on horseback certainly sounded more appealing than a deadly dull afternoon in a parlour with a harp, or reading to one another—heaven forbid. He shuddered to imagine it.

“Where is she from?” he enquired.

“Near Luton, in fact,” said Worthe. “As it is, the evening that I met Scarlett, we had gone into Luton because Edward wished to meet her sister, Lady Edwina.”

“Lady Edwina never came that night,” Scarlett added, “because she had just got engaged to Lord Dalrymple. I have lately met the new Lady Dalrymple and told her she has done me much good without even knowing it.”

Scarlett smiled up at Worthe who gave her a tender look. They had been doing that a great deal of late, even more than was usual, and Oakley wondered if it meant a child was on the way.

“Dalrymple is a good family, a good connection to have,” he observed.

“Yes, it surely would be,” Scarlett said, rising from her seat. “Come, I arranged that we would meet her at Dalrymple’s house in Audley Street.”

“Now? But I am ill prepared?—”

“I know you are ill prepared, but that is how I thought might be best. A less portentous meeting, with less expectation will surely do you a world of good.”

He supposed she was correct in that and dutifully followed her from the room.

Lady Emma reminded Oakley of a daisy, a cheerful, sweet little daisy. She had a small round face and dark hair that curled fetchingly about her face; the jonquil-

coloured walking gown she wore only added to the effect. They had a fine time in the drawing room discussing outdoor games and other getting-to-know-you sort of things; and then they, along with Scarlett and Worthe, and Lord and Lady Dalrymple, went to the park. Oakley offered Lady Emma his arm as soon as they arrived. Though it was not quite the fashionable hour, excellent weather had brought nearly everyone out, and the paths were thrumming with people both young and old.

Alas, it was the presence of all the people that brought out the less appealing side of his companion. As Oakley cheerily greeted anyone he had any claim to whatsoever, Lady Emma acquainted him with their more opprobrious proclivity. “Oh, you are friends with Miss Marianne Westbrook?” Lady Emma asked after they had greeted the lady. “You must know then that she refused her fourth suitor earlier this week?”

“No, in fact I had not heard that.”

“And her mother wants to send her to an institution.”

“In truth?” Oakley asked with amazement.

Lady Emma nodded authoritatively, her lips pursed. “Miss Westbrook says she has never met a man whom she takes pleasure in so much as she does a good novel.”

Oakley had to laugh at that. “I must know what it is she’s reading! It does seem rather a thin excuse to send a girl to an institution.”

“She would not be the first mama to do such a thing, I assure you. You have heard of what Lady Coleridge did with her daughter?”

When Oakley told her he had not, Lady Emma gasped theatrically and told him of Lady Aurelia Coleridge being sent off to an aunt in the country—who most suspected was not an aunt at all but rather an asylum of sorts—to be cured of her mad notions of

living independently from her fortune.

“And Miss Jones-Reeve, you know, was also sent to an aunt—but a real one—for her wilfulness in refusing to entertain male callers. Stayed in her bedchamber and flatly refused to see Lord Upton when he called.”

“As it is, I know Upton very well and have often wished to run to my bedchamber rather than greet him myself.” Oakley grinned and asked her if she had ever visited the seaside. That she answered only very briefly before settling into more gossip.

Lady Emma was in possession of a superabundance of tales of all the ill that had befallen various people of her acquaintance in the last months. And Lady Emma indeed boasted a very large acquaintance.

She was an excellent storyteller, full of wit and causing Oakley to laugh until his cheeks ached from it, and yet, he also wondered if it was wholly proper that he should hear such things about persons he either did not know or did not know well.

When a pause came again, he tried, gently, to change the subject. “I saw a wonderful play at Drury Lane the other evening,” he began only to have Lady Emma say excitedly,

“Oh! You remind me of something I heard about Lord Eberly. Well, it is not merely that he keeps a mistress or that his mistress is an actress, but she is also—” Lady Emma glanced about. “—twenty-nine! Why, that is positively ancient!” She giggled. More soberly, she added, “His father has threatened to strip his title from him if he does not give her up.”

Oakley knew not how to reply to that and so only gave a half-hearted attempt at a laugh. Such a story reminded him too much of his own family difficulties these past months. For a man who had endured as much tattle as he had of late, to participate in

gossip tweaked his conscience. He would hardly censure Lady Emma, for it was not his place to do so, and anyhow he had been laughing with her only moments prior. Lady Emma did not appear to notice he had sunk into his discomfort and continued to rattle away as they returned to the house. To his dismay, the others disappeared down a corridor with some vague comments of excuse and a promise to send a maid in to chaperone.

“We will have tea in the drawing room,” Lady Emma announced cheerily.

Discomfited, Oakley settled into a chair, smiling at the housekeeper when she brought the tea service in. No sooner had she left them than Lady Emma said, with hushed sympathy lining her countenance, “Of course, I am not someone who likes to hear tattle all the time, but I do feel I must tell you what I have heard of your uncle.”

“My uncle?”

“The not-so-honourable Mr Damian Richmond. I heard he has a by-blow who wishes to challenge your ascendance to the title. Is it true?”

Was it entirely proper for a lady to discuss by-blows? Oakley tugged at his collar and tried to smile. “A by-blow cannot inherit a title, as I am sure you know. I say, how do you like?—”

“Too true! How silly of me! Sugar?”

“Lots of sugar, if you will.”

The tea set was shiny and new, the silver appearing to have not known a day of tarnish in its life. The shine of it was entrancing to Oakley as he watched Lady Emma pour.

“This is my sister’s new set,” she told him once she noticed his observation. “Lovely, is it not? From Rundell Bridge and Rundell, but pray forgive me for mentioning that.”

He accepted the tea from her with a frown. “Why should I mind if you mention them?”

Rundell, Bridge and Rundell was one of the foremost jewellers, both for the ton and for royalty. Even now their shop was reportedly busy creating items for their new sovereign. He could not comprehend why she should think he did not want to hear about them.

“Well, many people think...” Lady Emma paused, shaking her head so that her curls bounced fetchingly around her temples. “Never mind. I would not wish to offend you.”

“Offend me?” Oakley drank deeply of the tea to conceal his growing puzzlement. “What could you have to say about a jewellers that might offend me?”

“There are some among the ton who think your uncle had a hand in that...that business a few years ago.” Her eyes flew wide then, and she placed a falsely sympathetic hand on his arm. “Not I! Of course not I! I daresay your uncle was likely very much misunderstood!”

“You are more certain of it than I am! No matter what Damian Richmond did, however, it is no indication of the honour of our family.” Oakley straightened himself. “Do you mean to say people think Damian had a hand in the robbery?”

Three years ago, the junior partner in Rundell, Bridge and Rundell, Mr Edmond Rundell, had been deceived by several men pretending to be emissaries of the king of Bavaria. The thieves had contrived to rob the firm of—it was said—jewels worth more than twenty-two thousand pounds. It had reputedly occurred through some

system of empty boxes and paste jewellery, but Oakley understood little of it beyond that.

Lady Emma waved a hand. "People will say anything, will they not? I am sure it is all nonsense."

And Oakley assured her it was, though he sounded more certain than he felt. A recollection of Lady Lenora's report from the gaol, which had also connected Damian to jewel thievery, had arisen. Could it be true?

To his great relief, Worthe entered, telling him the carriage was being brought round. Oakley hastily laid his tea on the table in front of him and rose, eagerly anticipating the moment they were away from Lady Emma and her tales.

CHAPTER NINE

As soon as the horses had moved a sufficient distance down the road, Worthe opined, “Pretty girl, but zounds, what a gossip!”

“You heard her, did you?”

“We could hear she was rattling away while we walked, although the specifics were not too loud.”

“Thankfully!” Oakley exhaled with relief. “I daresay she had a story about every person we passed!”

Scarlett opened her mouth, no doubt wishing to do as she customarily did and put a bright face on things. After considering it, she closed it again, then said, “She did have quite a lot to say, I only think it exceedingly odd that she would speak so freely to a potential suitor.”

“Perhaps she was having a bout of nerves,” Worthe suggested.

“Or perhaps she simply could not help herself.” Oakley adjusted his position on the bench so that he could look out the window. “Some people need gossip the way other people need fresh air or water to drink. But she is surely not the only lady I have ever known who enjoys some tattle now and again.”

“Only the most enthusiastic,” Worthe said. “I declare I never heard someone rattle away like that.”

“I am sorry,” Scarlett said. “She seemed so wonderfully good-humoured when I met her. So cheerful!”

“It was not all bad. The tales she told me were related with such spirit, it did make me laugh, more than once.”

“But did you like her?” Scarlett pressed. “I thought she would be so ideal for you, and such a pretty little creature.”

“She was very pretty; I shall grant you that. But ideal?” Oakley frowned. “I think I must give up on my ideal and look for well-enough instead.”

“Why do you say so?” Scarlett asked.

“The difficulty with finding someone ideal for me is that there can only be one ideal lady for me and I am afraid I have already found her. Anyone else is a poor substitute, and all I can see are their flaws,” he concluded glumly, the truth of his words sinking upon his shoulders.

Scarlett and Worthe exchanged looks. Worthe said, “Quite a change, Oakley. I am more accustomed to seeing you fall in love with anyone and everyone.”

“And now I cannot even like anyone much less fall in love with them.”

“You disliked her?” Scarlett asked.

Oakley ran a hand across his mouth. “No, I did not dislike her,” he said finally. “I really do not know. All I know is that it was not love at first sight, not by any stretch.”

There was a brief silence during which Oakley turned his face, ostensibly studying

the passing scenes on the street. Everywhere he looked he saw people who were coupled off, seemingly happily joined. Why must it be so much different for him?

“Perhaps if you saw her again it would be better,” Scarlett suggested. “Or have you no wish to call on her?”

“I had not thought of that yet.” Oakley pondered it for a moment. In the absence of Bess, was a lady like Lady Emma worthy of pursuit? “Indeed, with the exception of all her gossiping she was...charming. Amusing. And yet...”

“Yet, what?”

“She is likely one of those who spread tales of us, yes?”

“Everybody has been talking of the Richmonds,” Worthe said. “And it is true, Lady Emma was likely a part of it. But your family has provided the ton with more fodder for gossip than even Lord Byron. If we require a woman who has never uttered a word about the Richmonds, we will need to go looking in Italy or Spain perhaps.”

“An American, maybe.” Oakley snorted a little laugh. “But my greater concern is that she spoke of Damian.”

“The jewellery thing?” Worthe asked and Oakley nodded.

There was a short silence while those in the carriage considered that.

“It would be wise to inform Lord Tipton of that,” Worthe opined finally. “Much as I hate to alarm him.”

“He is already worried,” Oakley assured him. “Knowing it spread beyond the gaol and into the ton will be more worry, to be sure, but he would wish to know.”

“I agree, though I only hope it does not bring him pain,” Scarlett said worriedly. “I know he must wish all this Damian nonsense could just be set aside.”

Oakley agreed. “I shall speak to him of it as soon as I am home.”

“Let us all go to Tipton House together,” Scarlett suggested. “But Oakley, pray do not so easily dismiss Lady Emma. Call on her at least once before you decide.”

Oakley promised that he would.

As soon as they were at Tipton House, Oakley went to Lord Tipton in his study. Worthe offered to go along, but Oakley waved him off. No sense making it seem like a tribunal.

His lordship’s rheumatism had worsened slightly in the last days due to a succession of rain. It kept him indoors when Oakley knew he would much rather be on horseback or walking to his club. He was seated in a chair by the window, book open in his lap, merely staring out as Oakley entered.

“Father,” Oakley said by way of greeting. He had not given up the names by which he had known Lord and Lady Tipton for most of his life, despite the ton now knowing they were his aunt and uncle. They had raised him as their son, and he would forever call them Mother and Father, even if his sisters referred to them as Aunt and Uncle. It made for some strange conversational stumbles at times, but if they did not concern themselves over it then neither would he.

“My boy!” Lord Tipton smiled up at him fondly from his favourite reading chair. “Sit with me.”

Oakley sat on the sofa opposite his lordship, crossing his legs and accepting the offer of port. It was generally enjoyable for him to be in this mahogany-panelled room with

its overstuffed sofas. He inhaled deeply of its scents of tobacco smoked long ago and of decades-old books.

“You have an uncharacteristically long face,” Tipton remarked after a short discussion of the card party Oakley had attended the night prior. “Is there something troubling you?”

“I am not certain.” Oakley swirled the drink in his glass. “I just met a young lady whom Scarlett and Worthe wished to forward to me. Lady Emma Lovejoy. Pretty girl but full of gossip.”

“All ladies gossip,” said Lord Tipton warmly. “Do not be put off by that.”

“In any case, it might be no more than tattle but...she mentioned to me the tales being spread that Damian was involved in a jewel thieves ring.”

His lordship frowned pensively. “Just as Lady Lenora had heard. I wish I could dismiss it, but I fear I cannot. What did Lady Emma say about it?”

“That he was part of the theft at Rundell, Bridge and Rundell...was that in ’17?”

His lordship’s brows raised and he uttered a low, short whistle. “Yes, I do believe that was when it happened. And the ton believes Damian had a hand in it?”

“Evidently some do. I suppose it cannot matter, not with Damian most assuredly dead,” Oakley said, as much to console himself as Lord Tipton.

“If he was a party to that business, he was not alone,” Lord Tipton mused, his eyes on the ceiling. “There were several, at least three of them from what I heard, and I do not believe they ever recovered what was taken.”

“The report I heard was that what was stolen was worth twenty-two thousand pounds. What must he have done with it all? One cannot simply pass these things about.”

“I really cannot say,” Lord Tipton replied. “Sold them, clearly, but how?”

“Unschoolled as I am in the finer points of theft and what one does with the spoils, I daresay some smuggling must take place, get the pieces out of the country to somewhere they might be safely sold.”

There was a short silence while they both considered that. “Do you think it is possible he was involved in that?” Oakley asked finally.

“If it were merely stealing a necklace here and there, I would say no, he would not involve himself in so paltry a thing. But at such amounts as this? Yes, I daresay my brother would involve himself in it.” He drummed his fingers against the arm of his chair. “I must make some enquiries into this.”

“He is dead and surely all his misdeeds must have gone with him?”

“I would much rather learn the truth now than have yet another secret lurking about waiting to bloom into scandal for us.” Lord Tipton made a sound that was halfway between a huff of disgust and a dark chuckle. “If he had the plunder—money, or jewels, possibly both—secreted away somewhere, then at some point, someone he knew might come to retrieve it. Even if they only believe he had them somewhere, well...danger might arise. We would do best to find out what it was before we were caught up in it.”

Oakley nodded. “What will you do? Hire someone?”

“It is a place to begin,” said Lord Tipton thoughtfully.

Oakley waited a moment, watching as his lordship seemed to mull over something more. At last, Lord Tipton enquired, in a tone of exaggerated easiness, “So this Lady Emma? You liked her?”

“Well enough, I suppose.”

“Good, good. Do not let the telling of a few tales bother you. It is the Season! Everyone is talking about everyone else!”

“I cannot deny the truth in that,” he admitted.

“Will you call on her?”

“I promised Scarlett that I would, at least once.”

“It would not do to raise Lady Emma’s expectations,” his lordship advised. “But...she could be very useful.”

“Useful?”

“In terms of knowing what is being said. Might all be trumpery, I am sure, but still...I should like to know what people say happened.”

“You wish me to pay court to her to find out what she knows?”

“Oh, well you need not court her, precisely. Remain friendly is all I thought.”

“Keep the acquaintance close so that I know what she knows, but do not raise her expectations? I am not sure I am talented enough for all that.” Oakley raised his brows.

“Of course you are! I have every confidence in your ability to befriend a woman without it leading to marriage. You are forever doing it. And in any case, romances have developed from less auspicious circumstances! One never knows.”

Lord Tipton began to stand up from his chair, and Oakley rose and hastened to him, wishing to lend his arm. Lord Tipton only waved him off, reaching for a cane that was leant against the arm of the chair. “Keep me apprised of anything else you hear, and I shall do likewise for you.”

A sizeable party had descended upon the Tipton drawing room while Oakley was with his father. Lady Carbrooke had arrived as well as Adelaide and Frederica. Lord Tipton and Oakley’s entrance did nothing to quell the active discussion of Lady Emma that was evidently ongoing.

“Anyone who will gossip to you will gossip about you, surely as I sit here.” Lady Carbrooke pointed one heavily-ringed finger about the room, seeming to wish to be sure none of the younger people missed her point. “Oakley, I should not give this girl another thought.”

“She was not as bad as all that,” Oakley protested as he took a seat next to Frederica and smiled at her in greeting.

“Any family that has endured as much abuse from the tongues of the ton as we have lately is sure to be more sensitive to tattle,” Frederica said with a consoling pat on his arm.

“Well said, Sister.” Adelaide nodded approvingly. “It seems very odd to me that any woman trying to impress you would bring up the family problems.”

“I think the temptation to learn more about Damian from the source was too irresistible to deny,” Worthe opined while Scarlett nodded her head next to him.

“Knowledge is its own currency in these difficult times,” Lord Tipton said as he settled into the most comfortable chair in the room. “One ought not to look away from any advantage.”

His words were greeted with frank curiosity from those in the room.

“What do you mean, Uncle?” Scarlett enquired.

“Only that everyone has some value, even a gossip. Sometimes particularly a gossip.”

“We are not looking for someone to be of use to us, but someone Oakley can fall in love with,” Adelaide said.

“I believe I understand,” Frederica said, and everyone turned to look at her. “We cannot know what is being said about Damian because no one with any form of civility will say it in front of us.”

“Just so,” Oakley said with a nod.

“It is likely Lady Emma knows a great deal more than what she told, or she will discover more. Our best means to know what tales are going round, and also to put in our side of things, is for Oakley to continue a friendship with her,” Lord Tipton informed them.

“I suppose one might say there is no sense trying to hide from a gossip, it only makes them dig harder,” Lady Carbrooke conceded.

“Who knows, perhaps you will fall in love!” Lady Tipton added. “We might find Lady Emma improves on further acquaintance.”

CHAPTER TEN

The next morning, Oakley called on Lady Emma and her mother, Lady Lovejoy, at their house in Bruton Street. Both ladies greeted him kindly, but it was immediately apparent that Lady Lovejoy was an excessively deferential woman, the sort who nearly courted him herself to get a marriage proposal for her daughter. First she fretted over the comfort and position of the chair he had selected, wondering whether he would prefer this one or that. Then she worried the room was too warm, then wondered if it was too cold. Then she offered tea, coffee, a cake, some fruit. He considered asking for a fat haunch of venison just to see whether she could produce one, but immediately heard Scarlett's voice in his head telling him not to be churlish.

When her offers had been all refused, Lady Lovejoy exclaimed, with a knowing look towards her daughter, "Oh, but you both must excuse me. I have neglected my correspondence dreadfully."

Then, no doubt believing she had lowered her voice sufficiently, she murmured to her daughter, "Pray do not run on with your wild stories, child!" So saying, she moved to a small escritoire at the other end of the room.

Lady Emma watched her go with an expression of exasperation on her countenance. "My mother is far too apt to think a marriage proposal ought to come from every call."

Then her eyes flew wide. "And forgive me for speaking of marriage proposals! We scarcely know one another!" She laughed. "Believe me, no one in this house has any expectations of you from one call!"

Oakley laughed uncomfortably but could think of nothing to say in reply. Agreeing that they ought not to have expectations of him sounded too harsh, but saying they should was untrue. There was no good response.

“Emma?” her mother called from across the room. “Why not show the viscount your sketches? Lord Oakley, my Emma is simply unmatched with her crayons.”

“Mama, that is simply not true,” Lady Emma said, flushing a little. It was the first time he had seen her look embarrassed. In many ways, in fact, she seemed like a different lady when in the presence of her mother, less inclined to gossip, more demure.

“But you are!” Lady Lovejoy protested. “Very talented, your drawing master said so!”

“Which I am sure has nothing at all to do with how much you pay him,” Lady Emma muttered just loud enough for Oakley to hear. He smiled as she rose and went to where a slim portfolio rested on a side table, likely for just such situations. Returning to the sofa, she handed him the volume. He opened it and began to peruse.

Her drawings, in truth, were nothing out of the common way, and to Lady Emma’s credit—he supposed—she appeared as inclined to abuse herself as she was to gossip about others. Oakley found himself laughing quite heartily at her expressions.

He was acutely aware of her mother’s listening ear throughout and did not doubt she was as well. She offered no gossip, only the usual sort of tepid drawing room conversation. He had hoped that she would introduce the subject of Damian and his less honourable activities, but it was too awkward, and his father had instructed him to be nonchalant about it, not to ask directly. Alas, nonchalance had no return, and the time of the call drew to its proper end with him being none the wiser as to what more Lady Emma might know.

Leaving the Lovejoy town house, Oakley paused on the street to consider the remainder of his morning. It had been his intention to look in at his club, and customarily that would have involved getting in his carriage, going down Bond Street, crossing Piccadilly, and arriving in St James's Street.

But a very slight diversion, a mere alteration in direction that would involve no increase in the distance whatsoever, would be to stop at Dover Street. Wherein he hoped he might find Bess.

He was still unclear on where exactly Bess stayed. She had seemed settled in the place her mother and father had let, but it was strange, to be sure. What married woman elected to stay with her mother and father rather than keep her own house? With Bess, it seemed there were forever more questions than answers.

They are questions you have no right or reason to ask! No matter how often he reminded himself of that, he could not seem to care.

His carriage driver had been standing holding the door to the carriage open for him, and in a rush, Oakley decided to heed impulse rather than reason. "I think I shall walk, Hobcaw."

For a brief moment, Hobcaw forgot himself, allowing his amazement to show on his countenance. Oakley did not blame him; he never walked anywhere if he could help it, and the driver knew it.

"'Tis a fine day," he added by way of a weak excuse. "And it cannot be a mile, can it?"

"Half that," Hobcaw replied, closing the carriage door. With a slight bow, he added, "I shall take the carriage down to White's, then."

“Excellent.” Oakley watched his conveyance drive off and then began walking slowly towards Berkeley Street.

It was entirely likely Bess would not be there, but it did not signify. He was acquainted well enough with Leighton and his parents to warrant calling on them, was he not? And perhaps they, if not Bess herself, would provide some sort of reason for their son-in-law’s absence. Surely they could not like their newly married daughter being left alone so often?

It was surprising how agreeable the walk was, and how quickly he made the trip. Before he knew it, he was handing his card to Mrs Norris at the door. She frowned at his card for a moment, then said, “The family are all from home save for Miss Bess.”

Miss Bess again? “Perhaps she will receive me?” Oakley asked hopefully.

Mrs Norris agreed to ask and disappeared down the hall. A few minutes later, she returned and motioned for Oakley to follow her. She led him to a small but sunny parlour at the back of the house, in the middle of which stood Bess, smiling at him, almost seeming to anticipate his arrival. His heart stopped for a moment. What might it have been to arrive home to such splendour every day?

“I-I hope I do not come at a bad time?” he asked, not knowing what else to say as he recovered his composure.

“Of course not. Will you sit?” She gestured towards a group of chairs and they both sat. A book lay open by her chair, titled *Persuasion*. He had never heard of it.

“The weather is uncommonly fine today, is it not?”

“Charming,” Oakley agreed. “What is that you are reading?”

She cast a sidelong look at it. “A very sad story, in truth, about a woman who misses her chance with her true love.”

Oakley frowned. “See, that is why I never have much use for books. Why read about the suffering of others? Surely there is enough of that in reality without going looking for it in a book.”

She laughed. “One must presume it will work out in the end. That is what is so wonderful about a novel—one may depend upon a happy ending. Not so for real life.”

It was cynical, and he had never thought her a pessimist before. She had been, before, overflowing with cheer, talkative, ready to giggle, warm-hearted. Now she was quieter; she seemed to withdraw into herself often, and her laughter sometimes seemed either rueful or forced.

Beamish is making her unhappy.

“I hear we are to have rain later this week,” she announced.

“Pray do not treat me as a stranger,” he said quickly.

“Am I?”

“When we speak of the weather, yes. It is not the conversation we should be having.”

“Then what would you like to speak of?”

“I was concerned for you the evening of Lady Carbrooke’s dinner,” Oakley said carefully.

“Were you? You need not have been.”

“You left the party without so much as a by-your-leave to anyone,” he said, his voice rising. “Forgive me, but why on earth would you run off into the night like that?”

“I-I needed to go. Suddenly, yes, but nevertheless?—”

“The footpads are everywhere these days, and even a decent man would likely mistake you for a...a—” Oakley glanced around the room before hissing, “—ladybird!”

Bess laughed, this time more genuinely. “A ladybird? Oh, Oakley.”

“‘Tis true!”

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. After a short pause, she said, “Do not worry for me, I implore you.”

The frustration of love unrequited that he felt whenever he was with her had begun to make itself known. A dull flush rose through him, making him hot and itchy and unwise. “Yes, that is what everyone tells me. Do not concern yourself with Bess, she is a married woman now. She is Beamish’s concern. And yet, every time I see you, Beamish is nowhere to be found. Where is he today, Bess? Bath? His estate? The Outer Hebrides?”

Bess had a teasing smile on her face. “The last one. He is very fond of cold weather, you know.”

“Excellent, perhaps he should stay there, then,” Oakley muttered.

Bess’s smile slipped. “It is my husband you speak of.”

“A poor excuse of a husband if you ask me!”

He had vexed her. She rose with a little huff and walked towards the fireplace, putting her back to him. “Happily I did not ask you, nor shall I. I cannot comprehend why you are constantly inserting yourself into my life when you ought to be minding your own!”

The pain such words inflicted made him breathless. “And you cannot comprehend how it feels to see someone treating you so carelessly when in fact you would have been my dearest treasure.”

He went to join her at the mantel. She turned to face him and when she spoke, enunciated every word carefully. “I am married to Beamish.”

“And are you happy?”

“Happy or not happy, the deed is done. There is no getting away from it now.”

“But would you undo it if you could?”

“My marriage?”

He nodded.

“A silly question. One cannot simply undo these things.”

“But if you could, would you?”

She raised one pale, elegant hand to her head, smoothing back a curl from her temple. “It does not signify.”

“It does to me!” It was wholly unfortunate that he chose to accompany this statement with a flat-palmed slap of the mantelpiece. It was not that loud, but it made Bess shriek with surprise. Moments later, the footman hurried in.

“Forgive me, William,” Bess said to him. “It was nothing. I was merely startled.”

The boy, a strapping lad who must surely heave logs in his spare time, eyed Oakley mistrustfully. “I’m right outside the door, miss.”

“I know, thank you,” Bess told him, forcing a smile. With a final gimlet-eyed sneer, William left the room.

“Forgive me,” Oakley said immediately. “I did not mean to allow my anger?—”

“I think...” Bess’s hands had begun to tremble violently, and tears shimmered in her eyes. “I think it would be best if you do not call on me again.”

“What?” He stared at her, disbelieving. “Surely you would not refuse to admit me into your society?”

“I think it would be best for us both.”

He shook his head violently. “You do not mean that.”

“But I do.”

“I refuse to believe it.”

She inhaled deeply. “I cannot... There is too much... Please. Just go and do not come back. When you see me at a party, just think of me as someone you once knew and leave me be.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “And if I refuse to do that?”

Her gaze locked into his, and it grabbed his heart as it always did. Genuine despair marked her countenance, and it made him wish to slay dragons for her.

“Do you not see how much harder you are making this?”

He swallowed. “I do not mean to, you must know that.”

“If you have any kind feelings remaining for me, then pray, heed me. Leave me alone—it is what is best for me . Please Oakley...” In a softer voice, she said, “James. Please. We...we cannot be friends, we cannot be more than friends. Common and indifferent acquaintances is what we must pretend to be until it is the truth.”

The pain in his chest was so intense that he wondered absently if he might be on the verge of apoplexy. No, merely a broken heart.

“Very well.” He bowed jerkily to her, then turned on his heel and left her.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

As soon as Oakley arrived back at the Richmond townhouse, the butler informed him that Lord Tipton wished to see him. He sighed, shrugging off his greatcoat into the butler's waiting hands. "Pray tell him I have a dreadful headache, but if he will give me an hour or two?—"

"It will not do, sir. He told me to brook no opposition and suffer no delay. It is a matter of utmost urgency."

His head chose that precise moment to send a particularly vicious throb through his eyes. "Very well," he replied resignedly.

Frederica had once told him how all the children in the orphanage, up to age fourteen, were required to lie down for a nap, or at least a bit of rest, in the afternoons. "You would not believe how much better behaved they are when they have taken a short respite during the day," she had said, and he agreed wholly with the philosophy and thought that adults should follow suit. He wanted a nap, or a respite, or whatever anyone wanted to call it, not just for an hour or two but perhaps a week, maybe a month. Would not that be a delight? Go to sleep and wake when thoughts of Bess Leighton no longer have any power over me.

"You wished to see me, sir?" he said upon entering his father's study. Lord Tipton appeared decidedly distressed, his thinning hair showing evidence of many instances of a hand raked through it. It was a gesture Oakley shared when upset.

"Lady Lenora called this morning," he said, abruptly dropping into the nearest chair.

A flick of his hand towards another suggested he wanted Oakley to sit as well, so he did, somewhat cautiously. “There is a man she...encountered through her charity calls to the gaol who claims he knew something of this Damian business.”

“The jewellery nonsense?” On Lord Tipton’s nod, Oakley said, “Allow me to guess...for a sum, he will tell you what he knows?”

Lord Tipton nodded. “Although I must observe that what he wishes for is modest.”

“What is it?”

“Twenty.”

“Twenty thousand pounds!” Oakley exclaimed.

“No, no, twenty pounds. Merely twenty, paid to the warden to broker his release.” Lord Tipton smiled. “Not nothing, to be sure, but he tells Lady Lenora he intends to return the sum.”

“That is a far sight better, although I still should not depend upon it. What is it about him that makes Lady Lenora think he is in earnest?”

“I do not know. All she would say was that she was happy to forward the money herself if only we would hear him.”

“If you think it sound, then I surely cannot object. I say we hear him,” Oakley said. “’Tis better to know, as a wise man I know once said. Do you wish to go immediately?”

Lord Tipton demurred as Oakley suspected he would. His lordship’s matters of urgency were frequently more related to the speed with which he wished his family to

hear him, rather than urgency for the matter itself. “Lady Lenora has given me instructions on how to arrange it,” Lord Tipton explained. “I shall have my secretary attend to it.”

The next week was busy in the way that only the spring in London could be. There were parties every day: dinner parties, riding parties, driving parties, theatre parties, and balls galore. Oakley saw Lady Emma on several occasions and, if the situation warranted, asked her to dance with him, though he did not distinguish her beyond that. She could be amusing, he would grant her that much, but in some ways, it was almost as if she hid herself behind her tattle. In keeping his ears filled with the claptrap of the ton, the intimacy between them could not grow.

Even as he thought it, he scoffed at himself. What truly prohibited intimacy between himself and Lady Emma was not her tattle but his heart. Rather, it was the fact that his heart was no longer his to give to another; it remained with Bess.

As was his tendency when he was out of sorts, he longed for cream ices. Nothing, he felt, was nearly as satisfying as cream ices when one was feeling low. He stopped first at Worthe House to see whether they would wish to accompany him. Scarlett was sitting with her mother-in-law in the parlour. She looked a little pale, he noticed, and he hoped she was not ill.

After the usual polite civilities, he said, “Ladies, I was positively longing for cream ices this morning and I wondered—Scarlett?”

Scarlett had risen unsteadily, her handkerchief pressed to her mouth. “The notion of that...” Without a syllable more, she nearly ran from the room.

Such an action bewildered him, even if the dowager countess did not seem much concerned. “I believe her stomach is unsettled today,” said the older woman with a little smile in the direction of the door.

“Should someone go to her?” Oakley asked.

“I do not doubt her maid will tend to her. I daresay that she?—”

The sound of the door opening again stopped the elder Lady Worthe’s words. “Forgive me,” Scarlett said, re-entering the room. “You were saying, Oakley?”

“I am surely not going to say it again, not when the first utterance sent you dashing out of the room,” Oakley said. “What is it? Are you well?”

Scarlett nodded. “Do not worry, Brother, all is well.”

“I thought you liked Gunter’s?”

“I did. I do! I just...perhaps not today. You know who is simply mad for...Gunter’s, um, offerings? Penrith’s children. Perhaps you ought to call there and see whether you can take them with you.”

“A capital notion,” Lady Worthe agreed immediately. “No doubt they would be delighted for some of, um, the things at Gunter’s.”

The notion cheered Oakley considerably, and shortly after, he took his leave of the ladies and went to Penrith’s house.

He found Frederica and Penrith reading together in the saloon they used in the mornings. Oakley imagined most men might have purposed it for their own doings, but Penrith had allowed for the installation of light muslin curtains and furniture with flowered upholstery. There was a dainty escritoire for her and a more substantial desk for him, and a bottle of sherry sat next to the port. In all, Oakley thought he might like such a cosy domestic arrangement for himself, assuming he might be able to find a wife with whom he could be in such close quarters.

As I would have had with Bess. His ever-present bleakness seemed ever-ready to punch him in the gut with that sort of thing.

Determined not to show a gloomy face, he said, “You know I am quite determined to be seen as the fun-loving uncle, and I thought it might be diverting to gather the children and go to Gunter’s.”

His sister smiled warmly, while Penrith immediately laid aside his book. “Is it only the children you mean to invite? I like a cream ice as much as they do.”

“Then it seems we are a party.”

There was a brief delay then while Oakley begged leave to go to the nursery and surprise the children, which he did by first creeping in and hiding behind a conveniently-placed couch, then popping up with a shriek. Alas, the shriek only upset Mrs Coombs, their nanny; the children themselves were unperturbed.

“We must take Mrs Coombs with us,” he announced to Frederica as she came in behind him. “For I have nearly caused her to faint.”

“Take us where?” asked Lady Delphine, her small face alight with anticipation.

“Oh, you will not like it. ’Tis an excessively unpleasant place.” Oakley frowned and tried to look very dreary. “Filled with things no child ever liked.”

They were, by now, too much accustomed to him to fall for it. “Please, please take us?” Lord Ryde begged. “I promise I shall like it!” Beside him, little Felix echoed his exclamations.

“No, I am certain that you, most of all, will not like it,” Oakley replied lugubriously. “Oh never mind. You were right, Penrith, they will not want to go.”

The children were nearly mad to know by then, the boys hopping up and down and Lady Delphine begging and pleading with her father to allow them to go to this unknown wonder. With a laugh, Frederica urged Oakley to stop tormenting them and tell them.

“Gunter’s?” he asked, feigning dubiousness. “Cream ices? I know you thought the pistachio tasted like—oof!” He grunted the last as Felix hurled his small body at him and nearly knocked him over. He grabbed the boy and tossed him over one shoulder like a sack of grain, then grinned at his sister and Penrith. “Seems we are all off for cream ices!”

Penrith had lately acquired the most commodious landau that Oakley had ever seen, and as their party had grown large, it was in this conveyance that they travelled to Gunter’s. It required surprisingly little time until the seven of them were happily eating their treats. Unsurprisingly, the children finished first and begged to be permitted to run in the square. Mrs Coombs was quick to leap into duty, removing them from the landau and telling Frederica she meant to ‘run the wild animal spirits out of them’ in the square.

“I could eat these every day,” Frederica said. “I daresay this one is my new favourite flavour.”

“You say that every time, my dear,” Penrith said. He himself always ordered cherry.

“I have never had a flavour I did not like,” Oakley agreed. “But the noyau is my favourite as well.”

“Is that what I got?”

“It is,” Oakley confirmed for her.

There was a brief silence while those still in the landau scraped up the last bits of their treat out of the dishes, after which Oakley thought to tell them about Scarlett's strange behaviour when he had invited her to come. Frederica and Penrith exchanged a look and a smile.

"See there, why does everyone seem so pleased that Scarlett nearly cast up her accounts on the spot?" Oakley asked. "Seems troubling to me that she never quite seems herself these days."

"Oftentimes a lady in a certain state might experience unusual and sudden aversions to foods, milk and cream included," Frederica told him.

"A certain state?" Oakley looked towards Penrith who was yet occupied with the remains of his cream ice.

"Increasing," Frederica murmured with a little glance about them.

"Oh!" Oakley thought about that. It certainly explained why the dowager countess appeared so pleased by it. "How delightful! But is it certain?"

"No." Frederica shook her head quickly. "I have heard nothing of any happy news, but I daresay we can all have our hopes for her. I know she is eager to hear the patter of small feet in her nursery."

Unbidden, Oakley's eyes went to the children, playing among the trees in the square. It was so very peaceful to rest one's eyes on the antics of small children. He had not known it before, having no recollection of whatever time he had spent in the orphanage, and having been raised as an only child. Being around small children was something he enjoyed enormously, and he wondered, secretly, how it might be to have his own sons or daughters frisking about some day.

“How does Lady Emma?” Penrith asked, taking the empty dish from his wife’s hands, then signalling a servant to come and retrieve them. “Do you think there is anything there?”

“She is a fine friend but nothing more.” Oakley shrugged. “In truth, I do not perceive any danger of her falling in love with me, either.”

Frederica raised her eyes to Penrith’s, and some communication seemed to pass between them. “Perhaps you would not be averse, then, to meeting another lady?”

“The daughter of one of my cousins,” Penrith added. “Talbot. Miss Lillian Talbot.”

Frederica said, “She is a noted beauty?—”

“How is it,” Oakley said to Penrith, “that one never meets anyone without being told she is a noted beauty? Where are the average? The unremarkable?”

“Not in London,” Penrith told him. “They must go to the Continent to find husbands.”

Oakley chuckled at that. Penrith’s dry humour was rare but all the more amusing for it.

“In this case I have seen her myself and she is very beautiful. As beautiful as Adelaide and Scarlett, I should say,” Frederica added. “And then there is the connection to Penrith.”

“I am already connected to Penrith,” Oakley observed. “Short of marrying him myself, I do not think I could be more connected.”

“But in this case, you would be more connected.”

“Are there degrees of connectedness?”

“Oakley.” Frederica gave him her best chastising look.

He threw up his hands. “I am being difficult, yes, I know it.” But then it is difficult, trying to find myself a wife when my heart refuses to cease being in love with someone else’s! “Miss Lilly Talbot, then! May she bring me all the felicity a redoubled connection to His Grace may afford!”

In the square, Oakley noticed that Mrs Coombs had begun to gather up the children. They obeyed her quickly and began walking over to the carriage, Felix running ahead of them.

“Her mother is having a dinner party very soon. If you are agreeable to it, then we can all go,” Penrith said.

“Very well.” Oakley nodded his resignation to the scheme.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Here we go again, Oakley thought as he ascended the stairs to Penrith's first floor. He thought it exceedingly unlikely that Miss Lilly Talbot should be able to remove Bess from his mind—or even make him forget her temporarily—but he was trying. Failing, but still trying.

“You look very well,” Frederica said warmly after he was shown into her drawing room. “A new waistcoat?”

“Is it?” Oakley looked down at himself. In truth he had not really noticed what his man was putting on him, but now that he saw it, it was very nice indeed. A blue coat and a pale gold waistcoat shot through with darker blue threads. “Let us hope Miss Talbot thinks so.”

It was not until they were in the carriage that Frederica delivered the bad news. Or perhaps it was good news. Oakley could not say.

“As it stands, Miss Talbot is lately acquainted with Mrs Beamish.”

It always gave him a bit of a jolt to hear her name spoken. “Good to know,” Oakley managed to say, “in the event that she might speak of her.”

Frederica gave Penrith a glance, then said, with too much compassion, “It is likely that Mr and Mrs Beamish will be there. I had already accepted the invitation when Lady Talbot told me who would be joining us, and I could hardly refuse then. It would have looked excessively odd.”

“No, I would not have had you do that.” Oakley adjusted himself on the bench, then pointed at his brother-in-law. “Ten to one that Beamish does not appear.”

“He must appear some time, surely!” Frederica protested. “He has not been seen!”

“Twenty to one,” Oakley said firmly. “Penrith?”

“Those are odds I cannot resist,” Penrith agreed and extended his hand across the carriage to shake.

It was a wager that, it turned out, would go some way towards covering the cost of Oakley’s new waistcoat for, as he had predicted, Beamish was not present. Bess, sitting alongside her brother, was already in the drawing room when Oakley entered behind his brother and sister. She was perched on the edge of a dreadfully ugly, muddy grey chair that only emphasised how lovely she was. She had on a dark blue gown that did wonderful things to the colour of her eyes. Oakley greeted her in his best, most correctly sedate manner, just as she had said she wished him to, and then hurried off to the other side of the room to lean against the mantelpiece until it was time to be introduced to the daughter of the house.

Leighton rose and came to stand with him. Oakley smiled to see him approach. Bess’s brother was just the agreeable, sensible sort of fellow that he liked. Good-humoured without descending into silliness and nonsense, and if he tended to go about looking dishevelled, what did it concern him? Not a bit. In some ways, Oakley regretted the loss of him as the brother he would have been to him, had he married Bess. He repined the loss of the family in total; he should have liked to belong to the Leightons.

“Do you mind if I join you here?”

“Of course not.” Oakley angled his body differently, and the two quickly fell into

easy conversation on subjects of no real consequence. He considered asking Leighton what he made of the fact that his new brother-in-law was so rarely with his wife but decided against it. He was perhaps no scholar, but neither was he fool enough to keep asking questions no one wished to answer.

The gentlemen were interrupted soon enough by the arrival of Miss Lilly Talbot and her parents, Sir Edmund Talbot and Lady Talbot. Oakley did his best to ignore the interested looks of the room—especially Bess’s—while he and Leighton were being introduced to Miss Talbot. She was a pretty girl, very nearly as fair as Adelaide and Scarlett were save for the fact that being introduced had led to a flame-red blush over her chest and countenance.

“I understand this is your first Season?” he enquired gently. “How are you finding being in town?”

“G-good,” she stammered.

Lady Talbot, a large woman with determination on her countenance, ordered, “Tell the viscount about the play!”

“W-we saw a play last night,” she murmured. Her chin had sunk to her chest, and her blush had grown even more red.

“What play did you see?” Oakley asked.

The girl shot her mother a terrified glance. Lady Talbot offered, her voice strident, “Something Shakespearean, I believe. Lilly loves Shakespeare, do you not, Lilly? Tell the viscount how you excelled in poetry at school.”

Miss Talbot murmured something in the direction of her shoes that sounded like an agreement with her mother.

“I lately saw Coriolanus . Quite good, I enjoyed it enormously,” Oakley replied brightly. “But perhaps your inclinations run more towards concerts, Miss Talbot?”

“She adores concerts,” her mother replied. “Particularly as she is so often able to come home and replay what she heard on her own instrument. My daughter is exquisitely talented on the pianoforte and the harp, Viscount Oakley!”

“Excellent,” Oakley said, wondering whether the girl would ever speak for herself or if he was meant to make love to her mother in some sort of courting by proxy.

They were rescued from further agonies by the announcement of dinner. Oakley was meant to escort Miss Talbot in and sit next to her, and so he offered his arm, hoping that the absence of her mother would make the girl easier. It did not—not if the trembling he perceived was any indication.

He caught Bess’s eye as he was helping Miss Talbot into her chair. It seemed as though she had been watching him but jerked her eyes away hastily when he caught her at it. Such a circumstance occurred several times over the course of the dinner, and each time, her eyes lingered just a little longer.

Unable to draw Miss Talbot out, no matter what subject he introduced, Oakley resolved himself to carrying the conversation with stories from his youth, his time at school, and his own recent forays into society. Miss Talbot seemed appreciative of his efforts and even went so far as to look at him occasionally.

When the servants began to clear the second course, Oakley permitted himself a respite, turning to Frederica, on his other side. “What do you think?” she asked him immediately in a low voice.

“Very sweet,” he replied automatically. “Good appetite. Enjoyed the mackerel, though I myself could not abide the smell of it.”

Frederica laughed and gave him a discreet swat on the arm. “It is her house after all, perhaps mackerel with fennel is customary here.”

“Served at every meal,” Oakley agreed with a chuckle. “She is very timid. Barely speaks a syllable.”

“Mr Leighton seems to have overcome that difficulty.” Frederica gave him a little nudge, and he looked back at his dinner companion who now very nearly had her back to him. She was speaking, with some animation, to Leighton, and Leighton was more than a little delighted by it, if the look on his face was any indication.

Oakley turned back to Frederica. “Well, how about that now?”

“It does not mean she did not like you! Perhaps after dinner?—”

“All told, I have been by her side for nearly two hours now,” Oakley informed his sister. “And I do not think I got as many words from her in two hours as Leighton has got in the last two minutes. It is all very well; let love flourish where it will.”

He happened to glance back at them then and again perceived Bess looking at him. This time when caught, she only gave a little wry smile to him, following an expressive glance towards her brother. Oakley smiled and gave a small shrug, wishing her to know he was not distressed by the lady’s defection.

The ladies and gentlemen separated after dinner, as was customary and common, and Leighton was shame-faced for a moment. “Quite stole your thunder, my friend, forgive me.”

“Think nothing of that.” Oakley waved his hand as if to whisk the words away. “We did not get on as the pair of you did, and who am I to stand in the way of such natural harmony?”

“She was everything lovely,” Leighton enthused. “An angel in every way!”

“Do you think so?” Oakley tilted his head. “Hm, well in that case perhaps I ought not to yield so easily.” Then he laughed and gave Leighton a little punch on the arm to let him know all was right and tight.

Leighton chuckled but then grew sober. “My father requires me to travel with him in two days’ time. I only hope I can call on her before we leave.”

“Where will you go?”

“Bicester.”

“Bicester?” Oakley laughed. “For what?”

“Likely nothing, but perhaps...something.”

Oakley found his curiosity roused. The other men were all clustered about the other end of the table, sampling something that Sir Edmund had brought out in multiple small, dark bottles. Their loud joviality made it easy for Oakley to pull his chair closer to Leighton. “What sort of something do you seek?”

Leighton pursed his lips for a moment, then admitted, “Beamish.”

“Beamish?” Oakley exclaimed too loudly, and several of the gentlemen at the other end of the table looked over.

“I knew it was strange how he was never about with his wife,” he continued in a hushed voice when Leighton shushed him. “Where has he gone? That rotter! I should very much enjoy dragging him back to London myself!”

Leighton shook his head. "No, no, I have said too much. Only...only if you hear anything of it, will you get word to my father or me?"

"Yes, of course, you may depend upon it. But...if I hear anything of what , precisely?"

"Just anything. Anything at all that strikes you as...odd."

Blast if Leighton was not being strange! Everything about all of it was odd! Oakley had no notion what to make of him.

"Very well," Oakley agreed. "Anything strange."

There was a short silence until, with some delicacy, Leighton mentioned, "I understand there is some talk about your deceased uncle..."

"Being a jewel thief?" Oakley sighed. "You are not the first to speak of it to me."

"Is there truth in it?" The look of concern on Leighton's face was gratifying in its sincerity.

"I cannot yet say. My father and I have heard of a man in Fleet Street who says he has information on the matter. We have not yet met the man, but we will. Not sure what, if anything, will come of it, but we think it will likely come to nothing. We only wish to have forewarning if there is further scandal to come about."

Whatever Leighton might have said to that was lost, for Sir Edmund rose, giving a little clap to draw the twenty-odd men in the room to attention. "I daresay we have left the ladies to their own pleasures long enough!"

When Oakley entered the drawing room, he was urged to join Miss Talbot at the

instrument by her mother who evidently had not observed her daughter's preferences at dinner.

"Viscount, you will surely wish to turn the pages for her?" she said loudly while Miss Talbot made embarrassed noises nearby.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said. "I daresay Mr Leighton here may be more qualified to perform the office, are you not, sir?"

Leighton, who had been slightly behind him, said immediately, "I should be honoured to assist your fair daughter in any way I can, Lady Talbot."

Lady Talbot seemed reluctant, but Miss Talbot looked up at Leighton, a pale pink blush on her cheeks. "Thank you, Mr Leighton. Stand here, if you will?" The spot she directed him to was quite near, and Oakley, with a short bow, left it in his friend's hands and walked away, nearly colliding with Bess.

"Oh!" she exclaimed as he did likewise. They both paused.

The arrival of men into a drawing room always made things seem closer and warmer. Voices rang louder, steps were firmer, and music played louder above the din. Oakley was immediately made weary even hearing the beginnings of it. On an impulse, he asked, "Will you come outside with me?"

After the briefest hesitation, she said, simply, "Yes."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Talbots' house opened onto one of the lesser squares. An obliging footman asked Oakley if he would like his carriage called for, and Oakley explained they only meant to take the air. He knew not what else to expect from the stroll, but it was enough for now that Bess had agreed to come with him. He could not stand another moment pretending indifference towards her. He led her down the stairs and out of the house, across the street. They remained in silence as they entered the square; she glanced up at him with a questioning look, and he said, "Let us not go too far. It would not do to have the footpads come upon us."

"I do not fancy that idea myself," she said lightly.

He turned to face her, unable to resist the temptation of a light brush of her bare arm. "I have done my best to honour your request of me tonight."

"My request." She sighed, looking down at her hands chafing against one another. She looked up. "I despise how we ended things at our last meeting."

"As do I."

"Do you like Miss Talbot?"

Oakley nodded. "She is a sweet girl. I think she would make you a fine sister-in-law."

"Sister-in-law?" Her eyes widened. "Do you think Leighton likes her so much?"

“He certainly got on with her far better than I did.” Oakley enjoyed the look of relief that crossed Bess’s countenance. “She is connected to Penrith; it would be a good match for him.”

“Dear Ollie.” She nodded, looking pensive. “I cannot say whether he thinks to seek matrimony as yet or not.”

“Seeking matrimony is a difficult thing,” he observed. “It seems far easier to me to allow matrimony to find you rather than the other way round.”

“I am sorry,” she said feelingly. “I wish it were not so. You deserve...you deserve the best of the best, dear Oakley.”

“Alas, that is you...and you cannot be mine.”

“I shall forever be yours,” she murmured. “Even if it is only in friendship.”

His heart swelled so at her words that it robbed him of his breath. The moon was full and its pale light traced the alabaster of her cheek as he stood simply drinking in the sight of her. He longed to taste the sweetness of her cheek, to touch her hair, to feel her warmth pressed against him. She belongs to Beamish, he reminded himself but found that, in the moment, he could not much care about that.

“I wish for far more, but as it is impossible”—he swallowed, hard—“I shall take friendship. I am honoured you offer me as much.”

He took up her hands then, bringing them to his lips for feather-light kisses. She had not donned her gloves after dinner, and her hands were petal-soft against his lips. They stirred him, and he imagined how it might be to continue up her arm, onto her shoulder, her neck, and then meet her lips with his own.

She belongs to Beamish! Gentlemanly honour asserted itself more forcefully this time. To seduce a married woman would make him no better than Damian, for pity's sake!

He forced himself to drop her hands and to take a step back, making his eyes move away from the beauty of her countenance. He stared into the dark shadows of the square, forcing his breath to become even, his body to cool. He could not so much as look to see what she did, if she was similarly affected.

"Forgive me," he finally said.

"There is nothing to forgive."

"If we stay out here much longer, there will be, I assure you." He smiled, feeling weak. "Come, let us go back to the party." He extended his arm that she should precede him and she did.

"You will want to go to see the man on a Tuesday," Lady Lenora informed Lord Tipton and Oakley. "It is the day that they are least busy with pleasure-seekers and gadabouts."

"Pleasure-seekers at the gaol?" Lord Tipton frowned. "Not tourists, surely?"

"There is nothing the wealthy love so much as having a glimpse of the wretched," she replied with a wry grin. "Short of an execution, there is nothing that delights them more than seeing the men in their chains shuffling about."

"Absolutely ghastly," Lord Tipton pronounced and Oakley agreed. That these desperate souls should be subjected to the further indignity of having their misery gawped at by the idly curious!

They were at last to see the man who ostensibly had information about Damian and his doings, and they would not press into the throng of the curious. Lady Lenora had helped them arrange it all and had even offered to accompany the men, much to her mother's dismay. They had kindly refused her in any case.

On the day appointed, they travelled the short distance to Fleet Street. Oakley was relieved to see that Lord Tipton appeared well in health and in spirits; he hoped both would serve his father well in enduring whatever it was Mr Shaw would say.

Lord Tipton had used all the power of his hauteur, and his coin, to insist on a private room for their interview; they were given one reluctantly by a stinking warden who had tobacco-stained lips and shifty eyes. "I should not be surprised if he absconded with my money and we never saw him again," Lord Tipton murmured as he went off, supposedly to fetch their man. Oakley murmured an agreement through the handkerchief pressed to his nose; the stench of so many unwashed and sick men was nigh on unbearable.

The man who came to them was called Mr Whittaker Shaw, and he was an inmate of the Common Side of the ward. They had been told he was the third son of a baronet—a notion which made Lord Tipton scoff—and that his father had disowned him for descending so far into debt. He was painfully thin, as would be expected for a man who had been in gaol for a twelve-month complete, and his chains made a clinking sound as he slowly shuffled towards them. Lord Tipton and Oakley rose to greet him.

"Good sirs," he said with an awkward bow. "How good you are to meet me." He spoke in educated accents, making Oakley think that it was perhaps true, that the poor man was a disowned third son. Like my birth father. He immediately felt greater compassion for the man.

"Pray sit." Lord Tipton gestured towards the bench that had been placed for the

purpose across from their own. Mr Shaw sank onto it gratefully. Oakley and Lord Tipton also sat, and for a moment, no one seemed to know how to begin.

“You understand, sir,” Lord Tipton began, “that we are by no means certain that you possess information of use to us?”

Mr Shaw nodded. “I do.”

“And that any information you provide to us will not be used for further conviction? I say that to encourage you to speak freely, for there is nothing for you to lose by candour.”

Mr Shaw nodded again.

“Lastly, if we do find your information to be of use, only then shall we meet your demand of twenty pounds.”

“Pray know that it pains me to ask for anything at all. Only my own desperation compels me to request it, and as soon as I am able, you will see it returned to you,” Mr Shaw promised earnestly.

Lord Tipton made a wordless noise of disbelief. “Well, we shall see about all of that. First let us discuss what information you have and why it is that you, and only you, have it.”

Mr Shaw moved on the bench, seeking a better position. “Your brother?—”

“Mention him only as Damian,” Oakley inserted immediately. “We do not recognise the family connection, though it cannot be hid.”

“Forgive me. Damian, then.” Mr Shaw gave Oakley an apologetic smile.

“How did you know him?” Oakley asked.

For a moment, Mr Shaw pressed his lips together. “I found myself in a bit of trouble from time spent at the gaming hells,” he admitted. “As many do, I always believed that the next hand should save me. Always the next hand, then the next and the next after that with no alteration of fortune, forever digging myself deeper into debt. I soon found myself well beyond the reach of my means, approaching sums that would leave me with nothing.”

“You squandered your entire fortune?” Oakley asked.

Mr Shaw hung his head. “Through my own foolishness, I would be destitute. Destitute and without family, for even then I knew what my father would do, once he learnt of it. I was panicked, knowing not what I could do to set things to rights. Then a kindly older gentleman took an interest in me, telling me he had a way out for me.”

“Damian?” Oakley guessed.

“I knew him first as Mr Milliard, but yes, it was Damian Richmond. I did not know it then. He had a very persuasive way about him, and I was desperate to recover whatever I could, in whatever way I could. So it was that I became a party to his scheme.”

“The thieving?” Lord Tipton asked.

“Somehow he made it seem right. Ladies always have more jewels than they can wear, and the great houses are laden with too many silver trays to count. A burden to the servants to polish! Why not move a few such items about and line my own pockets in the process? He made it all seem so...so harmless.”

Oakley and Lord Tipton glanced at one another, then Oakley nodded to Mr Shaw to

continue.

“What I did not immediately know was that Damian was involved with the Carter gang of smugglers, a particularly bloodthirsty group, but they positively adored him. I believe he began as merely an investor but soon realised there was more to be had. The Carters, you see, were only bringing things in, mostly from the French. Damian persuaded them to be active in also sending things out of England.”

“Things? Things like what?” Oakley enquired.

“Jewels mostly, silver, an occasional piece of art. Whatever someone somewhere might want, Damian would see that they had it—for a price.”

Lord Tipton looked troubled, but dubious. “I can scarcely credit this, with all due respect. Damian was not the sort who liked to get his hands dirty and certainly not for the occasional watch fob.”

“It was far more than an occasional watch fob. That was where men like me came in. He would employ younger gentlemen of upper levels of society—many of us choked in the stranglehold of debt—men whom no one would ever suspect of taking things from the house. There were many of us, each of us on any given night taking a candelabra or a bracelet, perhaps two from among the lady of the house’s finest necklaces. We would bring our wares to Damian and he would pay us, then pass them along to the Carters. The Carters would see that the goods got out of England, and Damian would receive a share of the profit.”

“You stole from the houses you visited?” Lord Tipton asked, his tone severe.

Mr Shaw nodded miserably. “Only a few times...perhaps five. I do not mean to diminish my role in it, but I had not the disposition for thievery. I did what needed to be done to cover my debts and then wanted to be out of the scheme. I told Damian, no

more, I was out. Alas, like most groups of that sort, once you are in, they do not like you to leave. Thus it was by his hand that I was sent to the gaol, although if I am being perfectly fair, it was also by his hand that I was not hanged for theft as could have been done.”

“What you are telling me is that Damian was the leader of this gang of gentlemen thieves in London, taking things from the houses of the ton which were then smuggled from the country for a share of the profit for him,” Lord Tipton summarised. “Yes?”

“That is correct,” Mr Shaw confirmed. “It went on for several years and was profitable for all involved until Damian unknowingly gave paste jewellery to the Carters, thinking they were real. He was being crossed by one or perhaps several of the other men and had no suspicion of it until one of the Carters’ men told him he would be killed—slowly and painfully—if he ever tried such a thing again.”

“How did that happen?” Oakley asked. “I should have imagined Damian quite shrewd, if nothing else.”

“The men, one in particular, who made the paste jewels had become exceedingly talented at it. One could hardly know the difference seeing two pieces side by side. Apparently the man in question would steal something, make a forgery of it, and then Damian would buy it, thinking it real. Damian would then send it through the Carters. In the meantime, I would imagine the man making the paste jewels intended to make his own arrangements for the real jewels; I know not if he actually did.

“Needless to say, Damian was enraged that this upstart thief had endangered him so, and he went into Bicester, wishing to lay low while he determined who had deceived him. Alas, due to some other matter with a nobleman, Damian found himself being sent to gaol.”

Of course, Oakley—and Lord Tipton as well, he suspected—knew exactly the matter of which Mr Shaw spoke, but he said nothing of it.

“I, too, was in Bicester gaol for a time, and presuming me a friend, Damian confided that he meant to be freed at once. The Carters would give him money, he said, but first he would make good to them by providing the real jewels. Thus, he summoned the man he suspected of betraying him?—”

“Why would the fellow go? Who was he?” Oakley asked, intrigued by the tale despite himself.

Mr Shaw shook his head. “I do not know the gentleman’s name. Damian called him the Corgi, and that was how I knew him. He was a handsome fellow, I shall give him that, but then again so were we all once. Damian did not like to employ the ill-favoured—he said it boded ill for a caper to have ugly fellows stamping about enacting it. In any case, whosoever the Corgi was, he came to Damian because, I believe, he would have had no notion that Damian was on to him. I should imagine that he believed he was being summoned to help Damian and was happy to act as agent, likely imagining some reward would result.”

Lord Tipton said, “So this unnamed man, this Corgi, came to the gaol in Bicester?—”

“Two of them came, but alas I knew the second even less than I knew Corgi,” said Mr Shaw. “There were few of us in the yard when it all happened, but Damian had drawn aside the men for their discussion. I know not when or how things went awry, but a fight ensued, one which proved fatal for Damian.”

Shocked, Oakley asked, “The man killed him?”

“Several were involved in the fight, and I know not who dealt the death blow. I have heard it was the Corgi who, it is said, brought in a blade.”

“Allow me to put a conclusion on this,” Lord Tipton said. “Damian was in fact involved in a ring of jewel thieves—a ring leader of sorts—but was likely killed by one of his underlings.”

He looked pained, Oakley noticed. He was not surprised. Their estrangement notwithstanding, it could not be pleasant hearing the gruesome details of his brother’s death. To hear the full extent of his infamy at the same time must be painful indeed. For himself, Oakley only grew angrier still with his uncle. There truly was no end to the ways in which he had damaged the Richmond family while he was alive.

“Yes,” Mr Shaw agreed.

“And is it likely, do you think, that jewels or money remain that these Carters might like to get hold of?”

Mr Shaw considered that a moment. “I am not an authority on the matter, of course, but I shall say that the Carters were not investing in the schemes. It was Damian who put up the blunt to get the goods and pass them on in hopes of the return. The Carters’ part began when Damian delivered to them.”

“So if the supply had dried up...?” Lord Tipton asked.

“I do not think the Carters would go looking for it. They likely kept Damian’s portion from the last shipments and moved on to greener pastures. The Carters steal entire shiploads of goods at a time; I know not how much these jewels signified to them.”

“And this business of Rundell, Bridge and Rundell. Do you know anything of that?”

“I heard Damian mention that in reference to the Corgi,” said Mr Shaw. “The Corgi had a talent for fashioning replicas with paste, it seemed, and he used that to advantage in the matter of Rundell, Bridge and Rundell. I do not think Damian had

any involvement. He thought the whole thing too damn tricky. Liked easy money, did Damian. He was not one to risk his neck.”

Lord Tipton looked thoughtful as he nodded. “Anything else we should know, sir?”

Mr Shaw shook his head.

“Oblige my curiosity, if you will,” Lord Tipton said. “Twenty pounds is a very small sum for this information. Why did you not try to ask me for more?”

“It may not seem so now, my lord, but I am a gentleman,” said Mr Shaw. “The information is about a dead relation and thus worth only a nominal amount, I felt. I asked only for that which was desperately needed to broker my release from here, and I do say, again, that I shall return it to you.”

“We appreciate your candour,” Oakley told him.

“That we do,” said Lord Tipton. “I intend to see the magistrate next to pay your twenty pounds, Mr Shaw, and wish you Godspeed.”

Lord Tipton and Oakley rose to leave as did Mr Shaw. It was a relief to Oakley’s posterior to leave the hard wooden bench, and it was this he was mostly thinking of when he said, idly, “Why was the man called the Corgi?”

Mr Shaw paused. “All gangs adopt nicknames for one another. It would not do to utter family names amid such schemes, so the leader will always begin calling a person this or that. I was the Lily, for being too nervous, too lily-livered. The Corgi was...well, he was the Corgi after those dogs from Wales with the enormous ears.”

Oakley felt himself stiffen. “A handsome fellow but large ears?”

“Oh yes. Quite comical in fact, could scarce be contained beneath his hat.” Mr Shaw chuckled wanly.

For a moment, Oakley stood rooted to the spot, implications of it all racing through his mind. It was the clearing of Lord Tipton’s throat that returned him to his senses, and he followed him from the room.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Oakley could not like the fatigue on his father's countenance as they left Fleet Street. Lord Tipton was positively grey, and it stilled the impulse that Oakley had to immediately discuss his suspicions of who 'the Corgi' might be. In any case, his family had made it amply clear that they believed any and all things Beamish were not his business; they would not like to hear that he now suspected Beamish of murder.

They would think I wished to implicate Beamish merely to get him out of my way. Perhaps I do, at that.

His instinct proved correct. Lord Tipton took his dinner on a tray that evening and remained in bed the day following, assuring them all that he was quite well and only fatigued from the events of the day prior.

"Shall I sit with you?" Oakley offered. "Perhaps I might read to you?"

"Later," Lord Tipton said. "For now, I shall do as old men do and sit quietly ruminating."

This prompted several cries of protest from all in the room, which included Oakley, Lady Tipton, and Lord Tipton's man. Lord Tipton waved them all off with a faint smile on his lips. "Now, now, all of you just go on. I promise not to die while you go about your days."

That he should speak so seemed promising—surely gravely ill men did not make

jokes about their own demise?—but nevertheless Oakley was determined to remain at home for the morning. He encouraged his mother to make her calls and do the things ladies did. “I shall remain in the house,” he assured her. “If he needs anything at all, I shall see that he has it.” At length she was persuaded to go out, for she had a meeting of one of her committees, but promised to return directly after.

After taking some breakfast, Oakley sat at his father’s desk, indulging himself in a dreadful habit he possessed of chewing on his pen. Both quill and nib were beyond mending already, but he could not stop himself, for he needed to devote his mental faculties to thinking of Beamish.

What did he know of the man, really? It was a great leap to go from disliking a fellow for stealing your girl to accusing him of a hanging offence. Yes, it was odd he had not been seen about town, but he was not the first man to marry and then tend to the house for a time. Was Beamish even the master of his estate? Were his father and mother still alive? Oakley had no idea. Beamish had been like a bot-fly lingering about, always on the edges, never of much significance to any of them as their family was being reunited and Oakley was making calf’s eyes at Bess.

The butler entered the study amid his ruminations. “Sir, there is a caller for Lady Tipton, but as her ladyship is out, she wondered if you might receive her.”

“Who is that?” Oakley asked over the edge of his chair.

Silently the butler came and handed him a card. Miss Bess Leighton, it said, no doubt her card from her maiden days. Oakley shot to his feet in a moment, striding across the room. “I shall see her in here,” he told the butler.

“Shall I send a maid in, sir?”

“Please do,” Oakley replied, then came to a stop and turned back. “Only...”

“Only what, my lord?”

Lowering his voice, Oakley said, with a grin, “You might not remember to do that right away, hm? Perhaps the maids are all busy at their work? In any case, the lady is a married woman, and surely we might depend upon my gentlemanly honour for a short while at least?”

The butler nodded, then added somewhat sternly, “No more than a quarter of an hour, sir. I should not like to see another scandal in the house.”

Oakley gave him a little salute and nearly ran towards the drawing room. Although he knew to expect her there, his heart still gave a pleasant little jolt to see her sitting in the drawing room, lovely in a morning gown the colour of aquamarines.

She rose when he entered and immediately put a hand over her mouth, giggling. “Oh, Oakley, what have you done to yourself?”

“What is it?”

She gestured at the area about his mouth, her eyes sparkling with mirth. He decided he did not care if he were an object of amusement, so long as it was her amusement. Pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, he said, “Now you know my secret. I have a filthy habit of chewing on my pen while I write. Better?”

“Um, mostly, yes. There is still a little right over...there.” She gestured to the corner of his mouth and he dabbed, seeing by her look that it was not solving the problem.

“I shall likely need to go to my man and have him give me a proper scrub,” he pronounced at last.

“It is mostly gone,” she said with a little laugh. “I promise I shall not continue

laughing at you.”

“You likely had no notion of coming here to find a madman who had scribbled ink all over himself.” He took a seat and offered her tea, which she declined. “In truth, I have such an appearance because I have been putting a great deal of thought into some things we lately learnt about Damian.”

“Yes, I... At the risk of seeming impudent, I was hoping to hear some of what you learnt from that.” She looked embarrassed, admitting, “I suspected Lady Tipton might be away from home. My mother is at the same meeting as she is. Of course, I could only hope that you might have remained in this morning.”

“But here I am, and delighted you have come.” His good humour faded slightly, and he added, “Would that we had every morning together! You would grow very impatient with me, I daresay, always lingering about.”

She shook her head. “No, I would not, but...we must not speak of such things. It is not right.”

He agreed with a tight nod. “But you wished to hear what we learnt in the gaol and so I shall tell you.”

In broad strokes, he told her what they had learnt from Mr Shaw, the ring of jewel thieves and Damian at the head of it all.

“I suppose—” She began in a voice that sounded high and strained. Reaching up a hand to smooth her hair, she said, “I suppose that is all over and done now? Is Lord Tipton satisfied or does he intend to make further enquiries into the matter?”

“I am not certain. He wishes above all to be sure there are no further surprises, no more scandal awaiting the family,” Oakley said, watching her carefully. She had

averted her eyes from him, and it seemed to him she looked paler. “On the other hand, I cannot deny it takes a toll on my uncle, learning more about his brother’s wrongdoings. He has taken to his bed today to recuperate.”

She nodded but still did not look at him, her fingers picking anxiously at her skirts. “Likely you will encourage him to stop, then? To let matters lie?”

He had been seated in the chair near the sofa she sat upon, and now he took it upon himself to move. It was likely not wise, he told himself, to sit closer and yet he was a moth to her flame. He could not help himself.

“I confess that for myself, there were other bits that piqued my interest,” he said. “That Damian was involved in such a thing is not wholly shocking. I have come to believe my uncle believed himself entitled to anything he wished for and would resort to any means to get it. But I was shocked to learn that others had been involved, other men, possibly those whom I know, stealing from the families of the ton .”

“Accused of it,” she said immediately. “Not known for certain.”

“That is true,” he agreed, studying her carefully. She was distressed, he saw, and could not meet his eye. “Bess? You seem unduly dismayed by this news.”

“Dismayed? Oh, I suppose I am a little. Like you say, it is shocking to imagine it.”

The nonchalance of her words nowise matched her tone. Colour had risen in her cheeks, and her eyes darted about as if seeking escape. She knows something.

“At the risk of upsetting you,” he said slowly, “I must ask you something.”

“I pray you would not. In fact, I believe I am late and ought to be on my way.”

“Bess, this could be of great importance, for you and for us.”

“There is not an ‘us’, Oakley.” Now she looked at him full in the face. “No ‘us’ to concern yourself with.”

“Beamish acts like a man in hiding,” he said, the thoughts nearly tumbling from him. “Always somewhere else doing heaven knows what! A man of his description visited Damian in the gaol the day he was killed!”

“Do you accuse my husband of murder?” She gave a brief, almost hysterical laugh. “I assure you I did not marry a murderer!”

“Could he be involved in this? I do not mean to say he murdered my uncle...but might he be, or have been, involved in Damian’s scheme?”

She met his gaze, her mouth opening as if to speak and her hands, on her lap, beginning to chafe one another violently. “I...I, um... No, of course not.”

And then she burst into tears.

What began as a mere gesture of consolation, of friendship, he would try to persuade himself later, flamed into much more. His apologies became tender assurances of his devotion. Gently brushing away her tears became his lips kissing away the trails they had left. His arm, lent in comfort to her shaking shoulders, found its way around her waist, pulling her close to him as he kissed her with all the fervency of love denied.

Too quickly she wrenched herself out of his arms. Before he could even begin to apologise, she was on her feet, running towards the door. After a moment of surprise, he ran after her. “Bess! Wait!”

She ran down the hall, her skirts billowing behind her. Her bonnet and pelisse, her

gloves were ignored as she yanked open the large wooden door and dashed into the street.

Nearly running headlong into Hanson.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

There was confusion on the street as Bess calmed herself and Oakley called for the butler to bring her outdoor garments and get her carriage brought round. Both sought the appearance of a typical morning call, with Bess asking him very politely to give her best regards to Lord Tipton and him telling her to pass his regards to Sir Humphrey and Lady Leighton. All the while Hanson stood, watching. "You may go," Oakley said to him at one point. He had hoped hauteur would mortify him, but Hanson was the sort of man incapable of such fine feelings as mortification and stood his ground.

Oakley, on the other hand, was very nearly sick with mortification and disgust for having kissed Bess, dishonoured her. He was no gentleman, and he wished more than anything that Bess would slap him soundly, perhaps give him a kick or two as well. "Pray forgive me," he murmured to Bess as he handed her into her carriage. "I do not deserve your mercy but plead with you to grant it to me."

She shook her head, with tears again springing into the corners of her eyes, tears that he despised himself for causing. He felt helpless and uncertain, watching her depart, wondering whether it was best to let her leave or if he ought to try and keep her there to continue making amends. I have bungled this all too badly to set things right at present, he decided. Perhaps some time to calm themselves would help them both.

He watched the carriage go down the road, wishing she might turn around; she did not. When her conveyance had turned the corner, Oakley moved to go back in the house, pointedly turning his back on Hanson who, inexplicably and infuriatingly, yet lingered on the street. "Farewell, Hanson," he said over his shoulder.

“That was certainly a peculiar scene,” Hanson drawled, causing Oakley to stop.

He faced him with arms across his chest. “Peculiar? Hardly. Mrs Beamish called on Lady Tipton. On finding that the lady was not at home, she gave her regards to me and my uncle, who is ill, as any civil person would. And then she left. Not that any of that is your concern.”

“You know, you have a little something on your lip,” Hanson said, tapping his own with his gloved finger. “Black. Looks like ink. And matches damnably well with the same spot on Mrs Beamish’s lips. Why did she cry, Oakley? Did you take her against her will?”

Oakley’s heart lurched into his throat; he had not noticed the ink on Bess’s lips. He had been too preoccupied with the tears in her eyes. He closed the short distance between them in a trice. “Name your second,” he spat. “You will answer for that insult.”

Hanson only smirked. “My apologies for the insult,” he said smoothly, with no sincerity whatsoever.

“I should not go about spreading tattle on Mrs Beamish, ruining her good name, were I you. Her husband will not tolerate it and neither shall I.”

“Her husband?” Now Hanson laughed outright. “Oh yes, Beamish. He would need to find me first! I shall bid you good day, Viscount. It is still Viscount, is it not? Or have you laid claim to new titles since I saw you last? Perhaps you are the Duke of Oakley now? One does not know what to call you one day to the next.”

“At least no one thinks to call me a jewel thief,” Oakley retorted. “Which is more than can be said of you.”

The effect on Hanson was shocking. His mirth gone, he lunged at Oakley, grabbing his lapels and cravat, shoving his face at him, demanding, “Who? Was it Beamish? That saucebox! When?”

“Stand down.” Oakley gave him a small shove away from him. “I could beat you at school and I shall again if you do not behave as a gentleman ought to.”

Hanson stepped backwards. His face had flushed a dull red, with beads of sweat dotting his forehead. His eyes had narrowed to slits, and his breath came fast.

Beholding him, Oakley laughed, though it was more from incredulity than amusement. “It is true, then. By Jove, Hanson, I knew you were a sly mushroom, but this is beyond anything.”

“We must go somewhere to discuss this. It is not merely your uncle; it is far, far more complicated than that.”

Oakley shrugged. “If you think I mean to go anywhere with you, you have run mad. You forget—Damian is dead. The family’s interest in this wanes accordingly.”

It was not wholly true, but Hanson did not need to know that.

“Who said I had a part in it?” Hanson demanded again. “Did Mrs Beamish say so? What did she say? Either you will tell me or I shall call on her myself and get the information from her.”

Oakley stiffened. “You will leave her alone, Hanson. She knows nothing about any of this.”

“Is that what you think?” Hanson raised one eyebrow. “If so, then you have been gulled as surely as anyone.”

Oakley knew not what to make of that. “By your own words, you have convicted yourself as a party to this scheme. I spoke in jest, but you have confirmed it. That said—” He held up one hand to silence Hanson who appeared as if he were about to speak. “You leave Bess alone and you leave me alone and you may depend upon my silence. I am not the magistrate, nor do I wish to be one.”

“Beamish cut me out,” Hanson hissed. “I want to see him dangle as much as you do!”

“Who said I wish to see Beamish dangle?”

“Stop your useless protests. I see how much you want her, and death is the only way to part them!”

“I hardly wish the man dead. He knew her first; he married her. Where is the harm to me in that?”

Hanson rolled his eyes. “As you wish. But do know this: when next I see him, he will receive no mercy from me.” He stepped back then, and gestured between them with his hand. “We will keep one another’s secrets then, yes?”

Oakley forced a laugh. “What do you think you have on me?”

“Stealing a man’s wife is just as bad as stealing the wife’s necklace,” Hanson said. “Worse, some might say?—”

“I did not?—”

“Come, come!” Hanson interrupted. “Your very look condemns you. You gaze at her like a starving man sees bread. But I shall not tell a soul about that if you do not tell anyone about me. I do not wish to end my life aged six-and-twenty in a hangman’s noose, Oakley. I should think you would grant me that much.”

He extended his hand and Oakley reluctantly accepted it, shaking a hand that made him feel he was making a pact with the devil himself.

An hour later—having washed all the ink from his countenance—he was back in Lord Tipton’s study, still pondering the events of the morning when Kem was announced.

“What is the matter with you?” he exclaimed the moment he saw Oakley. “I understood it was his lordship who was feeling poorly, but now I come and see you in such a state!”

“Is it really so bad?” Oakley quirked a grin as Kem dropped into the chair nearest him. “I am well and his lordship is resting peacefully. Visiting the gaol yesterday proved too much for him, I fear. How did you know?”

“Adelaide was with Lady Tipton at her committee meeting. I am afraid my dear wife cannot resist a charitable cause, particularly one that is aimed at helping children.”

“Which society is it today?”

“Aid for invalid children,” Kem told him. “Possibly invalids in general? Or maybe a society for the relief of the poor? I cannot keep them all straight, but I do know Adelaide means to hold a ball to raise funds for it, whatever it is.”

“How good my sisters are!” Oakley shook his head in wonderment. “Plucked from whatever foul misfortune had befallen them only to become leaders in society, while I, the elder brother meant to guide them, flail about kissing other people’s wives.”

He had not meant to say it so frankly; Kem was rightly shocked, his brows high on his forehead. “You kissed a married woman? Pray do not say it was?”

“Mrs Beamish, yes.” With a sigh, Oakley stood and went to retrieve the small bottle of brandy his father kept in the sideboard. “Not too early, is it?” he asked rhetorically, pouring two glasses. “I did not mean to say it any more than I meant to do it. And yet I did both. Pray do not censure me, Kem, for I have done nothing but loathe myself since it happened.”

Kem grimaced. “He will call you out, of course. I do not know the man, but who would not?”

“I must tell him, I daresay,” Oakley admitted. His reluctant agreement with Hanson notwithstanding, he was not accustomed to being laid upon with guilt. He was a man who followed rules, who pleased his schoolmasters, and who made his father and mother proud. He was not a man who condoned misbehaviour and, having done such a thing, wished to answer for it.

“It would be infinitely worse to be discovered to have kissed her and kept it a secret, than to tell him yourself I should think.”

“I agree. I am already sinking under the weight of my remorse. I do not suppose thinking him Damian’s murderer lets me off that hook?”

“What is this? You think Beamish murdered Damian?”

“I think it is possible.”

Oakley related to Kem the conversation that had been had with Mr Whittaker Shaw, notably the mysterious man referred to as the Corgi. He said nothing of Hanson but quickly explained his suspicions about the identity of the Corgi.

Kem whistled, long and low. “Do you truly think it is possible? I cannot claim to know Beamish, but he seemed decent enough on the few occasions I have been in

company with him.”

“But that is the point, is it not? The men employed were thought to be above suspicion, else the scheme would not have worked,” Oakley said. “And Mrs Beamish’s response this morning could only confirm that something there is afoot. I just do not know if we will ever know the truth of it. One can hardly go to a man and say, hey-ho, I kissed your wife but you killed my uncle, so shall we call it even?”

“Short of confession, it is unlikely any of us will ever know. Damian took his secrets with him to Hell.” Kem offered, “I would be honoured to stand as your second, of course.”

Oakley threw up his hands and shook his head. “No, no, I could not ask it of you. Firstly, you have a child you must think of. Secondly, if I managed to survive the duel, Adelaide would subsequently have my neck for involving you in it!”

“That she would.” Kem chuckled. “Then let us hope it will not come to that.”

“One thing is most certain. If I am to apologise to the man, I shall have to find him first, and that is something that no one, not even his wife, seems able to do.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The next day, Oakley began his calls on Bruton Street, thinking he might as well maintain the pretence of interest in Lady Emma. I have neglected her, he mused, trying to recollect when it was that he had last seen her in society.

Lady Emma sat with her mother and another young lady named Miss Watson who appeared to be of like mind with regards to gossip. Her mother left when Oakley arrived, after which the two younger ladies fairly tumbled over one another in their eagerness to acquaint him with the latest on dit, most of which made him laugh: Mr Byng had gambled away his poodle, then won back his poodle plus another; Miss Everleigh had accepted an offer of marriage from a man from Massachusetts, believing Massachusetts was in England; and everyone who had gone to Lady Dartmore's dinner party had fallen miserably sick.

"I believe it was the fish," said Miss Watson. "If there is something to turn your stomach, it is bound to be the fish."

Lady Emma was shaking her head firmly as her friend spoke, her curls bouncing about. "No, no, they all say it was the wine! It was spoilt!"

"Lady Dartmore is saying it is an outbreak of typhus," Miss Watson said. "Seems she would rather think us all on the verge of a plague than admit she served her guests something bad!"

Oakley was still wiping the tears of laughter from his eyes when Miss Watson said, in a playful tone, "But my friend here has not told you the biggest news of all."

“Oh, that!” Lady Emma giggled, then said, coquettishly, “Pray do not despise me, Oakley.”

“That sounds like a promising beginning indeed,” he said with a smile. “What have you done?”

Lady Emma paused and into the breach sailed her friend. “She has accepted an offer of marriage from Sir Angus Fitzherbert. He has Herbert Hall in Kent and eight thousand a year!”

“Congratulations, Lady Emma,” Oakley said warmly, realising he felt no disappointment. “I wish you both every happiness.”

“I thank you kindly,” she said with equal warmth. “My mother and father are very pleased with me, and I think Sir Angus and I shall shift along very well together.”

“He seems like a good man,” Oakley said, although in truth he did not know him. Sir Angus was thirty-five if he was a day, but he supposed it was not too dreadfully old.

At once the idea of remaining on the marriage market another decade assailed him. He imagined himself, aged thirty-five, proposing to some young lady who giggled and simpered with her friends, all of whom had only just left school. Nausea rose within him at the notion, and he was on his feet immediately. “I must take my leave of you,” he said, careful to keep a smile on his face. “But I again offer my congratulations, Lady Emma. Sir Angus is most fortunate.”

As he had done before, he dismissed Hobcaw and the carriage and made the journey between Bruton Street and Dover Street on foot. The sense of foreboding over his future did not leave him, borne out of the hopelessness that plagued him since the day he learnt Bess Leighton had become Bess Beamish. There had long been something within him that simply could not believe it. It was too false, too nonsensical to be

accepted. Was it merely stubbornness? A refusal to own that she would never be his? A reluctance to deny himself something he really, really wanted? He could not believe it was true, but it seemed increasingly that it might be the case.

“It will certainly be easier to believe when I am counting my paces with Beamish,” he muttered, causing a passing lady to look at him strangely.

He was relieved when Bess said she would receive him, but less so when he found her with her brother in the drawing room.

“Oakley,” Leighton said by way of greeting. “You find me on my way out, my lord.”

“That is unfortunate,” Oakley said, taking care to disguise his relief. “Perhaps we will meet later, at White’s?”

He had not forgotten his promise to Leighton that he would tell him what he learnt, if he thought it might be of use to him. Is it too soon to say? he wondered. He did comprehend that his suspicions, based on ear size and the mysterious absence of a husband, were hardly enough to convict Beamish of a crime. Going about telling people he was a murderer might be premature, to say the least.

Then he glanced from Leighton to Bess, sitting on the sofa looking achingly vulnerable. She could be in danger, he thought. Who knows what Beamish is capable of? Telling Leighton in confidence surely was not out of order, and in any case, he would certainly desire to know about Mr Shaw and what he had related to Lord Tipton and himself.

“I shall see you there,” Leighton promised, then quit the room, careful to leave the door ajar. Oakley was abashed to see it, wondering whether it was Leighton’s sense of propriety or Bess’s newfound distrust of him that made him do so.

Her warm smile as she invited him to sit assuaged his fears. He selected a chair, and settled into it. "I am dreadfully sorry for distressing you yesterday."

"Not at all. You must forgive me for running from you like a...a ninny," she replied.

"I was a beast to-to... Well, you know. I have been filled with regret ever since."

She looked down at her hands, her mouth twisting into a frown, but said nothing.

"I hope that you will forgive me, and that your husband will as well."

"Beamish? Oh, it is nothing to him, I am sure."

"I would not be so certain," he said. "A man has his pride."

"What he does not know cannot hurt him, can it? It can be our secret," she replied airily. "I should not give him another thought."

Oakley leant forwards, resting his elbows on his knees. "Bess, he must be told. I must go to him and admit what I did. You are a married woman, his in the eyes of the law?—"

She barked a short laugh.

"I cannot blame him if he wishes to call me out," Oakley pressed. "Indeed, I expect it. Nevertheless, gentlemanly honour demands that I tell him and take whatever punishment he chooses to mete out." For a moment, he wished to grab her hands, but good sense stopped him. "But never fear, I shall make it perfectly clear that it was I who did it, and you are innocent of anything. My hope is that my candour will be met with his forbearance."

She rose and walked to the window, her back to him. “Much as I appreciate your wish to behave as a gentleman, I can assure you, telling him is not at all necessary. Wholly unwarranted, in fact.”

“It is both warranted and necessary,” he said with gentle insistence. “Bess, I cannot be a thief. Why, it is positively Biblical, to covet another man’s wife, and I?—”

Turning back to him, she said severely, “I forbid you from going to Beamish. Do I not have some say in this? I believe I must.”

“You do not understand?—”

“No, you do not understand,” she retorted with sudden ferocity and a jab of one finger towards him. “We kissed . Merely a kiss! It is not such a dreadful thing! People kiss! Just leave it be, sir, I beg you.”

“I cannot,” he said quietly. “Forgive me, but I cannot. I have injured both you and him, and I must?—”

“Are you not hearing me?” Her voice had grown shrill. “Just leave it all be! Beamish does not need to know anything!”

Oakley paused and took a breath. He had anticipated some reluctance but not this outright dismay. Certainly not that she would forbid it. “Will you please just tell me where I might find him? Hertfordshire, yes?”

“Yes. I mean, no. He is not there.” A blotchy flush had risen on her chest and cheeks. “I do not know.”

“You do not know where he is?”

She was silent, her colour high and her eyes trained on the carpet. At length she shook her head, the smallest shake. “You have not injured anyone, least of all Beamish, so pray let it lie. Believe me when I say it is of no consequence to him.”

Has he abandoned her? It happened in society; had not the Prince Regent sent away his own wife, seemingly never to return to English soil? There were rumours that he did not intend to permit her to attend the coronation, even!

All the time Bess had been in London without Beamish, there had been myriad tales told of his whereabouts: estate business, concerns in the country, something or another with a friend or relation in this place or that. Had all of it been lies meant to save appearances?

He rose, as he should have done when she stood, and walked slowly to join her at the window. “Has he abandoned you?”

In a very small voice, she said, “No, not...well, perhaps he has, in a manner of speaking.”

“At the risk of causing you further distress, I must tell you that...Hanson confirmed that Beamish was involved in this caper of Damian’s. He suggested that he might have been trying to betray Damian.”

Bess showed no surprise at this. Her eyes remained trained on the carpet, and she said nothing.

Very delicately, Oakley added, “He might have been present in the gaol the day that Damian was murdered. And now you tell me you do not know where he is and that perhaps he has abandoned you? Maybe he is in hiding? If involved in the scheme, there are certainly people he might want to hide from, and well do I understand a wife’s need to protect her husband. I assure you I mean him no harm, no matter what

he has done for or against Damian. If he has gone into hiding?—”

“He is not at Beauvis, and has not been for some time. That I do know.”

“Has your husband gone into hiding?”

“My husband.” She sighed and raised her gaze from the carpet. Meeting his eyes squarely, she said, “Beamish is not my husband. We were never legally married.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

In the seconds and minutes that followed Bess's extraordinary statement, Oakley scarcely knew what happened. Shock, delight, confusion...everything wonderful suffused his being. His legs closed the small gap between them, his arms reached to gather her to him, his lips were on hers, and there was exquisite felicity, an altogether too brief period of bliss.

She pushed him away.

"Forgive me, only I was carried away. My darling! Such excellent news! Hang Beamish then, we can?—"

"It is not excellent news!" Despair filled her eyes. "All of society thinks I am married. I cannot simply be unmarried now. No matter which way it is, I will be seen as ruined. I am ruined. And yes, Beamish might well be hanged, and where should I be then?"

"I care nothing for that," Oakley replied warmly.

"But I do ." Now Bess did cry, producing a handkerchief from her sleeve and pressing it to her eyes while her weeping turned into quiet sobs. Hesitantly Oakley pulled her into his arms again, unable to stop himself from thinking how very right it felt to have her there. Eventually her tears ceased and, with his arm still around her, he led her to the nearest sofa, and they sat.

"Would you like some wine? Some tea, perhaps?" he asked gently.

“No, but...some air might do me good. There is a small courtyard at the back; will you join me there?”

“Of course.”

He followed her from the room, down the back stair and out into the area between the house and the coach house. It had been beautified by someone into a charming space with benches and flowers in abundance.

“We might see a servant or two on their way hither and yon,” Bess told him. “But the air is nice.”

There was a short pause while she seemed to be gathering her thoughts. He had been just about to prod her into continuing their conversation when she burst out, “I have been such a fool! Such an addle-pated idiot! I am ashamed, so very ashamed of myself for having been so thoroughly gulled!”

She began, as was her custom, to chafe her hands against one another. “We were caught, Beamish and I, in an embrace at a party. I-I wished to speak to him. For many years I had supposed he would eventually propose to me, and I think he thought I would always be there, always his little Bess. I felt I needed to tell him about you, and how I had fallen in love with you. He was glad to go outside with me, perfectly civil when I told him there...there was an understanding between you and I. But civility soon became something...less pleasant. Certainly not wanted.”

Oakley felt his hands clench into fists. “Do you mean to say he imposed himself upon you?”

“He... Well, yes. If I am honest, he kissed me no matter that I had no wish to be kissed and his...embrace grew more ardent with every protest I uttered. He... I was cornered, you might say, and he was very insistent.”

Rage was not an emotion Oakley generally experienced, but he did now. He thought he ought not to distract Bess by an expression of his own feelings, but privately he vowed that when and if he met Beamish, he would tear the flesh from his limbs to answer for this.

“All I could think of on that terrace,” she confessed, “was you . How if you knew of it, you would think me untrue. Pray tell me you believe me? I could not bear it, all these months, for you to be thinking me capricious or that my attachment to you had wavered. It never did, never once.”

He took both of her hands in his own, stilling them momentarily. “Of course not,” he assured her, even if he had, once, feared it was so.

“My father and mother felt the matter would be soon enough forgot—it was hardly as if I was ruined! But nearly every day Beamish was on Stratton Street making my poor mother’s nerves just flutter with tales of how fierce the gossip was about us. For the sake of my reputation, he said we needed to marry, and quickly.”

“The gossip was fierce? About a kiss on a terrace? That sounds like a bag of moonshine.”

“I think it likely was, else half of London should be embroiled in scandal.”

“Well they are, but it is not for kissing.”

That made her giggle, and Oakley was inordinately pleased with himself for having made that happen.

“He had my poor mother in such an agitation! Thus my father agreed to a hasty wedding, to calm the supposed gossip. Reverend Margrave was, of course, out of the question—given all that had happened with Scarlett—but Beamish said not to worry,

his friend was lately ordained and would be delighted to perform the ceremony. He said he had already obtained a special licence?—”

“Special licence?” Now Oakley was truly incredulous. “Those are?—”

“Rarer than a hen’s teeth for mere gentlemen, I know, but he claimed to have some special connection with the archbishop, and my family were grown very anxious about all the gossip that was ostensibly circulating, and so we were willing to overlook any irregularities. Including the parson himself...who turned out not to be a parson at all.”

She looked at him full in the face then as she said, “Hanson. It is why we argued that night. One of the reasons anyway.”

“Hanson!” Oakley reared back with shock. The sins of that thieving wretch deepened with every hour that passed! “He is no more ordained than I am.”

“That is true. In any case, I believe I misspoke once and accidentally told you that Damian had been at my wedding breakfast? It was not precisely true, for the breakfast was no more than my family and Beamish gathered round some ham and eggs in an inn. Damian appeared in the middle of it, and he and Beamish closeted themselves for the rest of the day. It was my first indication that all was not what it should be, but what could I do? It was done by then.”

Bess stood and went to a large container filled with a rose bush, absently removing the faded heads from them as she continued her tale. Oakley went behind her, watching the action of her hands as they moved among the roses.

“Everything happened too quickly for any of us to recognise we were being bamboozled. The object of it all was my dowry. Beamish was mightily displeased when he learnt that, as I was only twenty, he had to wait to receive it. It was only a

month or so until my birthday, but he was distant from the beginning, and always seemed angry with me. In any case, he had it soon enough, and once he did, the absences began, growing longer each time.”

“How did you learn the truth of the matter?”

“Beamish did not only deceive us, he deceived Hanson as well. I do not know all that the pair of them were involved in, but in this caper, Hanson was not given his due. Fool that he is, he came to my father, threatening to expose me if he was not paid.” Tears again filled her eyes, but she blinked them away, her gaze still on the flowers. “My poor papa did as he asked, all for fear of scandal.”

“This is dreadful indeed,” Oakley said sympathetically, placing one hand against her back to soothe her. “And now? You do not know where Beamish has got to?”

“I have not seen him in above a twelve-month,” she replied. “Before that I would, on occasion, see him, in London, or a few times in Stanbridge. He claimed matters of business kept him travelling here and there, but as of a year ago, he disappeared and seems to be completely gone. His father has taken very ill—he is in his bed most of the time—and if nothing else, one might imagine that should bring him home. Alas, it has not. My father and brother are looking for him, but it must be done quietly, so as not to alert the gossips that something is amiss.”

“When did you learn of the jewellery scheme?”

“I found out quite by accident. I went, of my own accord, to Beauvis—you found me there, when you came to give me Scarlett’s note warning me about Damian. Beamish had never taken me there—he always said it was better that I remained with my mother while he travelled. I was angry with him at the time, believing he had gone to Bath. I have never been to Bath and begged him to allow me to accompany him, but he refused. I decided then that I should go to Beauvis and make myself at home, for

after all it was my home, even if I had never seen the place. I had only even met my father-in-law once, and that had been many years prior to marrying his son.”

Oakley nodded. “You went to Beauvis alone?”

“I persuaded my mother to go down with me,” she said and then cried out. She had pricked her finger among the roses. Oakley took her hand in his, noting the small bead of blood that had risen up on one finger. Removing his handkerchief from his pocket, he pressed it against her finger.

“Perhaps we ought to leave the roses to their day,” he suggested with a smile. “I fear such distressing conversation along with thorny plants will lead to further injury.”

Smiling, she went back to the bench with him. He immediately took the injured hand again and held his handkerchief to the affected finger.

“I am sure my hand is well,” she told him.

“I think I had better keep holding it, just to be certain. One cannot be too careful with these things,” he said with mock gravity. “But do go on with your story.”

“Where was I?” she said, thinking for a moment. “Oh yes, Beauvis. They were all surprised, at Beauvis, to learn Beamish had married. No one had any idea of it, but everyone was kind to me, and the housekeeper immediately went to see the mistress’s chambers situated for me. And it was there that I found the jewels, the candelabra...even a punch bowl or two.”

“Stolen?”

“I am sure. My first thought, on seeing them, was to be delighted, imagining they were for me. I did wonder, later, how a family like the Beamishes—well placed, but

not noble—had such jewels. Indeed, the things he had would rival royalty! But no one ever suspects something so fantastical. The worst that I could conceive was that he disliked being married to me and meant to keep me out of his way, and I thought that at least my material comforts would console me in that. With such notions in mind, I asked my mother if she thought I would be within my rights to take one or two of the pieces back to town, to wear to the theatre and so forth.”

Oakley knew not if he wished to laugh or gasp at the notion.

“Beamish arrived at Beauvis then, most fortunately, and stopped me from taking any of it anywhere. He gave me some nonsense about how it was stored at Beauvis but belonged here or there, but it was after that that he grew more secretive, even more insistent on leaving me with my mother all the time and not allowing me in his house. I have not been back since, but my father has learnt that the estate is not doing well. Even when the elder Mr Beamish was well, he was not a good steward, and the estate has suffered an extensive decline.”

It seemed much like the story Oakley had heard from Mr Shaw. Some sort of financial trouble—debts in the case of Mr Shaw, a foundering estate for Beamish—and there was Damian to swoop in with his misbegotten remedies of criminal activity instead of hard work. He sat back, mind spinning as he considered what he had learnt and what ought to be done next. It was too much to contemplate all at once, and in any case, it was hard to concentrate on any of it with the feel of Bess’s hand within his own.

He brought her hands to his lips, kissing them gently then bringing them down again. With his gaze locked on hers, he asked, “Will you marry me?”

“Would that I could,” she said with a smile.

“You can . You just told me you are not married.”

“But neither am I completely unmarried.”

“You are as much a single woman as any!”

“No, I am not,” she said gently. “Understand that I thought myself a married woman. Though I was not often with him—and have not seen him in a year—when I was, we...we were married.”

Oakley gritted his teeth, hating the meaning of that. “I suppose it is a mercy you have not conceived his child.”

“Decidedly a mercy,” she agreed. “But child or no child, I cannot simply throw off the lies as though I am removing a cloak that does not suit me. There would be a scandal, even more so should his crimes come to light.”

“I care nothing for that,” Oakley replied fiercely. “And with not only the Tipton name but Penrith, Worthe, and Kemerton standing behind us, see if it would be of any consequence!”

“It is of consequence, believe me.”

“I disagree! Bess! Darling, do you not see it is the answer to all of these problems? Fie on Beamish! Let him rot in whatever hole he has crawled into! Damian is dead and his gang disbanded; whatever Beamish does is his secret alone.”

“Secrets do not remain secrets in this world we live in, and I simply refuse to bring more scandal to your family, or to mine.” There was finality in her countenance that made Oakley’s heart plunge into his boots.

“My family has grown well accustomed to weathering the wagging of a few tongues.” It was a weak protest.

“I could be held accountable, too,” Bess said.

“Nonsense!”

“No, really, I could. I am, at present, mistress of an estate wherein a vast quantity of stolen goods resides.”

“It would not stand up in any court. You were hoodwinked,” Oakley said firmly.

It was at this least auspicious of moments that a young maid poked her head out of the door. “Miss? Your mama has returned and is asking for you.”

Bess stood hurriedly. “I think you should go. I...I thank you for keeping my secrets. There is no one I could trust more than you, dear Oakley.”

He got to his feet, catching her hand again, and bringing it to his lips. “You trust me...but do you love me?”

“Yes,” she said without hesitation. “Yes, I do and that is why I shall tell you this. Forget me. Leave me to my disastrous affairs and go and find a pretty young lady with no scandal behind her to marry.”

He ignored the last. “Tell me.”

“Tell you what?”

“Say the words. Tell me you love me.”

“Oakley...”

He brought her hands again to his lips, kissing them with delicate, light kisses.

“Because I love you, Bess Leighton, and I intend to do all I can to extricate you from all this. And when I do, we will marry.”

“Oakley, there is nothing that can be done, not by anyone and surely not by you. There is no need for you to involve yourself in any of this. I would never have confided in you about any of it if I thought?—”

He silenced her with a kiss that rapidly grew heated until he wrenched himself away for fear of doing something truly scandalous. He could not help but smile beholding Bess, her lips reddened and her curls tousled.

“If you only knew how the imaginings of what life with you could have been have kept me from madness these dreadful months,” she said. “I confess that the sweetness of them is sometimes too much a contrast with the bitterness of the reality I must bear.”

“Tell me you love me,” he demanded gently. “For I love you with every fibre of my being.”

“How can that?—”

“I am begging you,” he said. “The words. Please let me hear you say them.”

She paused briefly then said, “I do. I love you dearly.”

“And once you are free, will you marry me?”

“I shall never be free. I am tied with the hangman’s slipknot.”

“You will be free, Bess, and when you are, will you marry me?” He grinned at her. “I intend to keep asking.”

“I think it is impossible in every way but?—”

“But if it were not?”

“Then yes, of course, I would marry you in an instant.”

It was the greatest gift she could have given him. He bent to give her one more quick, chaste kiss, then whispered in her ear, “You will be my viscountess or I shall die trying.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A sense of purpose and hope quickened Oakley's steps on the way to his club. He entered White's shortly after leaving Dover Street, finding Leighton at a table in the front. Hilarity and jovial spirits rang out through the room; evidently there was a high-stakes card game ongoing and nearly everyone in the room had some money on one hand or another.

"Come upstairs with me." He beckoned to Leighton.

Leighton grinned, and teased, "Buy a man a drink first, eh?"

Oakley chuckled and clapped him on the back and then followed him to the floor above where small, private rooms could be had. A servant took their coats and brought them drinks; when he was gone, Oakley began to speak. "I have just left your sister?—"

"Do have a care," Leighton urged him. "There is already talk—the gossips are saying her husband has abandoned her. If there is tattle about some dalliance with another man, it will only make things more difficult."

"Pray believe me when I say tattle is the last thing I should wish for, particularly on Bess's account. Alas, with what Beamish has done, I do not know whether it can be avoided." Oakley then began to tell Leighton all that he knew. Leighton's jaw was slack for nearly the entirety of the time Oakley required to tell the whole miserable tale. Leighton confessed to having already suspected something was afoot that kept Beamish away so often, but thievery and potential murder had naturally not crossed

his mind.

“Damian’s murderer?” He took a prolonged draught of ale and set it down hard on the table. “Do you really think so?”

“I only know that it is possible.” Oakley lifted one shoulder in a half-shrug. “Did you know her marriage was false?”

“Only very recently,” said Leighton, taking a drink and wiping his mouth. “We knew him only as the man he claimed to be at the wedding, a name he confessed was false when he came to my father demanding more money to keep it secret. We had no idea if he told the truth, but his demand was modest and my father felt it best to agree—though he made no bones about reminding him that it was unlawful to falsely perform the rites of the clergy and that he should do best to keep his own secret as well.” He took another drink. “It does us little good of course. I do not think it possible to see the return of Bess’s fortune.”

“I hope you do not think I care two straws about that,” Oakley replied warmly.

Leighton’s gaze suddenly swung to Oakley, sharply focused. “Why would you?”

“Because I mean to marry her.”

“Oakley.” Leighton shook his head. “And your family...do they support the notion? Because from what I have heard, your sisters have been actively matchmaking on your behalf.”

“My family love me and wish for my happiness, my sisters most of all.”

“Wishing for your happiness is not the same thing as inviting a scandal of enormous proportion. Beamish is a criminal . Would you like to marry someone knowing his

deeds could become known at any time? How would you be received in society if it were known that your wife's former husband had been stealing valuables from the great families?"

"I could happily hie away to Chiltern Court with her and never see the lot of them again," Oakley replied staunchly.

"And your children? Would you be happy seeing them shunned?"

Oakley opened his mouth and then closed it again.

"Further," Leighton said, "we have spoken to a barrister—in confidence, of course—who informed us that even with the disregard of inheritance issues, it would be five years with no sight of him until Beamish is officially declared dead. Fortunately, Beauvis is not entailed; his father is able to name his heir as he wishes and Beamish's mother died when he was an infant, so he would not have her to plead for him. I understand there is an eager nephew ready and willing to take over as master."

"He may be less eager when the scandal erupts," Oakley muttered, then ran his hands through his hair vigorously. "Ah but Bess was right when she called it a knot. Your sister is as wise as she is lovely."

Leighton smiled faintly at the compliment.

"What of an annulment? Surely once the fraudulent nature of the thing became known, the marriage would become void?"

Leighton nodded. "A slender hope my father and I have held up for some time now. Alas, Hanson was crafty—he performed his part under the name of a parson of exceedingly advanced years who tends to be...forgetful. The good man compensates

for his forgetfulness by staunchly ‘remembering’ everything, even things he does not, in truth, recollect at all. Such as the wedding of my sister.”

Oakley groaned.

“In any case, we would need Beamish present to annul his own marriage. No matter what, we are constantly stymied by Beamish’s absence.”

“Then we must find him,” Oakley said.

“You think it so easy!” Leighton laughed. “Would that it was! My father and I have sought him diligently. Alas, England has any number of small places where a man might go to become a new man or hide the old one.”

Oakley had never considered himself a particularly clever man; school had been more struggle than triumph for him. However, he had always prided himself on his ability to guess at riddles and charades. It was all in the phrasing, he had learnt. There was much to be gleaned from word meanings and emphasis, particularly for words spoken when emotions ran high.

Hanson had said to him ‘when next I see him’ in regards to Beamish. Not ‘if I see him’ or ‘if I can find him’ but ‘when next I see him’. It suggested that Hanson knew where he was, or at least knew where he might be.

“I wonder whether Hanson might know something. I daresay there is something in the way he presented things that makes me believe he might be able to lead us to Beamish. Perhaps we might even contrive some way to flush Beamish out of his fox hole.”

“I suppose it is possible. What reason might Hanson have to help us?”

“Same reason any criminal does anything,” Oakley replied. “Either because he is paid for it, or is at risk of being killed over it. Myself, I prefer the latter, but the former is more likely.”

“He would likely wish for a great deal of money to give up his comrade.”

“My understanding is that there is a great deal of money to be had. Hanson feels Beamish has befooled him, cheated him out of money. If he thinks there is any possibility for him to receive his due, I reckon Hanson would give up his own mother.” Oakley nodded, excited and encouraged to have, at last, something to do for this tangle. “Tomorrow we will call on him.”

Oakley arrived back at Tipton House to find that the family had gathered. The duke and Frederica, Worthe and Scarlett, Adelaide and Kem, and Lady Carbrooke along with Lady Lenora and Lady Lila were all milling about the drawing room. Even Lord Tipton had removed from his bed, at last, and sat in his favourite chair, looking as healthy as he had for some time. Oakley went to him at once. “Father? Your colour is marvellous.”

Lord Tipton patted his hand. “I confess, it gave me a turn, all this nonsense about Damian, but reason has asserted itself at last and I am well prepared to have dinner with my family as a gentleman should.”

“May I get you anything?”

“I have things well in hand.” Lady Tipton had arrived at her husband’s side with a glass of barley water.

“Barley water!” Lord Tipton cried in dismay.

“’Tis fortifying!” she protested. “You cannot expect to regain your health by drinking

wine all day!”

“If barley water is to be my choice, then pray, let me die,” Lord Tipton said, but he smiled as he said it and took the proffered glass. Oakley thought he might have seen him pat his wife’s bottom when he thought no one could see, but the very notion made him shudder. All a sign that he was raised by loving parents, though, which was more than many, including his sisters, could say.

Addressing Lady Tipton, he enquired, “Did I forget we were all meant to gather today?”

“It is a trifle spontaneous,” she said, her cheeks pink and her air anticipatory. “But Cook was good enough to accommodate us all. I daresay,” she lowered her voice, “we might have something to celebrate.”

“Celebrate?” Oakley asked. “What are...” He allowed the sentence to trail off as Worthe stood and addressed the room at large.

“If my beloved relations will indulge me for a moment?”

“Of course,” said his lordship from his chair. He, too, had a smile playing about his lips, seeming to expect something wonderful. A child, Oakley thought with satisfaction. Scarlett is with child, and they mean to tell us now.

“Some weeks ago, Scarlett began to be plagued by dreams of her former life in Stanbridge. Most particularly of the Reverend Margrave kidnapping her,” Worthe said. “And so disturbing were they to the peace of my dear wife, I felt I needed to do something, anything, that would put her mind at ease.”

Oakley pursed his lips, thinking that a mention of Reverend Margrave was certainly not what he had expected—nor had Lord and Lady Tipton, if the bemused

expressions on their faces were any indication.

“To relieve my wife’s fears, I hired one of the men from Bow Street to make some enquiries, and what I have learnt is...” Worthe paused a moment, then said, “Reverend Margrave has died. Suffered an apoplexy in the pulpit of a small church in Wales.”

The announcement was greeted with silence until Oakley said, finally, “I do not know whether I ought to console you, Scarlett, or cheer for you.”

“I thank you for both. I have excessively contradictory feelings on the matter,” Scarlett admitted. “Though his heart proved cold to me, and despite the harm he attempted to do to me, he and Mrs Margrave raised me. I suppose I have some...softer feelings left within me for that, at least enough to feel...sorrow at his passing.”

“And the dreams?” Frederica asked. “Have they gone now? How strange that after two years you should begin to dream about the reverend!”

“In fact,” Scarlett said with a smile up at Worthe, “we were told it was not strange at all. Alas, while those dreams did pass, there have been others in their place, equally peculiar. I keep dreaming I have lost my kitten, even though I do not have a kitten!”

“We were told by the midwife that it is to be expected,” Worthe added, “for a woman in a delicate condition.”

There was a moment’s pause while the others in the room came to understand him and then they all erupted into happy felicitations. Lady Tipton’s delighted effusions were such that Oakley thought she might swoon, and Lord Tipton lurched to his feet with such haste that his cane, quite forgot, went clattering across the floor. Hugs, kisses, and claps on the back were given with abundance, and Adelaide informed her

sister, “Thank heaven! Because I was having symptoms myself and began to fear I had another coming already!”

“As did I,” Kem added. “Do not misunderstand us—Susanna is a delight. But we are happy to wait another year or so before the nursery has another occupant.”

“They say they know what causes that now,” Penrith said drily. “The matter rests within your power, sir.”

Oakley and Kem both hooted with laughter, and Frederica, after a moment looking puzzled, joined them.

Cook had done an excellent job with their impromptu family celebration. It was in times such as these that Oakley truly marvelled at the miraculous reunion of the Richmond clan. He saw it in his parents’ eyes too; they plainly delighted in the number of chairs that were now occupied at the table, and the scrape and clink of a multitude of people eating and drinking, talking and laughing while another generation formed and grew among them.

Lady Tipton had scarcely eaten a morsel. She had seemed to pass most of the courses just listening to everyone’s banter and smiling at them all.

“Mother,” he said quietly, “you have barely touched your dinner.”

“I am too full of pleasure to eat,” she said. “You will never know, dear boy, until you are a parent yourself, but there is much joy to be had in watching your family gather and tease and talk and...and simply be together. And then such delightful news from Scarlett atop all of that! It is almost too much to bear, such happiness, and I only want to drink and eat of the moment.”

“Well said!” Oakley gave a little incline of his head. “I confess I do feel some

measure of that. I think of all the evenings with just three at the dinner table. They were happy times then, too, for we knew no different, but look at us now. We are a dynasty!”

“You were always the most wonderful boy,” she told him, the faint glimmer of tears in her eyes. “You were enough, even if there was only you, you were such a blessing to us!”

“Thank you.” He touched her hand lightly.

“But, that said...” she teased with a smile. “I do at times imagine myself as one of those grandmamas with a veritable herd of grandchildren dangling from all sides of me. Just imagine the lawns at Chiltern with scores of children roaming about! The halls echoing with their laughter!”

“Happy thoughts indeed,” he agreed.

“Only think of it,” she said, warming to her subject. “If each of you has just three, why, that’s a dozen! And dear Frederica has already brought us three, if she has three more, then I shall have?—”

“Good heavens!” Oakley said, laughing. “One step at a time, my dear lady! Poor Frederica has only just got married!”

“That is true,” Lady Tipton agreed. “Perhaps I ought to be concentrating my hopes and wishes on you? How goes the search for a wife?”

Oakley groaned. “Stepped neatly into that trap, did I not?”

Lady Lenora, who was on Oakley’s other side, leant over him to inform Lady Tipton, “Every woman to whom his sisters have introduced him is now engaged...alas, they

are all engaged to someone else.”

“Miss Talbot is not,” Oakley informed her.

“Have you even called on her?” Lady Lenora asked.

“Miss Talbot? Well...no.” Lady Tipton frowned, so Oakley hastened to say, “But all is not lost. I have been applying myself to...interests of my own, and I have reason to hope that all will work out for the good.”

“Oh, I do hope so.” Lady Tipton sighed. “For I do truly wish to hold the future earl in my arms before I die.”

“Before you die! Heaven forfend, you are but forty years old,” Oakley said, knowing full well she was above fifty.

“Forty! Do not I wish it!” Lady Tipton laughed, but her happy blush grew more pink.

“One and forty then, and not a day older. You will hold your future earl and perhaps a little lady or two besides.” Rising a bit out of his chair, he gave her a kiss on the cheek. “I shall not fail you.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

If Oakley had imagined that Lady Lenora had not heard him, or that she would let it lie, he was sorely mistaken. Scarcely had the gentlemen—all of them, including his lordship, replete with the scent of cigars and port—joined the ladies in the drawing room when she pounced on him.

“Reason to hope? Does that mean you have given up on your married lady, or do you mean to see her husband killed off?”

“Do you not need to exhibit at an instrument or something of that sort?” he teased in reply. “I thought young ladies were always eager to display their talents.”

“My primary talent is gathering information.”

“I fear this information is not mine to share.”

She gave him a little pinch. “Come, now! You know I would never give up your secrets. What did you mean when you said you had reason to hope?”

They had arrived at a small sofa by the window where Oakley hoped there might be some privacy. Spirits were high and the conversation and laughter being had by the rest of the family were loud; it was conducive to a clandestine conversation. Loath as he was to reveal what Bess had told him, he needed a plan to extricate her; thus, for the greater good, he would trust those he knew could be trusted.

“What it means is that she might not be as married as was previously understood.”

“That sounds intriguing! Pray tell me more,” Lady Lenora urged.

“The whole of it was a sham. Do you remember Mr Hanson, to whom Adelaide was briefly engaged?”

“From whom Adelaide made a most fortunate escape, you mean? I have only seen him once or twice—and I have never consented to an introduction. Nor this Beamish fellow.” She sniffed. “I hear that the estate—Beauvis, is it?—is bleeding money rather violently and is sure to be sold soon.”

“Your talent for gathering information is to be lauded. I had heard something similar, but I did not think it known abroad. In any case, Hanson posed as a vicar to unite Bess in unholy matrimony with Beamish. Beamish was after her fortune, and Hanson was meant to get a piece for his efforts, although it seems Beamish swindled him out of that.”

“And they say there is honour among thieves,” Lady Lenora said with a quirk of her brow.

“Beamish was certainly all for what he could get, and it seems he did not care whom he needed to stab in the back to get it. In any case, Bess believed herself lawfully wed, as does all of society, and never mind that she has hardly even seen her own husband in the entirety of two years.”

“Because Beamish was out stealing jewels with Damian?”

“Beamish was...well, my evidence is weak, but my gut tells me I am correct. I think he was stealing jewels and crossing people. Perhaps murdering Damian.” Oakley rubbed his forehead. “I can scarcely keep it all straight.”

“What are you two speaking of over here?” Kem asked, sliding a chair to be closer to

them. “Pray tell me it is anything but babies and nurseries! Being a father is by far the most wonderful feeling I have ever known, but I confess I have reached the end of discussing it.”

“You may not like our conversation any better when I tell you whom we are discussing,” Oakley replied—and indeed when he relayed, in the briefest terms possible, the heinous plot he had uncovered, involving two of Kem’s most detested acquaintances, his brother-in-law looked suitably grim-faced.

“And so this Beamish fellow has crossed Hanson and possibly murdered Damian?” Kem asked.

“It would seem so.”

After a pause, Kem gave a tight shake of his head. “If it were not for his treatment of Miss Leighton, I should say the man deserved a medal, for you well know I have little enough regard for either of the other two—but his actions towards the young lady are abhorrent. And unfortunately, it seems she is neatly trussed. Scandal on one side and crime on the other.”

“Unless Beamish dies,” Lady Lenora said. “If he is caught, he will be hanged. Why not see him arrested? If there are jewels belonging to anyone else at his estate, it would be evidence enough, I daresay.”

Oakley shook his head. “That would rid me of Beamish, but the notoriety would ruin Bess as well. Wife to a hanged criminal? She might be implicated in the scheme herself and certainly would never be received again.”

“And if she reveals herself to have never been married, that would be equally undesirable,” Kem added. “I presume that the marriage was...consummated?”

“Yes, but without...with no issue. Obviously. She has not seen him in a twelve-month. In any case, an annulment, should she even be able to obtain one, requires Beamish’s agreement. Which brings us round, again, to the problem of no one being able to find him.”

“A twelve-month? Since Damian’s death, then.” Kem shook his head. “Very suspicious.”

“But you think Hanson knows where to find him?” Lady Lenora asked.

“I believe Hanson is able to get word to him, even if he does not know precisely where he is.”

“Then we have it.” She grinned. “Beamish must be persuaded that his death is in his own best interests.”

“I cannot see that we could persuade him to kill himself,” Oakley said dubiously.

Lady Lenora rolled her eyes. “His pretend death. He must agree to feign his death and leave for parts unknown, wholly persuaded that if the law does not get him, the Carters will. A drowning would be best if we can manage that—no body to worry over.”

Oakley and Kem both stared at her, and Oakley suspected that he looked as astonished as his brother-in-law did.

“What novel did you read that in?” Kem finally enquired.

“Oh, pooh!” She waved a hand at him. “One does not linger about the gaol as I do without developing a taste for scheming. Now, how shall we go about it? Perhaps Hanson might get word to him, let him know that the noose is tightening, and arrange

a meeting?”

“I had thought to pay Hanson to give him up...” Oakley said slowly.

Lady Lenora shook her head. “If Hanson knew where Beamish was, he would not need to importune Bess to try and get payment—but I imagine he knows how to get word to him.”

There was a short silence until Kem said, “Lady Lenora is probably correct.”

“I am certainly correct,” she informed him loftily. “Thus you must get word to Beamish that Lord Tipton intends to see him swing for Damian’s murder, that the Rundells mean to pin that robbery on him, and that the Carters intend to exact their due—but that you are willing to help him escape all of that.”

“But why?” Kem argued. “Why would Oakley have such mercy on him?”

“Because above all, I love Bess,” Oakley said quietly but staunchly. “And winning her hand means more to me than seeing my worthless uncle’s murderer brought to justice.”

Lady Lenora gave a firm nod of her head. “Just so! If Beamish can be persuaded to feign his death and leave England forever, then Oakley—” She gave him a little pat on the arm. “Oakley will get his wife.”

“What about Hanson? Or any of the other men involved?” Kem asked.

“They get all the enjoyment of unpunished misdeeds,” Oakley replied, sitting up straighter in his seat and taking up Lady Lenora’s idea. “The jewels are at Beauvis, and Damian’s money paid for the theft of them—nobody else’s. If whatever remains on English soil could be returned to their rightful owners, the families would be

happy, the thieves would be forgot—we hope—and everyone would continue on as they were. Even the Carters, for surely they would be well pleased to see the problem of traceable jewels removed for them. But Beamish must be persuaded they care about his neck above all, even if we know they likely do not, else he should be dead already.”

“What if I were to pretend to be mistress to one of them? I could tell them that I know it well that Mr Carter is highly displeased to see Damian gone,” Lady Lenora suggested, her eyes sparkling with excitement at the notion of some mischief. “I do not know this Beamish, and I should imagine he does not know me. I could wear a veil? I should imagine mistresses to the Carter gang must wear veils.”

“Good lord!” Oakley said with a laugh. “Len, the very idea!”

“What? It is a good idea! You know I have always been excellent at home theatricals.”

“This is hardly drawing room amusement,” Oakley said. “Beamish may have killed my uncle and he has certainly proved quite a thief! He might be dangerous.”

“I might be dangerous too, you know. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,” Lady Lenora replied. “Pray do not scorn me.”

He held his hands up in a gesture of surrender and said, laughingly, “The last thing I should do is scorn you. Indeed, once all of this is written into a play, you will be the first person cast as the smuggler’s mistress. Will that do?”

“Very well then, but I shall wish for a full accounting of the meeting,” she said good-naturedly. “I would have done it to acclaim.”

Lady Lila approached their group. “Lenora, Mama wishes you to come and play.”

Lady Lenora rose with a heavy sigh. "Prepare yourselves for something very dreadful, good sirs, for I have not touched the instrument for a six-month complete." The two ladies walked off, leaving Kem and Oakley behind.

"We will need some protection for ourselves, you know," Kem mentioned. "Some overgrown footmen ought to do us well."

"Us?" Oakley enquired. "Do you mean to accompany me on this escapade?"

"I cannot let you go alone, can I?"

"Bess's brother will be there as well," Oakley replied. "I should not wish to put you in danger any more than my cousin."

Kem shot him a sidelong glance. He was, of all their circle, likely the largest and most brawny. Oakley had watched him as he broke a horse last spring with scarcely a bead of sweat on his brow.

"Yes, yes, I see the nonsense in my words now," Oakley said with a chuckle. "No doubt you could beat Beamish with one hand and the Carters with the other."

Kem smiled. "Let us do it, then."

"'Nothing ventured, nothing have', as they say," Oakley replied determinedly.

"Hanson is just the sort of fellow to always be lingering about when he is not wanted, and then lost to the ether when one needs him!" Oakley gazed about Lady Barcroft's crowded ballroom two evenings later with disgust. "Where has he taken himself, now?"

By his side, Bess said, worriedly, "Perhaps it is a sign that the scheme ought not to be

attempted.”

She had not been in agreement with him about his plan. Leighton had thought it terribly brilliant, but Bess had been more difficult to persuade. Only the hard truth, that without some sort of daring scheme, she might be bound to Beamish forever, caused her to relent.

“If anything, it is a sign that Hanson is, as I have long suspected, mostly useless,” Oakley scoffed. “Shall we dance? We might catch sight of him going down the line.”

As it was, Oakley could only keep half his attention on the other dancers; the rest was wholly devoted to Bess. She was positively beside herself with excitement that Scarlett was increasing.

“She will be such a wonderful mother! I can still remember in Stanbridge how much she enjoyed it when the little ones would come to her needing help learning their sums or tying their boots. I confess I had begun to worry for her, that there might be some difficulty conceiving.”

“Perhaps there was,” Oakley agreed. “I shall admit, I try to hear as few of the details as possible.”

She laughed merrily, and he realised how rarely he had seen her do so since her marriage. It lifted his heart even as part of him wished she might be as she once was, where merry laughter was a daily, if not hourly, occurrence for her. It was undeniably pleasant to put aside thoughts of Hanson and Beamish and speak as courting couples spoke. To his delight, Bess was full of happy tidings. Leighton, she informed him, was quite in love with Miss Talbot.

“Does your brother think of matrimony?” he asked.

“He is a little young, I suppose, but there is nothing to speak against it.”

“And a good deal to speak for it,” he replied with a devilish grin as he surreptitiously squeezed her hand.

They continued on in this vein throughout their dance. It reminded Oakley why Bess was such the ideal woman for him. He could speak to her about anything, even things ladies did not often enjoy speaking of—at one point touching upon the matter of mine subsidence, and at another on the finer points of his most recent bout in the fencing parlour.

He enjoyed hearing of her little nothings too, a favourite book she was re-reading for the eleventh time, and how she believed autumn to be the finest season, particularly late autumn when she might see her breath outside. “I do not know why,” she told him, “but seeing my breath has always seemed exceedingly magical to me.”

“At Chiltern Court, we see our breath routinely from November through to February,” he told her. “We are like dragons up there.”

“Really?”

“No, not really,” he admitted with a laugh. “I only wish to make you feel as if you would enjoy living there.”

“I would enjoy living in a cave so long as I lived there with you,” she told him in a low voice.

“There we have it, then,” he said in similar accents. “If the first plan does not succeed, you and I shall find ourselves a charming cave dwelling.”

The dance ended then, and they removed from the floor, chatting affectionately as

they went. Oakley observed an occasional gimlet-eye upon them, and one or two who dared to whisper; no surprise there, for the ton was adept at finding bits of interest even in the least interesting places. It might have angered him had he not known that one day none of it would signify. We will see how brave you all are when she is Viscountess Oakley, he told them all silently. Sister to a duchess and two countesses, with my mother as her own. See how you want to bow and scrape to her then!

CHAPTER TWENTY

It proved more difficult to find Hanson than it did to persuade him that it was best to go along with the scheme. It seemed he had gone from town for a se'nnight, and once he had returned, it took three days until Oakley met him on Rotten Row and persuaded him to take a ride in his curricule with him. Thereupon, Hanson was readily convinced that the Carters were indeed searching for Beamish, and that the magistrate was hard on Beamish's heels.

"I truly do not know where he is," he said by way of a final protest. "Truly! I do not imagine he remains in any one place very long."

"But you can get word to him." Oakley said it rather than asked it.

Hanson sighed very heavily. Without any sympathy, Oakley observed his pallor and the shadows beneath his eyes. The criminal life had begun to weigh on him it seemed.

Almost as if he had heard him, Hanson said, "It was never meant to be so complicated, you know. A little lark, some might say, resolve a debt or two."

"Theft is theft," Oakley replied flatly. "No man is entitled to another man's possessions."

"Such as his wife?"

Oakley shot him a look. "Enough of that. We both know, and Beamish does too, that he is not lawfully married to Bess. In any case, I shall gladly tell him about it, see if I

do not. Now, about getting word to him?—”

“What’s in it for me?” Hanson demanded suddenly and Oakley smiled. People of his ilk were so very predictable!

“Your name will be forgot,” he replied. “Neither Leighton nor I, nor our families shall remember anything about you in any of this, and if we happen upon anything with your name on it—which I think is unlikely—it will be destroyed.”

The look of relief on Hanson’s countenance was undeniable. “I shall call on you as soon as I hear back from him. It can take a week, sometimes two.”

“Get it within a week,” Oakley retorted. “I am growing impatient.”

Hanson did as he had been ordered, even if he did require eight days, perhaps merely to prove he could. In any case, a note was delivered with the direction to a tavern by Bethnal Green and instructions to meet two days hence. Kem arranged the precautions, from eschewing their own carriages in favour of a hired one, to conscripting two beefy footmen to accompany them.

Oakley saw the wisdom in such plans the moment they arrived. It was a neighbourhood of impoverished Irish weavers, a place of low, close houses slumped over tight alleys; taverns were in abundance. The driver of the hack was paid to linger while the five men stepped out, the two footmen fading into the shadows of the rabbit warren-like dwellings nearby.

The gentlemen were unblinking and unshifting as they awaited Beamish’s approach. Occasionally they spoke of some commonplace triviality, but mostly they just waited. Oakley had just begun to wonder whether they had been deceived when a man, whose ears could not be contained nor cowed by his hat, whose handsome countenance was dimmed by months of low living, came down the alley.

“Beamish,” Leighton hissed beside him. In quick paces, Oakley drew abreast of him, Leighton and Kem hard on his heels.

Beamish did not at first appear to know Oakley—their acquaintance had been scant—but he remembered Leighton immediately. “Long time no see, Brother. What do you do here?”

“I am here to meet you,” Leighton spat back in a hard voice Oakley scarcely recognised. “And pray do not insult me by calling me Brother.”

Beamish’s gaze darted among the three men. “Hanson said there were some men who wished to do business with me.”

“And here we are, Corgi ,” Oakley agreed. Beamish startled visibly at the name but said nothing, and Oakley pressed, “Shall we go inside? Privacy is for your benefit.”

Beamish was not a large man. Leighton was larger, if softer, and Oakley himself was taller but more slender. Kem was the most impressive physically, but it was the two footmen who appeared to truly make him fearful. John and Johnny, they were called; both had been attired in breeches and coats that were a mite too small so as to make the thick cords of their muscles that much more evident. The pair of them were not only strong, they were young and their blood ran hot. Surely even Beamish could comprehend that they would welcome any cause to pummel him.

Looking resigned, Beamish pointed to the door. “We can speak in there, but I agreed to meet two men, not an entire gang.”

“You are the authority on gangs,” Leighton scoffed.

“How could we come with fewer, knowing that you are capable of murder?” Oakley enquired with an easiness that belied the gravity of his words.

“Murder? I?—”

“Save your denials,” Oakley advised. “We know everything. Now let us go in there and talk about what we mean to do about it. The boys here will remain outside; the rest of us all have business with you.”

They entered the small, stinking tavern, occupied only by a toothless wench who was wiping down the bar area. She scarcely looked at them long enough to jerk her thumb towards a narrow hall, but it was enough for Beamish to begin walking that way.

“No,” Kem said immediately. Beamish gave him a look.

“We will stay out front,” Oakley agreed. “One can only imagine what you might do with us back there.”

“I am not a violent man,” Beamish protested.

“Not a violent man?” Oakley laughed. “Kem, did you hear him?”

“I did, though I suspect your uncle would have a different story, were he still alive to tell it.”

“Your uncle?” Beamish asked uncertainly. “You are...”

“Lord Oakley, yes,” Oakley replied with a smile that he hoped was menacing.

Kem leant towards Beamish in a way that was definitely menacing. “We think you murdered Damian Richmond, Beamish, and so do the guards at the gaol who saw you that day. So, in fact, we think you are capable of nearly anything and trust you with nothing. Is that clear enough?”

With eyes narrowed to mistrustful slits, Beamish walked over to a table nearby, the three others joining him in sitting. Oakley was relieved to see they remained within easy distance of the door.

“We do not have a great deal of time, and even less inclination to be in your company,” Leighton began. “We know what trick you played on my sister, and that you have swindled my father out of her fortune. We know about the jewels, the forgeries, Damian’s betrayal and by extension how you cheated the Carter gang. And we have witnesses and testaments to all of it, well prepared to see you into the King’s custody. I hear he gives a special collar to his honoured guests like yourself, though one only gets to wear it once.”

Beamish crossed his arms over his chest. “You would not want me hanged, surely. The scandal would curse your family for generations to come.”

“Absolutely true,” Oakley agreed. “Quietly letting the Carters take care of matters would certainly be better, would it not?”

“From what I understand,” Leighton put in, “when the Carters take care of things one scarcely hears a whisper. Men simply disappear in a puff of smoke. No scandal at all.”

“The Carters are in Kent,” Beamish replied. “In the time it would take you to get a letter to them, I could be long gone.”

“Save for one thing,” Leighton replied.

“Several, in fact,” Oakley corrected him with a smile, and Leighton tipped his head in acknowledgement.

“Several,” Leighton said with a nod. “Johnny and his friend and a few other of their

friends mean to watch you every minute. They are the Carters' men and pride themselves on having never lost their quarry."

Oakley gave Leighton a small smile. He was a gentle sort and had been concerned about all the cock and bull required to get Beamish well and truly on his way, but Oakley was well-versed in the art of the bluff, thanks to his mother and aunt's rapacity for whist. He had coached Leighton, and coached him well it seemed, for the words tumbled flawlessly from his lips.

For himself, he was well prepared to do anything necessary to set Bess free, even if he had to lie to this Friday-faced goose-cap for a week complete to do it. He leant forwards. "There is no escape for you, Corgi, except the escape we offer you. Death of another sort than the one that awaits you at the hands of the hangman or the smuggler."

"And what might that be?"

"Passage to America where you will live out your days under a different name. Mr... What is your given name?" Oakley enquired.

Beamish frowned and worked his mouth a moment before admitting, "Beauregard."

"French," Leighton scoffed.

"An old family name," Beamish threw back.

"And none the more distinguished for it," Kem retorted.

"In any case..." Oakley held up his hands to stop them. "Mr Beauregard Beamish shall be declared dead, thus freeing his widow, and his estate, of any obligation to him."

“You expect me to give up my estate?”

“By all accounts, you will be giving up little more than a mountain of debt. Besides, I should think your ill-gotten gains sufficient to buy a new one,” Oakley replied levelly. “In America. And in any case, a dead man has no use for an estate, and whether it is King or Carters who get to you first, a dead man you assuredly shall be.”

“We offer you more than you deserve,” Leighton added. “I personally would have much preferred to beat you within an inch of your life and then surrender you to the Carters, but Oakley here is far more merciful than I.”

“And in return, I am...exonerated?”

“You would be declared dead,” Oakley replied. “Declared and duly recorded in your parish. Dead men hold no burdens.”

Beamish tapped his fingers on the rough-hewn table while he considered it. In truth, there was not much to consider; he needed only to recognise the hopelessness of his situation, and in short order, he did, agreeing with a reluctant, “I daresay those Americans cannot be nearly so savage as the Carters, can they?”

The Thames, they decided, would be too risky. One word amiss and they would have mudlarks all about searching for Beamish’s ‘dead’ body. No, Oakley and Leighton would pose as a group of friends en route to Wales who ran into a bit of trouble while fishing.

The strong currents of the River Severn were well known to all which was why, Oakley told the magistrate, they had begged their dear friend Beamish not to take the boat out. “We urged him to stay on the river shore angling with us, but he assured us he would be perfectly safe,” Leighton informed the man sadly. “He was determined to have a Severn chub.”

“For what?” The man gave a little shake of his head. “No good to eat.”

“Just what we told him,” Oakley replied.

In truth, Mr Beauregard Beamish, now in possession of a character that would establish him as Mr John Smith, was well on his way to America at the time of his ‘death’. Both Leighton and Oakley had watched him board the ship the day prior. They had then watched the ship as it began to move away with Beamish saluting them from the deck. It was not until the ship itself had been well out of sight that they both breathed a sigh of relief.

“What I shall do is write a letter for you that you can take to his people, have it all recorded properly in his own parish,” the magistrate informed them. “It is how they do it when people die in places they did not belong.”

“We will see to it that the right people receive and record it,” Leighton promised. “It is the least we can do for the fellow.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

It took a week for Oakley to settle matters pertaining to Beamish—or rather, Mr Smith. Back in London, the Season had begun to wind down, many families leaving for their country homes. Scarlett had extended an invitation to Bess to go to Ashworthe with her and Worthe, and Bess had accepted eagerly. Oakley was fairly desperate to join her there and beyond vexed that even in his counterfeit grave, Beamish was still managing to keep them apart.

The journey from Gloucestershire was just above one hundred miles, but it might have been a thousand for his impatience with it. “You are positively driving me mad,” Leighton said half a dozen times, having been awakened from slumber in the carriage by his companion’s wildly joggling foot or endless opening and closing of his unread book.

At last they were in Hertfordshire where Leighton split from him, intending to go to Beamish’s father to express his ‘condolences’ and see that the death was properly recorded within the parish. “By the end of tomorrow it will be finished,” Leighton promised as he left Oakley with a firm handshake.

Within the hour, Oakley’s carriage was moving down the shady, ash-lined lane towards Ashworthe. Once in the portico, he very nearly tumbled from the carriage in his haste to enter the house. Scarlett’s face held an anxious frown as she hurried into the vestibule to greet him. “Oakley! You are returned!” She kissed his cheek, then drew back to look at him. “And were things...?”

“Things went as things were meant to go,” he said. “Mr Smith is well on his way to

Maine, by way of Boston.”

Tears sprang into her eyes, and she clapped her hand over her mouth. “I cannot believe it,” she said a little breathlessly. “It seems almost too good to be true!”

“Where might I find Bess?” Oakley enquired rather bluntly. He regretted that his eagerness made him sound uncivil, but his sister only smiled. Ashworthe Park boasted extensive gardens, and it was within them, she told him, that Bess had been spending much of her days, most often with a book to keep her company.

“It has kept her worries from tormenting her. She will be so relieved to know that all has gone as planned. But will you want to refresh yourself first?”

“I can wait no longer,” he told her, already turning on his heel. “I can only pray Bess will love me, road dirt and all!”

A light summer breeze cooled him as he walked out into the gardens, but it did nothing to calm his racing heart. It seemed impossible that after all they had been through, his heart’s desire, his dearest wishes would come true within this hour, in this garden.

Bess was not in the cutting garden nor among the cherry trees. He had just begun to be alarmed when he found her sitting amid the sculptures of Worthe’s ancestors. Her back was to him as he neared, and her book, her bonnet, and an apple were on the bench beside her. He wondered how long she had been there.

She turned when he was about ten paces away from her—he knew not if it was by sound or presentiment that she detected his approach. Her eyes went wide and then she bolted up and off the bench, running towards him. He released a huffing little breath as she leapt into his arms, squeezing him tightly with her head pressed into his chest.

“You have been gone forever,” she said urgently. “I began to fear you were dead.”

“I sent word to Scarlett!” he protested, kissing her hair.

“I feared it was the work of charlatans,” she replied, and he threw back his head and laughed.

“No, it was me, entirely me. Shall we sit?” he asked. “I have much to acquaint you with.”

“Let us walk,” she suggested. “I have been sitting here for some time.”

“Walk!” He moaned. “I loathe walking.”

She gave him a little poke in the chest. “Have you not been sitting in your carriage for an age? It will do you good to stretch your legs.”

“Very well, but I must steal your apple from you, for I am very nearly starved.” He tucked her book into his greatcoat, while she donned her bonnet; she handed him the apple and he then offered her his arm. They began to slowly stroll towards Ashworthe’s maze. He longed to speak of the feelings bubbling over in his heart—of hope and joy and love, but she asked if the journey had been easy and instead, he found himself telling her all of the commonplace things: the condition of the roads, and the misery of staying at inns along the way. She, in turn, told him of Scarlett and Worthe, and how they had passed the days since his departure.

When those subjects were adequately canvassed, and he felt fit to burst with impatience, she asked, “Dare I hope you have successfully made me a widow?”

“Your brother is on his way to the parish to see things recorded, but you are a widow, indeed,” he confirmed. “Mr Beauregard Beamish is no more.”

Glancing about her, Bess whispered, “You and my brother...you did not...that is to say, did you kill him?”

Oakley laughed aloud. “No! I only meant in the way we discussed! A feigned death!”

“Oh!” She put a hand on her heart. “Something in the way you said so made me think things had gone another, more permanent way.”

“No, the man who was once Beamish still shuffles along his mortal coil, only he is Mr John Smith now, an American from a newly organised state called Maine.”

“Maine,” she repeated thoughtfully. “I do not think I know anything about Maine.”

“There is land to be had there, and relatively few Englishmen,” Oakley explained. “Would not wish him to meet up with anyone from a former life, hm? His money will go far there, and he says he enjoys snow, which I understand Maine has in abundance.”

“Good for him, then. It seems it is more than he deserves.”

“It is indeed. More than any of them deserve truly; Damian’s gang have stolen countless family treasures and?—”

“I have done what I could in that quarter.” With a mischievous grin, she said, “I have been to Beauvis.”

She had gone ostensibly to see to Beamish’s father’s health; finding the man excessively unwell, she had made the necessary arrangements for him to travel to his nephew’s home to be cared for in what were likely to be his final days. Then she had removed all the items she believed Beamish had stolen and brought them to Ashworthe.

Oakley shook his head with wonder. “Extraordinary! Leighton and I had determined what we would do once we had the items but knew not how to go about removing them from Beauvis!”

What he and Leighton had decided was that they would enlist the aid of a Bow Street runner to quietly—and without any hint as to how the items were obtained—see to the return of the valuables. It was not everything, not by a long stretch, but it did them all some good to imagine that at least some of what was lost could be found.

“The jewellers always put some mark on their creations,” he told Bess. “And using that and the records of the shop, we will be able to find some of the rightful owners.”

“The best that we can do,” she agreed. Then she uttered an excited little shriek.

Alarmed, Oakley dropped his apple, whirling about to see the danger.

But there was no danger. She was only elated. Giving a little twirl, she cried out, “Oakley! I am a widow!” She bent and picked up his discarded apple, then flung it high into the air. “Widow!” she cried out gaily.

He laughed at her, although it brought to mind how girlish and gay she had been when he first met her. He had not before realised that her giggling optimism was absent until he saw it appear again now. Yes, there is my Bess, he thought. Always with a laugh and a sparkle in her eye. Who could want for more?

Reaching for her, he tugged her towards him, facing him. “The only thing I have ever wanted in any of this was to see you just this way,” he told her admiringly. “With the sun on your face and laughter bursting from your lips. Your happiness, my darling girl, means more to me than my own.”

“I intend to spend the rest of my life making you as joyful as you have made me,” she

promised, her eyes aglow. “You will never have cause to regret any of this.”

“Beginning now?” he asked, taking both of her hands in his. “I fear I can wait no more.”

She had already begun to beam with delight but kept her lips pressed together, waiting for him to speak, to utter the offers and make the promises both of them had desired for so long. Yet he paused, cataloguing every detail of her beauty, from the curl of her lashes to the sweet bow of her mouth. The ribbons of her bonnet, untied, danced in a sudden breeze, so he smoothed them back behind her shoulders, hoping he might fix the memory of her in his mind forever.

“I can hardly believe the time has at last arrived,” he said. “To imagine that henceforth we might be acknowledged as lovers! It does not seem possible.”

“It will not be possible,” she chided him, “if you never actually declare yourself to me.”

“Teasing woman! And at such a moment!” He could not stop smiling; this was so typical of their love, was it not? Tenderness and jollity in equal measure. “Bess, my dearest, beautiful, wonderful Bess, I love you more than I ever imagined it possible to love another. You are the other half of me, the keeper of my heart, the better part of my soul.”

“I adore you,” she whispered.

“As I do you.” A sudden lump made the rest harder to speak, but he did, nevertheless. “My heart knew yours from the first moment I ever beheld you, and somewhere in my soul I believed you must one day be mine, for if not...if not I might have perished.”

She kept her gaze on his, and ran her fingers lightly across his cheek. “How grateful I am that you did not perish and that you persisted in loving me when it seemed all was lost!”

“Will you make me the happiest man alive and marry me?” he asked.

Tears immediately sprang into her eyes, and she flung her arms around his neck. “Yes. Yes!”

EPILOGUE

Chiltern Court

April 1822

O akley had told Bess, back when it seemed the jumble of her life would never be sorted, that once things were settled, he would marry her in an instant. As it was, she insisted on a year's wait. "If I am to be the widow Beamish," she had said, "I must observe the mourning period, yes? Do it all properly. Otherwise, the entire tale falls to pieces."

"A day or two would surely do?" he had begged. "A week is the most I can allow for!"

She laughed. "I shall marry you in May of 1821, not a moment sooner. And I should very much like to have the banns called."

He could deny her nothing, even if it delayed their nuptials. Besides, as it turned out, she was not the only one in mourning.

Just as the leaves began to turn, his lordship's rheumatism became worse than it had ever been and, confined to his bed, he developed pleurisy and pneumonia that proved fatal. He had held on just long enough to know that Scarlett's pregnancy had come to a successful and happy end; she was delivered of twin boys in the beginning of November 1820. They had been christened Charles and Robert and were as fair as she was, although far, far more plump, which he attributed to the Worthe side.

Certainly none of the Richmonds ever grew really plump.

Oakley had fervently thanked God for having Bess by his side during those dark months, for he truly felt as if the bottom of his world had dropped out from beneath his feet. They did all they could to ensure Lady Tipton was never alone; all of them, Kemertons, Worthes, and Penriths along with Oakley and Bess, sat with her endlessly so that she might not feel too much bereft in the first weeks after his passing. Being so much together as a family was soothing to them all, and thus it was that a saying began to circulate among those in society, that one never saw one Richmond without three or four others of the clan nearby.

Now it was he who was called Tipton, and Bess after all was never to be his viscountess, but his countess, mistress of Chiltern Court from the very day she married from its small chapel. The dowager countess began, almost immediately, to remove herself to the dower house, but Bess put an immediate stop to it.

“Chiltern Court is an enormous home,” she said. “What need could we have to send you elsewhere? As it is, your chambers are so far removed from ours, we shall too little see one another!”

His mother was dubious and pleaded with her son to speak privately with his wife and be certain she knew what she was about.

“Mother,” he said, kissing her on her cheek. “An excellent man once told me the secret of a happy life was to always keep a happy wife, and though he is gone, I cannot gainsay his excellent counsel. I shall indulge the wishes of my wife as he did his, for surely one could not want for better than he had!”

Tipton had brought his robe and coronet back to Chiltern Court to store them safely—“So much crime in London, after all,” he had told his mother with a wink. There had been a minor sensation raised by the reappearance of the jewels Bess had removed from Beauvis, and Damian’s name had been raised here and there along

with the gossip. But between all that had happened to them in the past years, beginning with Adelaide and ending with his father's death, the ton had evidently decided the Richmonds had had enough. Then Lord Eberly had gone off to Gretna Green with his actress mistress, and the tongues of society finally moved on.

Tipton stood one morning, looking out the window of the study, the lawn of Chiltern Court unfurling before his eyes, and thinking of it all.

"How ironic it is to see you standing there," his mother remarked as she entered.

"Ironic? How so?"

Her face, thinner and paler since the loss of her beloved husband, twisted into an odd frown. "From the stories I was told, the day your father—Robert, that is—came to show you to your grandfather as a babe in arms, I believe he was likely standing in that very spot when he cast you both out, saying that neither of you would ever see a farthing of the Tipton fortune."

"The old badger must be turning in his grave, then," he replied soberly.

"Oh, I hope so. He was a cold-hearted man, far more concerned about his position in society than his family."

"Pure idiocy," Tipton remarked. "For what greater treasure have we than our family?"

Shortly after the period of mourning had passed, Tipton opened a letter in his study, one that had been hand-delivered to him. He expected a letter of condolence and thus was surprised when pound notes fell from the folded pages.

My lord,

My condolences on the passing of your excellent father. Though I knew him for an exceedingly short time, his goodness and mercy have altered the course of my life. It was through his largesse that I found myself able to reconcile with my own father, and I hope that I have, in so doing, set my life back on its proper course. He called on me shortly after my release, and came with me to my family home. It was respect for him, I believe, that convinced my father to receive and ultimately forgive his errant son. The words he spoke to him I shall never forget: 'To cast out the prodigal is no credit to any father, but to see him brought back to the fold is a credit to all'.

I remunerate these funds to you as promised on the day you called on me in Fleet Street. Alas, I can never truly repay the debt owed to you both for your kindness. Please accept my deepest gratitude to you and my unwavering fealty to your family.

Ever your servant,

W Shaw

"Absolutely astonishing!" Tipton stared at the money in disbelief. He had quite forgotten the prisoner's vow to repay the twenty pounds, in fact had never given it the least thought. His father, it seemed, had taken more interest in Mr Shaw than he knew at the time and had taken great care that the elder Shaw did not repeat the mistake of the elder Tipton.

"I shall remember it too, dear Father," he murmured.

Frederica and Adelaide had both found themselves expecting babies in the spring of 1821, which did much to ease the dowager Lady Tipton's suffering. Tipton thought it a fine thing for the pair of them to experience at the same time; Adelaide and Scarlett would often have their 'twin' feelings and experiences, but in this case, it was Frederica's turn to 'twin'. They had their children within mere days of each other in early October, both of them delivering girls, for which Lady Delphine was wild with delight. She had grown weary, it seemed, of the nursery at Cedarvale being too full of

military figures and blocks, and was eager for someone to play dolls and roll hoops with.

Thus it was that 1821, which had begun so dreadfully, ended happily. Lady Tipton still fervently missed her husband, but as the year wore on, she had cried less and spent more time in fond remembrance; they learnt that the remedy for her melancholy was always the children, and she would be often found in the nursery of whoever's home she was at, watching the children with a faint smile on her lips.

The nursery at Cedarvale was where she sat one day late in November when Tipton and Bess went to her. They had gathered at Penrith's estate because Frederica was to be churched, and on the whole, they liked to make an occasion of things whenever possible. Thus, Frederica's churching and the christening of little Lady Louisa would be heralded with family meals and family games, family musical evenings and likely even an impromptu family ball, for they all, it seemed, loved to dance.

The dowager held Lady Louisa in her arms as she scolded Lady Delphine for boxing her elder brother's ears. "A lady must not lose her temper, Delphine," she instructed. "She must be pleasing in voice and temper at all times."

Lady Delphine considered that a moment, then said, "I suppose I shall grow into a man, then, because I have too much of a temper to do that." And then she skipped off.

Lady Tipton appeared to smother her grin as she turned to view Tipton and Bess. "That one has a spirit," she told them. "She is going to give Frederica a grey hair or two in her time, I assure you."

She beckoned the nursemaid over to take Lady Louisa as Tipton and Bess told her they wished to share some news with her. "Good news, I hope?" she enquired.

"Excellent news," Tipton told her. Then—after a look at Bess, who only turned pink and lowered her eyes—he said, "My darling wife tells me I am to be a father."

For a moment, the dowager could not speak. She opened her mouth and seemed to have difficulty catching her breath; then she exclaimed and grew teary-eyed, rising only to pull them both into her embrace as she exclaimed her delight. "If only Charles could be here!" she said over and over. "How happy he would be! Oh but, dear Bess, you must take every precaution! We cannot take any risk with your health!"

As the winter drew on, the young Lady Tipton was coddled and cosseted by every Richmond as well as her own dear parents who visited Chiltern as often as they could. They, too, had a wedding in the offing—Leighton had proposed to Penrith's cousin, Miss Talbot, and the union was set to be the event of the forthcoming Season. Privately Tipton could not imagine the reticent Miss Talbot as the centre of such a spectacle, but perhaps she had not a choice in the matter. Regardless, he was all anticipation of the cake, even if he doubted anything could ever be the equal of his and Bess's.

And now it was down to this. April 3 had been the longest night of his life—for Bess had begun with pains just before they dined the night prior—and had been followed by the most horribly prolonged day. It was of great consolation to him that his sisters, as well as her mother and his own, attended her, for surely, with so many accomplished mothers with her, nothing could go amiss?

The hours dragged on and on. Worthe, Kem, and Penrith all made every effort to distract and soothe him to no avail. He played billiards so badly he scratched the baize, then distractedly lost twenty pounds to the others at cards. The housekeeper brought in food and drink, but he could touch none of it. "How is a man to endure this!" he exclaimed over and over. "I know mine is by far not the hardest part, but gads if this is not insufferable!"

Finally, when he had just begun to think it could never end, his mother came into the room. It was nearly midnight, and poor Bess had laboured for nearly thirty hours complete. All of the men were immediately alert, sitting upright and straightening coats and waistcoats in anticipation of news. "My lord," she said with a smile that

allayed all fear, “your countess summons you.”

Oakley shot out of the chair as the last word left her lips, nearly bowling her over in his haste to get to Bess and...well, whoever might be with her. He took the stairs two at a time before arriving at the door to the mistress’s chambers. From within came a brief cry, a newborn’s infant wail, and he froze. It was his son or daughter on the other side, and the rush of love that came, before he had even laid eyes upon the babe, nearly felled him.

He pushed open the door to see Bess with an impossibly small bundle in her arms. She looked tired but radiant with joy.

“There you are!” Adelaide said, as if he had not got there in a trice. “Come, ladies, let us leave them to it.”

Scarlett and Frederica both had tears in their eyes as they pushed past him, murmuring things about privacy. Lady Leighton bent to kiss her daughter on the head, whispering something to her before she too exited the room.

Tipton approached the bed slowly, eager but afraid he might somehow harm someone. “Darling, you are well?”

“Tired,” she replied. “But yes, perfectly well. And so very happy to introduce you to your son and heir.”

“My son!” Very gingerly, he took a seat on the bed next to them. Bess immediately passed the baby to him and he, very fumblingly, took him from her. “How do you do, Viscount Oakley?”

His boy was thin and seemed long; he had nary a scrap of hair on his head, and his eyes were wide and watchful. “Violet eyes,” he said with amazement. “He has them.”

They spent time cataloguing him then: his lips were like Bess's and his hands were very like the late earl's; his legs were long like his father's and his brow brought to mind Sir Humphrey. Their son seemed to watch them as they were at it, his eyes unaccountably wise and almost knowing. The love Tipton felt for him, this silently watchful little boy, was beyond anything he ever could have imagined.

"How have we got so fortunate?" he said at last to his wife. "He is perfect, absolutely perfect!"

"He was grown in love," she said simply. "The love of us all, Richmonds and Leightons together. How could he be anything less than perfectly wonderful with so much love surrounding him?"