



# The Maid (Rags to Richmonds #1)

**Author:** *Amy D'Orazio*

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** She rejoiced at having finally discovered that happiness of which her friend had so often spoken—the sheer joy of being held, of being wanted, but moreover, of being loved.

MISS ADELAIDE BOOKER IS A HOUSEMAID with a secret—a secret so deeply buried that even she doesn't know about it, until the amiable and familiar-looking Viscount Oakley uncovers her hidden past. She is not who she thought she was but rather Miss Adelaide Richmond, long lost daughter of the estranged son of an earl. And her family wants her back.

THRUST SUDDENLY INTO THE WORLD OF EARLS AND DUKES, Society balls, and the London Season, Adelaide struggles to find her place among the very people whose bed sheets she once changed. Missteps abound, and it will take a stalwart champion and a patient heart to teach her she can be loved again. The only question that remains is, which of her many admirers loves her enough to wait for her to learn?

The Maid is the love story of Miss Adelaide Richmond, relegated to a life in service after her parents' deaths. THE MAID is the first novel of four in the Rags to Richmonds series. Follow the Richmonds as they rediscover one another and reclaim their rightful place in society where new friends and lovers await them.

**Total Pages (Source):** 27

## CHAPTER ONE

High Brook House, Southampton

August 1817

A delaide Booker had no idea from whence she hailed, but she liked to imagine she was not put on the earth to empty chamber pots. Especially not this one, with its contents swilling around like a small rodent drowning in a bowl of eggnog. It was not that the work troubled her—she had dealt with worse things than night soil in her time—only, with a name like hers, she fancied her natural parents must have imagined a more refined and sophisticated existence for her than a housemaid.

That was undoubtedly why her employers had insisted on changing it. No master or mistress of a stately home wished their servants to be more elegantly named than they. Thus, she was ‘Sarah’ to everybody at High Brook. She did not dislike it, though her own name being the only thing she had been given by her mother and father that remained hers, she clung to it obstinately in her thoughts.

“If you’ve finished the mistress’s room, the green needs doing. Lucy’s had to go into Southampton. Her mother’s taken ill,” the housekeeper informed her when she entered the workroom. “And do not look at me like that. You’d want to be let off, too, if it were your mother who was unwell.”

Regret instantly overtook Mrs Bunce’s countenance. She was a hard taskmaster, but she was not unkind and would never deliberately draw attention to Adelaide’s familial deficiencies. Nevertheless, three mothers dead was too considerable a

misfortune to be perpetually evaded, and the subject was inevitably stumbled over every now and again.

Adelaide grinned. "I did not care at all that the last one took ill. I thought the hives were an improvement on her usual complexion."

The housekeeper gave a grateful nod. "Get off and see it done, then, there's a good lass."

Adelaide retrieved her basket of cleaning paraphernalia and climbed the stairs to the second floor. These rooms were seldom used, but the master and mistress were hosting a grand party to mark the end of the summer, and the house was teeming with lords and ladies. She could not recall who was staying in the green room, though it scarcely mattered, for none of the guests seemed to wake up in the same bed in which they went to sleep. Whoever it was ought presently to be at breakfast, in any case; a quick tidy and a flick of the sheets could easily be achieved before they returned .

She was surprised and not a little put out to discover, upon entering the room, that it was occupied by no fewer than five men, engaged in a somewhat heated exchange about a card game, from what she could discern. She hated to be observed in her work and attempted to back out quietly, but her basket knocked against the door, bringing all their eyes swinging in her direction.

She curtsied. "I beg your pardon. I shall return later."

"There is no need. Pray, do not let us inhibit your work."

Thus, the room's occupier was revealed to be the Earl of Kemerton, who gestured for his friends to leave. Three of them did, continuing their debate as they went. One, Viscount Oakley, remained fixed to the spot, peering brazenly at Adelaide with a most peculiar turn to his countenance. She self-consciously wiped her cheeks with the

back of her hand, hoping she had not smeared dirt on her face without knowing it, but it did nothing to diminish his unnerving attention.

“You are not the usual maid,” Lord Kemerton observed. “I trust there is nothing amiss.”

Adelaide found herself momentarily lost for words. Whether because, up close, Lord Kemerton was even more striking in appearance than rumour and stolen glimpses had allowed him to be, or because Lord Oakley was continuing his ill-mannered staring, she could not tell.

“If one’s mother being indisposed can be considered ‘amiss’, then yes,” she mumbled distractedly. The earl’s obvious surprise recalled her to her senses, and she snapped her mouth closed, wondering whether he would have her dismissed for insolence. Her face warmed. “Forgive me.”

He only smiled and enquired, “You do not agree that it can be?”

“Well, I...um...” His smile was vastly distracting. “I daresay the woman is perfectly capable of being ill on her own. I cannot comprehend in what way it will improve the situation to have her daughter sitting about watching her while she is at it.”

His smile broadened. “You do not think the comfort of a loved one valuable in such circumstances?”

“I would not know, my lord.”

His amusement evaporated, and for some reason the seriousness that replaced it made Adelaide feel horribly exposed. She looked away, only to discover the viscount regarding her still, his face screwed into a quizzical grimace. As she watched, he took a step towards her, his hand lifting from his side as though he meant to touch her

face. She sucked in a breath and flinched out of his reach but in doing so banged her head painfully against the edge of the open door.

“Oakley, get a hold of yourself,” Lord Kemerton said sternly.

“Yes, I...I do beg your pardon,” Lord Oakley said, shaking his head as though to pull himself from a dream. “I did not mean to startle you, only...” He returned to gazing.

“We are in the way. Let us go,” his friend said firmly.

“One moment, I was just?—”

Lord Kemerton shoved him, none too gently, in the direction of the open door. Once they were out of it, Adelaide heard him say in a harsh whisper, “I know precisely what you were just doing.”

“Oh, you do, do you?”

“Yes, and it was beneath you. She is a maid, for God’s sake. Pray, do not stoop to even contemplating it.”

“You misunderstand.”

“Explain it to me, then.”

“Well...I cannot, precisely. But there is something about the girl that I?—”

“As I said, trifling with the maids is beneath you.”

The rest was inaudible, for they had passed out of hearing. Adelaide exhaled heavily. She had heard that Lord Oakley and Lord Kemerton were among the more amiable of

their set; evidently, they were no less conceited and ungracious than the rest. She pushed the door shut with her hip and set about her work.

The strange encounter set Adelaide's day off on entirely the wrong footing, and she remained in a funk until suppertime. A hearty meal raised her spirits—it always did—but she was thrown back into the doldrums when a note arrived from Lucy, informing them that she would not return that evening, consigning Adelaide to double the work again the next day.

She did not object to the extra effort—she and her fellow maids often took on each other's tasks when one needed time off. It was the reason for it she could not comprehend. She had not been lying when she told Lord Kemerton that watching somebody who was indisposed seemed a fruitless exercise. It had surprised him, and she supposed her opinion might be different had she ever been tended to by a loved one herself while she was sick. But she had not, and it had never prevented her from getting well again.

On reflection, it might be nice if somebody cared enough for her well-being that they would hold her hand and mop her brow when she felt ill—but she had long ago eschewed dreaming of such things, for it only ever ended in disappointment. She was a little cross with Lord Kemerton for making her think about it.

It was with some trepidation that she approached the upper landing in the morning, but none of the gentlemen she had encountered the previous day were there. Every chamber was blissfully unoccupied, and she was rather pleased with herself to finish all Lucy's rooms as well as her own before eleven o'clock. She gathered up her things and headed downstairs.

“I say, you there!”

Startled, she turned to see Viscount Oakley trotting down the stairs after her.

“Oh good, it is you. I thought it was.” He came to a halt several steps above her. “I, um...that is, I...I wanted to ensure you were not still pained from that nasty blow to your head yesterday.”

Adelaide frowned in confusion; the slight bump had hardly constituted a blow, but she supposed it spoke well of him that he should remember it and ask after her. She was accustomed to being mostly invisible to the lot of them. “I am not pained, my lord. Indeed, I had forgotten it entirely. But I thank you for your solicitude. ”

He descended another step and said, in a thoughtful tone, “Solicitude is an awfully big word.”

“My lord?”

“You have an uncommonly refined vocabulary for a housemaid.”

Adelaide wondered how many housemaids he had conversed with before forming the opinion that none of them knew any words of more than three syllables. “I meant ‘thank you for your concern’.”

“Yes, I know what solicitude means. I was only implying that...well, that is...have you always been in service?”

“Since I was twelve.”

“And before that?”

“I was eleven.”

“What? Oh!” He chuckled slightly. “No, I mean, where were you before that?”

“Have I displeased your lordship in some way?” she enquired, because she had absolutely no intention of answering his last question.

“No, not at all.” He splayed both hands in the air between them as one did when attempting to calm a distressed animal—or prevent it from fleeing. His assurances were welcome but not enough to make Adelaide want to stay.

“Then might I be excused? I shall be scolded if I am too long away from my work.”

“Pray, a moment more of your time!” he said pleadingly, almost urgently. “I shall not keep you long. Allow me to...I...” He gave a ragged sigh and ran a hand through his hair. “Might I ask your name? ”

“Sarah,” she answered warily.

“Sarah what? Forgive me, but I was after your surname.”

Adelaide felt herself redden. That was not at all where she thought his questions had been tending. The possibility that he knew her father, that he was here on his behalf, made the viscount’s enquiries ten times more ominous. With extreme reluctance, she admitted, “Booker.”

Apparently, it was not the answer he wanted, but his evident disappointment made Adelaide faint with relief. With one hand on the rail to steady herself, she began backing away down the stairs. “If that is all?”

“No! No, it cannot be.”

To Adelaide’s dismay, Lord Oakley dashed down the stairs past her, stopping on the step below and blocking her path as she turned towards him.

“Look at my eyes.”

She regarded him sceptically.

“I mean it—look at them. Do you see their colour? That they are almost violet?”

Adelaide had no choice but to look, for he had shoved his face so close to hers that she could see little else past it. As outrageously vain as it was that he should demand she acknowledge it, it could not be denied that his eyes were unusual. She would not have described them as violet, but she conceded that they were an extraordinary shade of blue. And, if flattery was what his lordship desired before he would leave her alone, then she was not above stretching the truth.

“I do, my lord. ”

“Right. But you see, I have never met anybody else with eyes this colour until now. Does it not strike you as a remarkable coincidence that yours are almost identical?”

“They are?”

“Do you not think so?” he asked, pushing his face closer still and opening his eyes comically wide in his eagerness for her to agree.

Adelaide drew back, not least to avoid the peril of an attempted kiss, but because no amount of staring into his eyes would alter the fact that she could not perceive any similarity.

“I have not spent as much of my life admiring my own reflection as some people appear to have done, my lord. If I am looking at a mirror, I am invariably polishing it.”

“Then look at my eyes now, and the next time you see your reflection, pray pause to look at your own, and you will see what I mean.”

“To what end?”

“Oakley!”

Adelaide let out a shriek at the booming voice. Lord Oakley almost fell down the stairs as he jumped to put some distance between them.

“Kem, what the devil? You scared me half to death!”

Lord Kemerton, his countenance like thunder, had appeared at the top of the stairs. He marched down to them, glowering at his friend until he reached the step above Adelaide, at which point he said to her, in a brusque tone, “Thank you, that will be all.”

Adelaide was no fool; before either could say anything more, she dashed past Lord Oakley, down the remaining steps, and rounded the newel post to the servants’ door beneath the stairs. She paused before closing it fully behind her to listen to what was being said in her absence.

“...do you imagine Lady Veronica would think?” Lord Kemerton was saying in a low voice. “You cannot expect that she will take your suit seriously if it gets out you have a fancy for one of the servants.”

“I keep telling you, I was only curious,” Lord Oakley replied.

“Curious? That is a new word for it,” Lord Kemerton replied sardonically.

“Come, now. You must have noticed her eyes.”

After a pause, and in a softer tone, the earl said, “Yes, I have. But you might have noticed that I did not accost her on the stairs and oblige her to let me stare into them.”

They reached the bottom of the stairs, and Adelaide pulled the door closed to avoid detection. After a few seconds, a strong curiosity of her own bade her push it open again by the smallest margin to watch the two men walk across the vestibule. It seemed she had missed some salient part of their discussion, for they were angrier with each other than they had been moments before.

“Just stay away from the girl,” Lord Kemerton said icily. “Stay away from all the servants. You demean yourself by chasing after them in this fashion.”

The viscount opened his mouth to reply but his friend interrupted.

“I shall not deny that she is uncommonly pretty, beautiful even, but you are better than to behave like this. I have never seen you thus, and I hope I never shall again!” He stalked away, shaking his head.

Lord Oakley stared after him for a moment or two before making a noise of exasperation and marching off in the other direction.

Adelaide thought neither man had covered himself in glory and was glad they were both gone. Lord Oakley was a strange one, though perhaps not quite so wicked as his friend seemed to think. She had met that sort before—men who thought they were entitled to whatever or whomever they fancied and pursued it without a care for the consequences. She had known plenty of girls whose lives had been ruined that way and had fended off more attempts on her own person than she cared to count. Despite his peculiar overtures, which she could certainly have lived without, Lord Oakley did not fit the usual mould.

As for Lord Kemerton, his sort was an entirely different kettle of fish—men who

thought so highly of themselves that to become embroiled with the working class was a debasement too repugnant to contemplate. She wondered what he would think if he knew she had chosen this life.

It was impossible to know what might have been if her birth mother and father had not died. She had wasted far too many hours wondering what course things would have taken had the woman who adopted her not perished. But they all had, and her third mother, the mistress of an estate with several servants in her employ, had made Adelaide's life so disagreeable that being a maid had become a more appealing prospect than having one. If Lord Kemerton thought less of her for where she had ended up, it was no concern of hers.

Nevertheless, now that the vestibule was empty, she could not resist sneaking out of the servants' passage to stand in front of the nearest wall sconce. Rising to her tiptoes, she was just tall enough to see her reflection in the mirrored wall plate behind the unlit candles. She turned her head this way and that, attempting to catch the light, but it was fruitless; the only purple she could see near her eyes was in the dark circles beneath them. Angry with herself for entertaining the viscount's nonsense, she pushed away from the wall and hastened back to the workroom.

### CHAPTER TWO

Dinner that night was lamb stew, one of Adelaide's favourites made better still by the inclusion of rosemary dumplings. She sat between her friend and fellow housemaid, Patty, and one of the footmen, Gregory. They were squeezed in unusually tightly, as they had been since the start of the week on account of all the visitors' servants taking their meals with them.

Adelaide did not begrudge them the elbow room, though she was less sanguine about sharing Cook's stew. When one of the newcomers—a wiry, middle-aged man, sitting across the table from her—observed that the food at High Brook was exceedingly agreeable, she began eating with unseemly haste, determined to secure seconds before it was all gone.

“But then, everything at High Brook is agreeable as far as I can see,” he continued. “It must be a pleasant place to work.”

Adelaide was too busy eating to do more than shrug, but Patty answered that it was .

“Being this close to the sea is delightful, I should imagine.”

Adelaide glanced up, wondering why he was so intent on praising High Brook. If he was fishing for work, he would do better to charm the butler than a pair of housemaids. Then he smiled at her with a warmth that his gaunt face had not made him appear capable of, and she felt bad for thinking he was being anything other than affable.

“We don’t get much time off to go to the beach,” she said, “but you can smell the sea on the air some mornings, and that is refreshing, to be sure.”

“Can’t be the first time you’ve seen the sea,” Gregory said to him. “The menservants I know get to travel all over, seeing things the likes of us can only dream of.”

“It is true that my work has allowed me to see some interesting places,” he replied. “Have you always worked at High Brook, then, young man?”

Gregory had put another forkful of food in his mouth, but it did not deter him from answering, unintelligibly, “Not always at High Brook, but always in Southampton. Patty used to work at Mottisfont Abbey, didn’t you, Patty?”

Patty nodded enthusiastically. “And Titchfield Manor before that.”

“What about you?” the man asked Adelaide. “Have you lived anywhere interesting?”

She shook her head. “I have worked at a few places, but none of them particularly memorable. Once you’ve seen the inside of one storeroom, you’ve seen them all.”

“You have always been a housemaid, then? ”

Adelaide had held all manner of positions and knew her way around a scullery as well as she did a dairy, laundry, and stillroom, but she could not imagine a stranger who was only attempting to make polite conversation would truly wish to hear about it. She replied, simply, “Yes. And you? Have you always been a manservant?”

“Not always, though I arrived at the position more quickly than some are able to thanks to the education my parents gave me.” After a pause, he asked, “Did you receive an education?”

Patty shook her head. “Too many mouths to feed in our family for any of us to waste time with learning. As soon as we could work, we did.”

The man smiled at her briefly, then returned his gaze to Adelaide and looked at her until she felt compelled to tell him something, if only to make him stop staring. She settled for saying she had never been to school, for it was always best to put as much truth into one’s prevarications as possible.

“How many years have you been in service?” he pressed.

“Eight.”

“You must have begun at a very young age, then, for you cannot be older than what—eighteen?”

Adelaide smiled but did not answer. In truth, she did not know her precise age, though it was probably nearer twenty.

He smiled back, wholly undeterred by her silence. “I was seventeen before I went into service, but I had to wait for my older brothers to find themselves positions first. Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“I do,” Patty answered, and tried valiantly to name them all, but the man talked directly over her, his attention fixed solely on Adelaide.

“But you? Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“Regrettably.” Though why they should be any more interesting than Patty’s, she knew not.

“Are they in service as well?”

She laughed cynically. The Booker children would rather starve than exert themselves to lift a finger. Indeed, they would have starved without servants—and an unlovable adopted sister—to do their bidding, for they had been brought up to be fashionably indulged and indolent. “No, sir, they are none of them in service.”

A bell rang on the far wall, and Mrs Bunce called from that end of the table that it was for Lord Oakley’s room. To Adelaide’s dismay, the man who had been questioning her stood up, thanked them for the pleasant conversation, and left. She felt herself grow hot.

“That was Lord Oakley’s man?” she asked, all agitation.

“It was, and he was mighty interested in you,” Gregory replied.

Patty wrinkled her nose in displeasure. “It is always you they are interested in, never me.”

“I do not think he was asking for himself. I think he might have been asking for his master,” Adelaide said quietly—though not quietly enough, for she was overheard.

“I think so, too,” came the booming voice of the butler from behind them.

With a scraping of chair legs, everyone in the hall rose to their feet. Mr Hardcastle looked down his perennially turned-up nose at Adelaide.

“And why do I think this? Because his lordship has just been asking after you upstairs, in the drawing room no less, wanting to know how long you have worked here.”

“Why did he want to know that?” Mrs Bunce enquired, hastening around the table to join them.

Mr Hardcastle folded his arms across his chest and peered at Adelaide sternly. “Because he thinks he recognises her from somewhere.”

Mrs Bunce’s countenance reddened, and Adelaide’s heart plunged. She knew precisely what the housekeeper was thinking—the same thing as every other person around the table, only they were all being less discreet about it, giggling and nudging each other suggestively.

“I assure you, that is not possible, for I have never met him before,” she said firmly.

“What about before you came to High Brook?”

“Upon my word, sir, never.”

“Then why is he showing such interest in you?”

“I do not know.”

The butler narrowed his eyes. “Have you been leading him on?”

Adelaide stifled an enraged gasp. “No, I have not!”

“Thank you, Mr Hardcastle,” Mrs Bunce interrupted. “I can deal with this from here. Sarah, come with me.”

Wiping her damp palms on her skirts, Adelaide followed the housekeeper out of the hall and away from the two dozen pairs of eyes boring into her. The room erupted into giggles and lewd speculation behind them, but the sound faded as they trudged through the warren of service corridors to Mrs Bunce’s sitting room. When they arrived, the housekeeper lit two candles on a little table and gestured for Adelaide to sit with her.

“Well then, my girl, you had better tell me. What has occurred between you and Lord Oakley?”

“Nothing.”

“Do not lie to me.”

“I have never lied to you, and I am not lying now,” Adelaide said desperately. “I have not done anything.”

“I never thought for a moment that you had. I am asking whether he has done something.”

“Oh, I see. Well...” She sighed unhappily.

“Oh, my days, he has tried something!” Mrs Bunce cried, clutching her chest.

“No! At least, nothing like that . He only seemed interested in the colour of my eyes.”

“Oh Lord!”

“But not because he was trying to flatter me, I do not think. At least, if he was, he went about it in a manner most unlikely to succeed. He was preoccupied with the notion that my eyes are the same colour as his.”

Mrs Bunce shook her head almost violently. “Listen to me. He is trying to seduce you, and you must not fall prey to his schemes.”

“I am really not sure he?—”

“Do not be na?ve. This is how they do it. He will try to make you feel safe, make you

feel as though you and he are not so very different, that there might be a future in it, but you are different, Sarah. You are from completely opposing worlds, and it would come to nothing but disaster for you. You must not let him succeed!”

“I was not intending to.”

“Not by design, I am sure, but if you deny him, he may take matters into his own hands.” She pushed her chair back from the table abruptly and stood up, taking one of the candles with her and turning around to rummage in the drawer of her small writing desk as she continued speaking. “I ought to have seen this coming. I’ve always said, beautiful girls ought not to be chambermaids, but I broke my own rule with you, Sarah. You’ve always been such a hard worker! I shall find out from Mr Hardcastle what sort of man the viscount is, and whether we ought to be worried he might try something untoward. In the meantime, swap rounds with Patty, so you are away from his corridor.” She turned back around and held something out towards Adelaide. “And I want you to take this.”

“A knife?”

“No, dear, a letter opener. You’ll not cut yourself carrying it, but it will stick a man just as well if the need arises. Keep it on you at all times. If Lord Oakley tries anything, use it.”

Adelaide thought it best not to laugh, for Mrs Bunce was clearly in earnest, but arming herself seemed a vastly excessive response to somebody noticing the colour of her eyes—even if that observation had been made with absurd and improper insistence. More by way of thanks for her concern than for any real concession that she might need it, Adelaide accepted the little implement and slipped it into her pocket .

The housekeeper gave a decisive nod. “Good. Now run along.”

Patty was waiting in the passageway outside and required an immediate summary of everything that had been said within.

“So there you have it,” Adelaide concluded, once she had told her all. “And he will see me kicked out on the streets if he does not cease his nonsense.”

“Do you not think it is a little flattering that a viscount has taken a shine to you?”

“Truly, I do not think he has taken any sort of shine to me. I cannot shake the feeling that he really was only intrigued by my eyes.” She stopped walking and thrust her face towards Patty’s, as Lord Oakley had done to her on the stairs. “Come, tell me. Are they purple?”

Patty gamely stared into them, only to shake her head. “Down here, everyone’s eyes look the same shade of murky brown.”

“Ever the charmer,” Adelaide said, rolling her unremarkable eyes as she linked arms with her friend and directed her back to the servants’ hall to see whether there were any dumplings going begging.

### CHAPTER THREE

Much to Adelaide's annoyance, the spectacle in the servants' hall prompted a cavalcade of teasing from her fellow workers, which lasted well into the following day. How many of them truly suspected her of an insalubrious connection with Lord Oakley, she dared not guess, but by the afternoon, her patience with winks, nudges, and ribald insinuations was completely spent. She pretended not to hear the two hall boys who called after her as she passed them that if she was looking for Lord Oakley, he was down on the terrace.

"All alone, too, when we saw him," one added with a snigger.

She gritted her teeth and kept walking. Alone on the terrace away from other innocent people trying to get on with their work was the very best place for the viscount, as far as she was concerned—long may he stay there! She wished he had never come to High Brook. Almost more vexing than tarnishing her good name, he was the reason none of her usual rooms—the tending of which she had down to a fine art—were any longer in her care. Instead, she had toiled all morning in Patty's, which were the state rooms and a fittingly royal pain to clean, and she was only now making her way up to begin work on Lucy's. Her back ached, her fingers were chafed, and if she never encountered another nobleman in her life, it would be too soon.

"Look out!"

"Jesus wept!" Adelaide dropped her basket upon rounding the corner onto the upper landing and colliding with someone coming in the opposite direction. Her hasty apology wilted into a thoroughly half-hearted one when she saw it was Lord

Kemerton. She curtsied and picked up her dropped things. When she stood up, it was to find him watching her, a quirk to his mouth that might have been contempt or ridicule. Or wind, probably, he's so puffed-up. She would not have hung about to allow it to grate on her nerves, only his broad frame took up rather a lot of the narrow corridor, and she could not politely get past.

"I cannot seem to avoid you," he said. "I assure you it is not by design. I understood the housemaids began working on this floor at an earlier hour."

"We usually do, but I was delayed this morning. Pardon me if I have inconvenienced your lordship."

He finally stepped out of her way, but she guessed by the way he watched her go past him that he had perceived her insincerity. What was it about this man that whet her tongue so? It would be just her luck if he reported her to Mrs Bunce. Then she would be in trouble for impudence as well as dawdling. "I would not be late if it were not for your friend."

"What was that?"

Adelaide went cold all over; she had not intended that he hear her muttered complaint. Without turning to look at him, she mumbled, "Nothing, my lord," and kept walking.

"No, you said something about my friend being to blame. I insist you tell me what you meant."

"I did not mean anything."

"Has Lord Oakley approached you again?"

Something in the earl's tone—anger? reproach?—made Adelaide stop walking and turn to face him. Bad enough all her own people thought her guilty of promiscuity; she had no desire to add this toffee-nose's censure to the pyre. “No, my lord.”

He looked at her closely, and for long enough that she began to feel self-conscious. She could not recall that any man had ever regarded her so intently, and certainly not one so handsome. It irked her that it was suspicion and not admiration that spurred him to do so. She lifted her chin and deliberately did not blink as she held his gaze. Something else he could complain about to Mrs Bunce: her impertinence for not lowering her eyes in his presence.

“Be on your guard with Lord Oakley,” he said abruptly. “His honour is usually impeccable, but he seems to have taken an unsavoury interest in you.”

It was all Adelaide could do not to exclaim—unsavoury indeed!

“In fact, it would be for the best if you were to avoid him for the remainder of his stay,” the earl continued. “His manners may give him the appearance of earnestness, but do not be fooled into believing that anything good could come of a dalliance.”

She could hold her tongue no longer and cared not whether the earl was displeased. He had thought it politic to begin lecturing her; he could jolly well hear her reply!

“Pardon me, my lord, but I have no intention of embarking on a dalliance, as you call it. I may be a lowly housemaid, but I assure you I am not without principles.”

He inclined his head. “I did not mean to imply otherwise, but principles are not always proof against false promises or foolish impulses—and both those things ruin innocent people.”

“Do not make yourself uneasy. Your friend is safe from ruin on my account.”

“I was not talking about him , I—” Lord Kemerton stopped speaking and sucked in a deep breath, his eyes wide as he stared at the letter opener Adelaide had withdrawn from her pocket.

“If he attempts to impose any foolish impulses on me, I shall make sure he knows they are unwelcome.”

She had done it to silence him, tired of hearing him speak of her inferiority and undesirous of listening any longer to how unworthy she was of a viscount’s attentions. Yet, now that she was brandishing a blade at the Earl of Kemerton, and he was regarding her as though she were a mad woman, she rather regretted being so rash. While she racked her brains for a way to extract herself from the situation, Lord Kemerton did something as infuriating as it was unexpected—he laughed at her .

“Of course you have a knife. I know not why I am surprised.”

Adelaide’s cheeks erupted with heat, and tears of mortification stung her eyes. Had the earl raged, had he dragged her to Baroness Grisham, demanding her instant dismissal, had he even retaliated with force, he could not have injured her more. His amusement was salt in the wounds already inflicted by his censure of her character, and she wished she had the nerve to stick the wretched letter opener in him . Instead, she shoved it back in her pocket and ran away.

Adelaide retreated to the attic room she shared with Patty and directed her fury at her pillow until feathers burst from one seam. She was fuming with herself for almost succumbing to tears before, but being laughed at was among the things she most despised.

“Odious, hateful man!”

“Who?”

She sat back on her haunches and brushed her dishevelled hair from her face to see that Patty had entered the room. “How long have you been there?”

“I just came in. Is it Lord Oakley you are imagining pummelling, or some other unsuspecting idiot?”

“Him too, why not? They are all as bad as each other.”

“True.” Patty sat on her own bed and regarded Adelaide with sympathy. “This whole business will blow over soon, you’ll see. Someone else will do something to make them talk, and this will all be forgot.”

“But I have not done anything! You’d think, after all these years, I might have earned a bit of loyalty, but no! The slightest hint that I am secretly a raging harlot, and they are all calling me ‘Share-a-Sarah’ behind my back. Danny, who gladly took my spare boots when his wore through. Mary, who I let sleep in my bed when she first came here, when she was still scared of her own shadow. Turns out not one of them is a true friend.”

“They are your friends. They’re only teasing. ’Tis you who has yourself in knots over it. You ought to cease being so precious.”

“Precious?”

“Aye! For none of the rest of us would turn our noses up at the chance of a tumble with a handsome viscount. Now don’t look at me like that. I’m not saying I have—only that I might if the offer was ever made. ’Tis not as though we’ve a barrel of other ways to make us-selves happy in this place.”

“But have you no care for your reputation?”

“What does reputation matter when you scrub floors for a living?”

“Everything! For a start, it is one of the only things that is in our power to control. Would you throw yours away so easily?”

“Oh, get off your high horse, Sarah. I’m frightful fond of you, you know that, but you’ll win no friends carrying on as though you think you’re some great lady, with your big words and your talk of reputation—when really, you’re no better than the rest of us.”

“I do not act as though I am a great lady!”

Patty arched an eyebrow. “You did lie with him, then, did you?”

“Are those my only choices? To be above myself or be in the gutter?”

Then Patty laughed at her as well—only her laugh was not a quiet chuckle as Lord Kemerton’s had been, but a cruel, unforgiving sound. “If having a bit of fun with someone between the sheets to put some cheer into an otherwise miserable existence means that one is in the gutter, then half the people in this house are there already, and you just proved that you think you’re better than all of them.”

“Not better than! More prudent maybe, but?—”

Patty only laughed harder, and Adelaide could not bear it any longer. She threw her pillow aside and strode out of the room, ignoring her friend’s protestations that she had only been joking. She ran down three flights of stairs and left the house via the conservatory door to avoid being seen by anyone who might waylay her. She had a great desire to be alone and an even greater wish not to be summoned to some new and irksome task by Mrs Bunce, and the park seemed the likeliest place to afford her some solitude.

“Bugger!”

Her curse rang out across the terrace, startling Lord Oakley. She had not expected him to still be there, and if only she had not voiced her displeasure so loudly, she might have escaped his notice. As it was, her vulgar imprecation brought him whipping around to look at her and made him the third person in quick succession to laugh at her.

“I say, somebody is angry,” he said with a chuckle .

Adelaide began to back away. “Forgive the intrusion, my lord.”

“Wait! I was hoping I would see you again. Pray, do not go.”

“I must. I am needed.”

“Please! I wish to apologise. And explain. My behaviour yesterday must have alarmed you, and I would not have you be afraid of me. Only—” He stopped and looked at the house, though the windows had all been made mirrors by the bright summer sun, and it was impossible to see what or who might be lurking behind them. He stepped towards her. “Might we go somewhere more private?”

Adelaide’s heart began to hammer against her ribs, and she fumbled in her skirts for the opening to her pocket. For all that she resented Lord Kemerton’s officious interference, she had not forgotten his warning. “Sir, you do not understand what trouble you make for me. I could lose my position.”

Lord Oakley, preoccupied with his scrutiny of the house, did not appear to have heard and continued to advance. “I must speak with you, but I would rather not get into it here.”

“Sir, I beg you to come no nearer to me!”

“I cannot be sure we would not be overheard, and I should prefer it if we could be discreet until— ow! Bloody hell, what did you do that for?”

He staggered away from her, clutching at his arm. The arm Adelaide had stabbed with the letter opener. She dropped it on the ground in horror and shook her head.

“I’m sorry! I-I did not mean to do that! I only wanted to warn you away. You frightened me with the things you were saying, but I-I never meant to hurt you.”

“The things I was saying? What do you—oh, good God! Please tell me you did not think I was attempting to seduce you?” He made a noise of disgust that deeply affronted Adelaide. She had no great opinion of her own beauty, but her figure was lean and well-shaped, and she always kept her hair clean and brushed. Surely that was not so disgusting?

“If not that, then what was your intention in asking to speak to me privately?”

He did not answer and instead lifted his hand away from his arm to inspect the wound.

Adelaide let out a vast sigh of relief. “You are not cut!” Indeed, his coat was not even torn.

“No, but it still hurts like billy-oh! This is a fine beginning—I finally find my long-lost sister, and she tries to stab me!”

Adelaide stared at him, unsure that she had heard him correctly. “You found a long-lost sister?”

His countenance softened, and he let out a breath of his own, assuming a far gentler tone to continue. “That is why I should like to speak to you in private. My past is not something I am at liberty to discuss openly, but I have reason to believe it is inextricably linked with yours. Miss Booker—Sarah—I believe you and I may be brother and sister.”

She laughed uncertainly and continued to stare, wondering whether she ought to attempt to retrieve the letter opener. Perhaps he was insane, his good humour merely a disguise for being soft in the head .

“You must think me out of my wits,” he said, echoing her thoughts. “Indeed, there have been moments these past twenty-four hours when I have considered that I might be. Will you at least give me the chance to explain? Maybe even to help me determine whether I am right?” He crouched suddenly and picked up the letter opener, which he held out to her, handle first. “Bring this if it will make you feel safer.”

Adelaide smiled at the gesture, though it was so unlike anything her actual brothers had ever done for her, it made him still less credible. Was this what Mrs Bunce had warned her he would do—try to invent a greater affinity before attempting a furtive tryst? She hoped not, for establishing familiarity was one thing; claiming to be family was quite another.

“Is this some sort of cruel joke?”

“No, I am quite serious. I would not have said anything otherwise. I am not in the habit of toying with the hopes and dreams of young ladies—though I grant you, I have not given you much reason to believe that.”

“No, but as it happens, Lord Kemerton spoke in favour of your probity.”

Lord Oakley looked momentarily surprised, then observably gratified. “Well then, might we go somewhere we can talk openly?”

She regarded him, still unable to discern any resemblance between his features and her own, and considered her choices. Patty had been right; opportunities for happiness did not often present themselves to people like her—and the sources of happiness that must be available to the sister of a viscount were beyond anything she had ever known or could imagine. Certainly, she would not be required to empty anybody’s chamber pot ever again. Yet Adelaide had no fond memories of the relations she had left behind half a lifetime ago and a deep aversion to obtaining any more who might come to resent her in the same way again. She took the letter opener from Lord Oakley and returned it to her pocket.

“There are plenty of girls who, in my place, might pretend to see a likeness they could not, simply for the chance to escape this life. I will not do that. But I will answer your questions, for I know what it is like to wonder who you are.”

### CHAPTER FOUR

A delaide led Lord Oakley to a little-used antechamber and pulled the door nearly closed, without allowing the latch to click home. Should matters take a turn for the unpleasant, she thought it best to give herself a fighting chance of escape.

The more she observed him, however, the more convinced she became that the viscount had no nefarious intentions. She could perceive nothing but nervous excitement in the way he paced about the small space, running his hands through his hair and seeming unable to decide whether he ought to sit or stand.

A small thrill flickered in her stomach at the prospect that she might really be his sister, but she instantly dismissed the notion. True, she knew not who her parents were, but the idea that they might have been in any way important was laughable. There were tens of thousands of children made orphans every year. There were but tens of dozens of viscounts. She schooled herself to keep a rational head .

“Thank you for agreeing to this,” Lord Oakley began. “It is indelicate to ask you to speak to me alone, I know, but it is not commonly known that Lord Tipton is not my father by birth, and?—”

“You are adopted, too?” Adelaide blurted. She followed her outburst with a hasty apology for interrupting, but to her astonishment, the viscount waved it away, took both her hands, and led her to the nearest chair. The taboo of not sitting in the presence of her betters was many years ingrained, and it took some persuasion on his part before she lowered herself gingerly onto the seat, all the while his manner warring with her resolve to remain impartial.

He pulled another chair over and sat, facing her. “The whole purpose of this exercise is to try and establish whether we are equals. If you wish to interrupt me, I beg you would. I daresay it will make the thing go more quickly if it is not left up to me, for I am dashed if I know how to begin.”

She nodded but had even fewer ideas of what to say than he.

“Let us begin with that, then,” he said into her silence. “Yes, I am adopted. My parents both died when I was about three or four years old.” After a short pause, he added, tentatively, “And yours?”

“I do not know when mine died. All I know is that I was not born to the family in which I grew up. My mother—well, my most recent mother—told me.” She smiled at the turn of his countenance as he attempted to comprehend. “Frances and Christopher Booker took me in because they were childless,” she explained. “But Frances died when I was still an infant. I have no memory of her or my natural mother. My father married again, and that Mrs Booker died when I was ten.”

“I am very sorry to hear you have suffered so much loss.”

Adelaide did not think it would paint her in a favourable light to admit that she had been relieved when the last Mrs Booker had died. Not without context, at least, and the context of her childhood was something she had no desire to expound upon, even to someone who would, surely, turn out to have no connection to her whatsoever.

“You seem to have had more good fortune,” she said, striving to sound cheerful. “Orphan to viscount is quite the elevation.”

“Ah. Yes. That is the reason I wished to speak in private. The thing is—” He stopped talking and gave a nervous chuckle, rubbing his eyebrow with the back of his finger as he did so. “I have been keeping this secret for so long, it feels foolhardy to be

revealing it to a housemaid in a darkened antechamber on nothing more than a whim.”

“You must not feel obliged to tell me,” Adelaide replied impatiently. “Allow me to go back to my business, and I shall happily leave you to yours.” It was only kindness that had persuaded her to consent to hearing his absurd theory. As genial as he seemed, she would rather not waste her time having to coax him into telling her.

“Forgive me, I meant no offence. This is all excessively discomposing, but I should like you to know. If I am right, then you must know, for it would make my story your story.” He took a deep breath. “All of society believes Lord Tipton is my father, and I am his heir. In truth, Lady Tipton was unable to bear children. The earl’s true heir is his brother Damian, who was for many years in the army and then gaol and now divides his time between gambling dens and...well, it is enough to say that he leads a dissolute life.

“When I came into his care as a very young boy, Lord Tipton let it be known that I was his natural son—a ruse that was possible because he spent most of his early marriage at his country estate and came to town but rarely. To this day, that is what everybody believes. If the world were to discover that I am only his nephew, and not the heir, I would lose everything, and in all likelihood, my uncle Damian would run the estate into the ground.”

Adelaide felt a familiar, sinking feeling as the implication of what he was telling her became clear. “Lord Tipton is your uncle?”

“Yes.” He frowned. “Does that trouble you?”

It ought not to trouble her; she was used to being unwanted. She gave a desultory, one-shouldered shrug. “Presuming we are brother and sister, it means that when our parents died, our uncle chose to keep you and not me.”

Lord Oakley's expression altered instantly to one of excessive alarm, and he dragged his chair a few inches nearer in an urgent manner.

“Pray do not think that for an instant. My birth father—the youngest of the three sons—was estranged from his family, and all contact between him and his brothers was forbidden by their father. It was known that he had a son—me—for he attempted to heal the breach after I was first born, but his father would not hear of it. He was sent away again, and there was no further contact between them. A few months after the present Lord Tipton inherited the earldom, the family received word of my parents' deaths. The orphanage to which I had been taken wrote to inform them I was there.”

“And only you?”

The viscount twisted his mouth into a rueful smile and nodded. “Yes. When I was younger, I used to fancy that I could remember playing with other children, but I have long assumed it was the wishful thinking of an only child. I have not always known I was adopted, you see—I have no memory of it. But since I was told, I have often wondered whether I did have any brothers or sisters and where they might have ended up.”

“I beg you would not make me the object of your longing. I should not like to be a plaything, taken up to fulfil a childhood dream only to be put down again when the novelty wears off.” Adelaide knew all too well what would happen when he decided he was no longer entertained by his counterfeit sister.

He shook his head. “That is not why I am doing this. Yes, I have recollections that cannot be accounted for, but I have not gone through life suspecting every stranger I meet of being my brother or sister. Indeed, I never suspected it of anyone until yesterday, but something about you arrested me the moment I saw you.”

“Yes, my eyes, you said.”

“It was your eyes that made me look, for I truly have never seen another person with the same colouring. But once I had looked, you seemed so very familiar.”

It was Adelaide’s turn to shake her head. “I do not think we look at all alike.”

“Neither do I. That is why I was so confused. But I have finally worked out what it is. You look like my grandmother. I never met her—she died before I was born—but there is a painting of her as a young woman, in the stairwell of Chiltern Court, where I grew up. I have looked at it every time I have gone up or down those stairs for the last eighteen years of my life. Believe me when I say that, except for your eye colour, the likeness is uncanny.”

Lord Oakley’s excitement had returned; he was looking at her encouragingly, nodding, as though willing her to be convinced. The spark Adelaide had felt before flared ever so slightly warmer. That he wanted it to be true, that he welcomed the possibility she might be his sister, moved her in a way he would likely never comprehend.

She sighed heavily. Her wish to belong, to be a part of something, had led her down the wrong path before. Where you belong is the servants’ hall, she reminded herself. And yet, against her better judgement, she found herself beginning to wish for the same thing as Lord Oakley. He seemed to be good-natured and amiable, and so utterly convinced himself.

“What was her name?” she asked tentatively.

“My grandmother’s? Frederica.”

Adelaide wilted a little, and when asked why, admitted, “I was wondering whether I

might have been named after someone in particular, but?—”

“I think there was a great-aunt called Sarah somewhere along the line.”

“Sarah is not my real name.”

“Oh. What is?”

“Adelaide.”

His smile was so warm and so genuine that it quite erased the disappointment she felt when he shook his head. “I know of nobody in the family with that name, but it is very pretty, all the same.”

Adelaide had always thought so, despite Mrs Booker’s frequent gibes to the contrary. ‘An ugly name for an ugly child,’ she had called it.

“Miss Adelaide Richmond,” his lordship said, grinning boyishly. “That would be your name if it transpired you were my sister. It has a very fine ring to it, do you not think?”

Adelaide had never thought anything sounded finer, and regardless of how incredible the hope might be, her chest abruptly filled with the fiercest desire to claim it as hers forever. “I was adopted in 1799.”

He resumed his fervent nodding. “As was I. From Princess Caroline’s Home for the Care of Unfortunate Waifs. In Harrowsford, in Oxfordshire. Does that sound familiar?”

“I do not know where I was found. I grew up in Banbury.”

“Well, that is near enough. I daresay Mr Booker could confirm the details. ”

Adelaide almost protested the idea of him approaching her father but changed her mind, for she could not deny the appeal of a viscount turning up on her family’s doorstep, claiming a tie with her.

“Does no one else in your family have your colour eyes, then?” she enquired. “Is it really just me?”

“My mother had them, I am told. Lord Tipton and Damian both have green eyes. Although, both do have exceedingly fair hair—the same as yours appears to be under that cap, if I am not mistaken?”

Buoyed by this new discovery, Adelaide undid the ribbon and removed her cap to reveal her light blonde hair. “It is quite fair. Fairer than my eyes are purple, at any rate.”

“I never said purple—I said violet,” he replied, equally animated. “What about your toes?”

“What about them?”

“If we are looking for family traits, my second toe is longer than my big toe.” He shrugged. “I wondered if yours was.”

“I do not believe so.”

“Well, check!”

“Now?”

“Do you not wish to know? I know I do. I shall look away.” And indeed, he surged to his feet and walked to stand in the corner of the room with his back to her.

“This is ridiculous,” Adelaide grumbled, even as she took off her shoe. Ten minutes prior to this, she had been concerned this man meant to seduce her; now she was voluntarily undressing in his presence. He was right, though; she did wish to know .

When her right stocking was rolled completely off, she let out a loud sigh. “That is disappointing. I have perfectly well-arranged toes.”

“Check the other foot.”

He sounded so little like a grand lord and so much like an excitable child, Adelaide laughed and did as he bade her. “Not this foot either, I am afraid.”

“Are you sure?”

In his eagerness, Lord Oakley forgot his manners and whirled round to see for himself. Adelaide, herself too caught up in the significance of the moment to recall that they were not yet brother and sister, did not tuck her feet away demurely under her skirts, but thrust them out towards him so he could see. Thus, it was with her cap removed, her hair coming unpinned, and a viscount—with whom her name had already been most pruriently connected—bent over her bared legs, that Adelaide was discovered by the butler.

“It is my fault! She only did it because I told her she was a prude for saying she wouldn’t! Please do not make her go!”

“I did not do anything, Patty,” Adelaide said through gritted teeth. She was shoving all her belongings into her moth-eaten case while Mrs Bunce stood over her, red-faced and tearful with anger, and Patty pawed at the housekeeper’s arm, pleading

with her not to send Adelaide away.

“How can you deny it?” Mrs Bunce demanded. “Mr Hardcastle caught you red-handed. And bare-legged! Oh, I am ashamed of you! Of all my girls, you had the most potential. You could have made housekeeper—now you will be nothing !” Her voice cracked and she picked up one of Adelaide’s night shifts and attempted to force it into a side pocket of the case, presumably to cover her show of emotion.

Adelaide snatched it from her and pushed it in with all her other things. It was not the first time she had been told she was worthless, though it had been many years since she last heard it said. The sting had not diminished, and it stole her voice for a moment. Wordlessly, she hefted the straps of her case onto her shoulder and made her way downstairs.

It seemed every servant employed at High Brook had gathered in the servants’ hall to witness her disgrace. Some cast disdainful looks at her, others appeared genuinely shocked, a few rallied in her defence. Patty had followed her belowstairs and now redirected her pleas from the housekeeper to the butler, though Adelaide could have told her that was a waste of time.

Mr Hardcastle glared at her with venomous eyes. “You have brought shame on this household. You will leave without a character, without pay, and without your virtue. Do not attempt to find work anywhere in this county—your name will henceforth be synonymous with ignominy, and I will not allow High Brook to be brought low along with you. Is that understood?”

Adelaide wondered how long he had wished to speak those words. He had never liked her, not since she refused his advances on her first night. She had been a laundry maid then and had worked her way up the ranks to housemaid in the years that followed. What would become of her now, she dared not suppose. She pushed the concern from her mind, for she refused to weep in front of this baying mob.

“Mr Hardcastle asked you whether you understood, Sarah,” Mrs Bunce said icily.

“My name is Adelaide,” she replied with equal frostiness. “And no, I do not understand why I am being punished for something I did not do.”

She thought for a moment that Mr Hardcastle would strike her, for his face turned puce with rage and his hand curled into a fist. Instead, he struck the table and spewed forth a tirade of vile accusations. Everybody present had an opinion on which of his charges was true or false or somewhere in between, and they all began shouting over each other to make themselves heard. The shouting progressed to elbowing, the elbowing to shoving, and before she knew it, Adelaide was in the midst of a melee. She looked in desperation at Patty, and her friend reached towards her, but Adelaide was abruptly tugged backwards by her collar. Someone pulled her case off her shoulder; someone else pulled her hair.

“Take your hands off that woman this instant!”

Hands, bodies, and sound all fell away from Adelaide, leaving her standing in a vacuum in the middle of the servants’ hall—into which stepped Lord Oakley. He picked her case up off the floor and held his arm out for her.

“Come.”

She went with him, her skin crawling beneath the glare of so many incredulous eyes as he led her up the stairs and out of the front of the house.

“Where are we going?”

Lord Oakley, who was so much the hero in her eyes by then that he did not need to prove himself her brother to earn her abiding devotion, grinned.

“I am taking you home to meet your family.”

### CHAPTER FIVE

“O ne hundred and twenty-four miles.”

Adelaide stared at Lord Oakley. This, it transpired, was the distance from High Brook to Chiltern Court. Leaving with the viscount had seemed a grand idea in the heat of the moment. It had briefly become even more exciting when she climbed into his carriage—quite the finest equipage she had ever seen, let alone ridden in—and High Brook had shrunk to a pinpoint on the horizon behind them. Learning that the journey ahead would require two nights at coaching inns with a man who was, despite his wild assertions, a stranger to her, Adelaide hastily reconsidered.

“Please ask the driver to stop. I cannot travel all that way with you unattended. ’Tis bad enough that I have been accused of wickedness in Southampton. Such a journey would see me branded a jezebel in every town south of Luton. I should never work again.”

“You never need to work again,” he replied with the grin that had taken up permanent residence on his face. “Besides, you most certainly can travel with me, for who better to escort a young lady than her older brother?”

“If you are my brother. And what if you are not—what then?”

Lord Oakley leant forwards, his elbows resting on his knees, and took up both her hands. “Miss Booker, I am not always sensible. I have been known to make rash decisions from time to time. But I am not a fool, and neither am I heartless. I comprehend the consequences of this undertaking to you, to me, to everyone, and I

would not have acted thus were it not for the absolute conviction that you are my sister.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I do not know. But I am.”

Adelaide wished she could share his confidence, but the longer she sat in his lavish carriage, wearing her worn and dowdy work-clothes, the more implausible the whole thing seemed.

“What of your friends? What will they say when they discover that you have left with one of the maids?”

He let go of her hands and flopped back in his seat with a disdainful huff. “I doubt many of them will notice. They are all too busy celebrating Lady Veronica’s engagement.”

“I did not know Lady Veronica was engaged.”

For a moment, the amiability left Lord Oakley’s face. His jaw tightened and he said stiffly, “She was not until last night, when that oaf Tattersall proposed to her.”

It was obvious this was a source of vexation, and on reflection, Adelaide thought she recalled hearing Lord Oakley’s name associated with Lady Veronica. A disappointment, then—but she was a long way from feeling ready to offer sisterly consolation and chose instead to return them to their previous discussion.

“What about Lord Kemerton? I daresay he will be displeased by your departure. He did not want you to have anything to do with me.”

“Oh, he did not, but only because he is violently opposed to anyone of our station consorting with servants. He is a good sort, though. All will be forgiven the moment I explain who you are.”

“Pray, do not bother. I have no need of his lordship’s forgiveness, thank you.”

“No, not you, me—oh, enough about my friends. We have weightier matters to discuss. My father is going to be delighted when he hears about you. My uncle, you understand. That is to say, Lord Tipton.”

“I know who you mean by ‘father’.”

“Then why did you look at me in that way?”

“Because no matter whether he is your uncle or your father, he is not likely to be as readily convinced as you that I am any relation, nor so delighted by the discovery. Another mouth to feed never made any man rejoice.” At least, not in Adelaide’s experience, though Lord Oakley gave her a queer look that suggested he did not agree. To avoid having to explain her remark, she asked, “Will you tell me about him? And your aunt? Your mother, I mean? I should like to know whom I am on my way to meet.”

“But of course! They are both equable, steady people. Lady Tipton is particularly kind and spoils me rotten, so I cannot begin to imagine her raptures when she meets you. His lordship is intelligent and practical, as evidenced by my history.”

“He certainly seems to have found a sensible resolution to your predicament—and his. But do you know the cause of your trueborn father’s estrangement from the family?”

“Robert went against his father’s wishes when he married my mother. He was

disinherited and his whole family instructed never to recognise him again.”

“My goodness, they must have truly disliked her. Who was she?” The question asked, Adelaide felt suddenly nervous. It was one to which she had wished to know the answer for a great many years.

“Her name was Susan Browning. She was a weaver’s daughter—an only child, thus I have no surviving relatives on that side.”

“Robert must have loved her very dearly to give up so much to be with her. Was she very beautiful?”

“I have no memory of her, and Lord Tipton never met her.”

“How did they die?”

Lord Oakley shook his head sadly. “Nobody knows anything about how or where they lived after they were banished—or what took them in the end. They died still estranged from the family.”

Adelaide felt an unexpected pang of sorrow for these people she would never know and were likely not connected to her anyhow. She swallowed. “How sad.”

“Indeed—but all the more reason for you and me not to go our own ways. If we were all the family they had, it would be a travesty to separate again now that we have found each other at last.”

It was a moving observation, and since they had, by then, travelled far beyond the point at which Adelaide could easily make her own way back to anywhere familiar, she resolved to continue with him to Chiltern Court to see the thing through.

A deep and burning desire to discover that two people shared an immutable, personal bond was, however, quite a different thing to the reality of two strangers sharing the confines of a carriage for two and a half days. They were each unwavering in their efforts to become better acquainted, but their lives could scarcely have been more different, and the onus to uncover an innate understanding soon rendered the undertaking more trial than pleasure as every topic exposed yet greater disparity between them.

More than once did she stare into a mirror, or out of a window, or into the darkness in the middle of the night, questioning what on earth she had done. Lord Oakley's enthusiasm was difficult to defy, yet whenever she paused to truly consider it, her being his sister seemed the most unlikely thing in the world. It did not help that he insisted on continually referring to her as such, drawing doubting or disapproving stares from every person they met. Adelaide could not blame them; she and Lord Oakley were each dressed according to their true station in life, and nobody was fooled into thinking they could possibly be related.

Added to this discomfort was the inconvenience of travelling as a single female. Lord Oakley instructed his manservant to acquire adjoining rooms, thinking Adelaide's chief concern must be safety. She was grateful for his consideration, though she was far more troubled at having but one clean pair of stockings, no one to help pin her hair, and scarcely two coins of her own to rub together.

By the third and final day of their journey, she felt about as presentable as a chimney sweep, with only her bonnet keeping her hair—and her dignity—in place. The viscount abandoned her at the last coaching inn before Chiltern Court to ride alongside the carriage on his own horse, and the solitude allowed all Adelaide's deepest misgivings to loom large in her mind. Upon reaching the end of the implausibly long drive, in front of the implausibly large house, she was ready to jump from her seat and run away as fast as her legs would carry her. Only Lord Oakley's sweet excitement as he handed her down from the carriage prevented her.

“Are you ready?”

She nodded, but already the conviction that this was the stupidest thing she had ever agreed to do was settling firmly in her mind. That notion was only heightened when they entered the house and the eyes of every servant they passed bored into her. They recognised one of their own, without doubt, and she could guess what conjectures they were presently forming about her presence on the arm of their future master.

The house itself was vast—easily twice as large as High Brook—and more fashionably decorated. High Brook was all dark wood panels and lead-crossed windows; the entrance hall here was flooded with light from a vast, domed atrium high above, and everything the eye could see looked to be made of marble. Adelaide could not help but think how much easier to clean this house must be—then she hated herself for thinking it, for it emphasised the impropriety of her being there.

Fixing her with much the same expression as had the butler at High Brook, a footman took her tattered old coat from her. She panicked when he held out his hand for her bonnet, but he would not relent, and she had no choice but to hope her hair did not look too much like a bird’s nest beneath it. He tucked it carelessly under his arm and informed the viscount that Lord and Lady Tipton were in the saloon.

Lord Oakley, oblivious to it all, said his thanks and led Adelaide away.

“Wait here,” he whispered outside a vast double door. “I have not yet worked out what I shall say, but I ought to give them some warning.” Smiling as though they were on the brink of the best adventure—and not the most painful rejection—he stepped into the room.

“Oakley! Home so soon?” a man called. It was a deep, brusque voice, nowhere near as amiable as his son’s.

“Dare we hope this means you have good news for us?” asked a lady, her voice gentler than her husband’s, but clipped in the way of the highest echelons of the nobility.

“I have news,” Lord Oakley replied, “but not the news to which you are alluding.”

He had left the door open, and though Adelaide could not see around it to the other occupants of the room, she had a full view of him, grinning with anticipation as he teased his parents with this intimation. She wished he would not, for it was surely not a joking matter.

“My dear boy, you were so sure. What went wrong?”

“I would really rather not discuss it, if it is all the same to you, Mother. I have something else—something of far greater significance—to tell you both.”

The mantle of ‘great significance’ whisked Adelaide’s nerves into even greater discomposure. She ran a hand over her hair to smooth it, managing only to dislodge every pin she touched, making more of her hair fall loose.

“Lady Veronica turned you down, did she?” Lord Tipton asked. “Cannot say I am sorry. You can most certainly do better.”

Adelaide flinched. Lady Veronica was the daughter of an earl; if his lordship thought she was not good enough to be his son’s wife, he was hardly likely to think a housemaid good enough to be his son’s sister. She glanced anxiously back towards the front door.

“What is this other news?” Lady Tipton enquired.

“Not a different girl, I hope,” her husband interrupted. “I keep telling you, you are too

young to be contemplating marriage. Give it a few years! Enjoy your youth!"

"This has nothing to do with marriage, Father—not mine, at least. Now you must prepare yourselves, for what I have to tell you may come as something of a shock."

There was a pause, then Lady Tipton said, somewhat nervously, "Your father does not like shocks, James."

Adelaide began to back away from the saloon. This had been a vast mistake. Lord Oakley ought to have come alone to prepare his family for the meeting. Better still, the whole wretched idea ought never to have been suggested.

At that moment, he caught her eye and signalled for her to come in. She shook her head.

"Who are you looking at? Is there somebody out there?"

Lord Oakley held out his hand towards Adelaide. "Come. It is well."

"For heaven's sake, who is there? Let us see!"

Lord Oakley gave up gesturing and walked back towards her, but as he approached, Adelaide thought he had never looked less like somebody who might be her brother. He looked like a viscount, his crisply starched collar high at his neck, his jewellery and fobs glistening, the hand that he reached towards her perfectly manicured, having never done a day's work in its life. Her heart, already racing, began to pound painfully fast. Then somebody appeared behind him, and Adelaide did not wait to find out who; she turned and stumbled away. Raised voices erupted behind her, then in front of her; somebody stepped into her path, and she attempted to evade them, but they caught her arms and forced her around to face her pursuers.

“What the devil is th—good God!” Lord Tipton—unmistakably so, for unlike Adelaide, he did resemble Lord Oakley—recoiled at the sight of her. “That is not possible,” he said in a tone of wonderment.

His son appeared at his side. “Let go of her this instant,” he commanded the footman restraining Adelaide’s arms.

She was summarily released, and the footman hastily dismissed, but she did not attempt to run again—she only stared back at the earl. She had not believed Lord Oakley when he said her resemblance to his grandmother was uncanny. A chance likeness at most, she had imagined. Yet his lordship was looking at her as though he had seen a ghost, his mouth agape and his eyes wide with wonder. Assuming it was not her drab brown coat or knotted hair that amazed him, Adelaide allowed herself, for the very first time, to truly begin to believe that she might have found her family.

“Father, allow me to introduce Miss Adelaide Booker. Or, as I think you have already surmised, Miss Adelaide Richmond. My sister.”

### CHAPTER SIX

“ I refuse to believe it,” Lord Tipton said, shaking his head for what must have been the hundredth time. “I grant you, the likeness is extraordinary, but there was one child by the name of Richmond at that children’s home—and that child was you . If there had been others, we would have been informed.”

“There must have been some mistake,” Lord Oakley replied. His ebullience had not wavered in the face of his father’s doubt. If anything, he had become even more enthusiastic. Yet, the harder he tried to convince everyone, the more stubbornly his father rejected the idea.

“The only mistake was that you brought her here. Son, this is not the same as bringing home an injured bird or stray puppy. Those we could at least release back into the wild once you were done playing nursemaid to them. What were you thinking we might do with a maid ?”

“I was thinking that you would join me in welcoming her into the family and help me make amends for the years of deprivation she has suffered.”

“Make amends? To an unknown girl from Lord Grisham’s kitchen?” He turned to his wife. “Do you hear this, Louisa?”

Lady Tipton had been sitting in silence until that point, and the way she fidgeted with her bracelet made it seem as though she had not been paying attention. But she nodded her head thoughtfully when addressed, and said, “I have heard what James has said, yes. Are you so ready to dismiss the matter? If she is Robert’s daughter,

then it is our duty to help her.”

“She cannot be Robert’s daughter. Robert had no daughters!”

“We do not know that, Charles.”

“Yes, we do. Let us be frank, she could just as easily be Damian’s issue as Robert’s. God knows, he must have a trail of by-blows dotted up and down the country!”

“Except, she has my eyes—my mother’s eyes,” Lord Oakley insisted.

“A fortunate coincidence indeed! You have been thoroughly taken in, boy.”

“I have not!”

Adelaide watched the scene before her with a slightly detached sense of horror. An earl, a countess, and a viscount were variously sitting, standing, and pacing about the austere chamber to which she had been marched, arguing heatedly over her future—none of them with any perceivable interest in her wishes. She recalled Lord Kemerton’s warning to stay away from Lord Oakley. It would no doubt gratify his towering conceit to know how profoundly she wished she had taken his advice.

“Of course you have—wake up, boy!” the earl snapped. “She has clearly somehow discovered her resemblance to my mother and used it, and you, to get herself in front of me , to—” He turned to look at Adelaide. “To what? What is it you want, exactly—money?”

Adelaide longed for some of the bravery that had emboldened her tongue for Lord Kemerton. All she could muster was the truth. “I should like to be permitted to leave, my lord.”

It silenced him, which surprised her. She had expected him to crow that he had uncovered her schemes and frightened her away, but he looked taken aback, unsure suddenly. Without his fierce glare, he was quite handsome, in a weathered, mature sort of way. She wondered whether that was what her father would have looked like, were he still alive. The thought made her even more melancholy, and she dipped her head to avoid having to look at him any longer.

Lord Oakley hastened to her side and crouched next to her chair. “Miss Booker—Adelaide, please accept my apologies. This is not at all the reception I envisaged for you. But I beg you would not go.”

“I have no desire to be where I am not wanted.” Not again. “I was a fool to allow you to convince me to come. I have gone along with it long enough. I should like to go.”

“Was it not your design to come here, madam?” Lord Tipton asked .

“No, it was mine!” his son replied impatiently. “Miss Booker was even harder to convince than you, but I persevered because...” In lieu of finishing his explanation, he gestured expressively at her, the turn of his countenance such as made it clear he thought his point obvious.

“She does have the family look about her,” Lady Tipton said cautiously.

“A look alone does not prove she is my brother’s child.”

“Then let us find proof!” Lord Oakley interjected, rising to his full height. “Have Bentley investigate it. Miss Booker’s family will be able to verify where and when they found her. Send him to talk to them.”

There was a hiatus, in which nobody spoke. Adelaide looked up when the rustle of skirts alerted her to Lady Tipton having risen from her chair. Her ladyship crossed the

room, indicating with an extended hand for her son to remain where he was and a small inclination of her head for her husband to follow her. They left together through a different door to that through which Adelaide had come in; thus she knew not where they were going.

She expected that Lord Oakley would begin speaking to her as soon as they were gone, and was surprised when instead, he remained motionless, staring at the door. It soon became clear why: his parents had not gone far, and their conversation on the other side of it could just about be heard.

“Charles, I comprehend this is distressing, but we must not punish Miss Booker for what might be our oversight,” Lady Tipton was saying .

His lordship’s reply was easier to hear, for it was said with obvious displeasure. “Do not dare accuse me of overlooking my brother’s children! I am not my father. You know I would never abandon my family.”

“Nobody is accusing you of abandoning her.”

“But that is what it would mean. If I acknowledge that she is Robert’s, then I must also acknowledge that I left my brother’s infant child alone in the world. That is not something I am prepared to accept.”

Lord Oakley turned to grin expressively at Adelaide as though this were an encouraging remark. She was too overwhelmed to be able to construe why he should think so and could only manage a faint smile in return.

“It was not just you,” Lady Tipton said with a sort of insistence that was at once firm and kind. “I was there, too. And yes, if we did miss this eighteen years ago then it was, indeed, a lamentable oversight, but you know as well as I do, it was not by design. If, however, you send Miss Booker away today, and if she is Robert’s, then

you will have abandoned her—and knowingly. Surely you see we must investigate the matter before we make a decision.”

“And if she is not his?” Lord Tipton demanded.

Adelaide’s stomach clenched, for that was the most likely outcome.

“Then we will help find her a new position somewhere and wish her well,” her ladyship replied. After a pause, she spoke again, but her voice was softer, and Adelaide was not sure she heard her properly when she said, “I know what you are thinking.”

She was more certain of it when Lord Tipton replied petulantly, “No, you do not.”

“You think she is Robert’s.”

There was another, longer pause. Adelaide could see Lord Oakley was looking at her again, but she refused to meet his eye, too intent on listening to Lord Tipton’s reply.

“How could this have happened?” his lordship said at last. He sounded disgusted.

“I do not know,” Lady Tipton replied. “But it has, and we must deal with it.”

Deal with it, Adelaide thought. As one deals with a blocked gutter. She tried not to sigh too loudly at yet again finding herself somebody’s unwanted problem.

Lord Oakley ceased looking at her and returned his attention in full to the back of the door when Lord Tipton said, “It is more perilous than you realise. If we acknowledge her as Robert’s, people may begin to question Oakley’s parentage.”

“I do not see why. They do not look much alike. They could certainly pass as

cousins.”

“Do you not think Oakley has enough to conceal as it is without adding the liability of a sister he can never acknowledge as his?”

Lord Oakley scoffed. “A trifling burden when it would mean I was protecting my sister!”

It was a generous sentiment, though his declaring it meant Adelaide missed whatever Lady Tipton said in response. All she heard was Lord Tipton asking, “And how would we navigate the small obstacle of her having been in service all her life? ”

“We need not tell anyone that part. We could simply say she has been living somewhere obscure in the country all these years.”

“You see?” Lord Oakley said triumphantly. “They are planning how to account for your presence in the family. I told you they would accept it.”

Adelaide was not convinced that a desire to minimise the degradation of being related to her could be counted as a success. She was also far from convinced that they had accepted anything. He must have seen her uncertainty, for he observably reined in his exuberance.

“This must be dreadfully bewildering for you. Is there anything I can do to make you feel more...” He gave a little chuckle. “I was going to say ‘at home’, but I suppose that is a little premature.”

That made Adelaide laugh ever so slightly, too. “Might I have something to drink?”

His face fell. “But of course! I beg you would forgive me for not offering you anything—what unpardonable rudeness. I shall have something sent up directly.”

“Do not ring that,” Lord Tipton said, returning to the room just as his son reached to pull the bell for someone to attend them. “I would speak to Miss Booker for a little longer without witnesses.”

“Father, she has not had anything to drink since we left Hertford this morning.”

“This will not take long, James,” Lady Tipton said, coming into the room behind her husband and returning to her previous seat. To Adelaide, she said, “If you would be so kind as to answer a few questions for his lordship, I shall see that you are provided with all the refreshments you require.”

Adelaide was hardly in a position to refuse, though she welcomed the warmth with which her ladyship made the request. That warmth was not emulated in Lord Tipton’s questions.

“Can you read?” he enquired tersely.

She baulked at his insolence and felt herself blush as she replied, “Yes, my lord.”

“Do arithmetic?”

“I can keep an account book, my lord.”

“Of course you can,” he said sardonically. “Obviously you do not speak any other languages. What about music? Do you play any instruments?”

She shook her head.

“Can you draw?”

“I do not know.”

“Do you know how to dance?” Lady Tipton enquired more gently.

“I am sure I could remember how, if I were shown the steps again.”

Lord Tipton shook his head. “She would need masters in everything from mathematics to manners.”

“Well, Charles, masters are not difficult to come by,” his wife coaxed.

Lord Tipton conceded the point with a grunt.

“You are beginning to believe it, are you not, Father?” Lord Oakley asked, his hopeful good humour returning.

“I shall concede to sending Bentley to look into it.”

Lord Oakley broke into a broad smile, and Lady Tipton looked very well pleased as she said, “In the meantime, Miss Booker, you are welcome to stay at Chiltern Court.”

“Am I?” Adelaide replied hesitantly, flicking a pointed glance at Lord Tipton.

“Most decidedly!” Lord Oakley replied. “And mark my words, there will be no ‘meantime’ about it. You are home at last, and I do not mean to see you abandoned again.”

### CHAPTER SEVEN

To their credit, Lord Oakley and Lady Tipton were very kind, very patient, but life at Chiltern Court was so different to the goings-on downstairs at High Brook, it was impossible for Adelaide to feel anything but out of place. She was given her own room, which itself made her feel ill at ease. She had not slept alone for many years, and though she was a frightfully light sleeper, used to waking at the merest tinkle of a bell, she had grown accustomed to falling asleep to the sound of creaking rafters and Patty's soft snores. The absolute silence of her new bedroom, with all its plush furnishings, felt suffocating.

On her first full day, she woke at five, as she was in the habit of doing, and dressed herself. It was later explained to her that a maid had been sent to attend her at eight, but by that time, she had already made her own bed, explored the principal floor of the house, sat on the stairs for a good twenty minutes, staring at the portrait of Lord Tipton's mother, who did, indeed, look unnervingly like her, and walked around the charming little lake that she had seen from her bedroom window.

She had even introduced herself to some of the gardeners and stable hands. They had not seemed pleased to make her acquaintance, adding to the feeling of ostracism that worsened the longer she was at Chiltern Court. The maids were not friendly, the footmen did not join in her banter, the housekeeper never stood still long enough to hold a conversation. When she attempted to go into the kitchen to introduce herself there, she was prevented by the butler. She was a guest, he reminded her, adding shrewdly that, "Even members of the family do not generally interfere in the servants' work."

Denied the consolation of company from that quarter, Adelaide relished the time spent with Lord Oakley, infrequent though it was. Like his mother and father, he seemed convinced that the best way of assisting with the adjustment to her new life was to leave her to live it alone. Dinners were the worst. Lord Tipton was not unkind, but neither had he much to say. It might have been his usual temperament, but without any way of knowing, Adelaide was inclined to think it was her presence that made him reserved. Lady Tipton danced around the subject of Adelaide's parentage with impressive determination, but since that placed an embargo on all topics pertaining to the family, she was left with very little of interest to talk about. Lord Oakley had but one care—that Adelaide be content at Chiltern Court—but his enquiries as to her comfort and happiness were repeated so often, and with such evident anticipation of recurrent positive replies, as to make every mealtime excruciating.

It was a far cry from the fairy tale he had painted when they made their impulsive exit from High Brook. For all the indications that the Richmonds were her true family, Adelaide was a stranger among them, and she was lonely. On the morning of her third day, when she once again found herself alone, and her misgivings were on the cusp of crystallising into a resolve to leave, she asked a footman to take her to somewhere she might write a letter.

“Certainly, Miss Booker, if you would follow me.” He set out through the house.

“I thought I would write to my friend, Patty,” Adelaide explained.

The footman gave no response.

“I do not know why, really, for she cannot read. Is that silly? It is, is it not?”

The footman said nothing.

“Come now, admit it. You think me daft. I should think you daft if you did not.”

The footman stopped walking and indicated a writing desk. With an impassive expression, he said, “You may write your letter here, Miss Booker. Or not, as you please.” Then he walked away.

Adelaide’s eyes filled with tears as she watched him go. She let her shoulders slump and turned disconsolately to return to her room.

“You do not wish to write your letter?”

She whirled round and, seeing Lord Oakley approaching from the opposite doorway, hastily wiped away the tear that had spilled down her cheek.

He was not fooled. “Good heavens, what is the matter? Was John rude to you?”

She shook her head. “No, he was very polite. Everybody is. All the time. Too polite to laugh at my silly waffle. I ought not to have rattled on at him, but I so desperately wanted to laugh about something.” So saying, she burst into tears.

The viscount could not have looked more awkward, but he did not flinch from her distress, and neither did he laugh at it, for which Adelaide was extremely grateful. He led her to a sofa and sat next to her, offering his handkerchief like a real brother would.

“They all hate me,” she mumbled.

“No, they do not.”

“They do. They will not talk to me unless they must, they do not smile at my jokes. Your mother’s maid barely spoke three words to me yesterday, though we were

together for over an hour while she pinned and prodded me. It was not as though I asked for the gowns. Your mother insisted that I borrow them.”

“Blanchett does not speak a great deal to anyone. Her English is not good. My mother talks to her in French.”

“Oh, I see.” Adelaide wished she had known that. She might have been able to befriend at least one of the servants. “I do not suppose the rest of them are French as well, are they?”

He laughed softly and shook his head. “No. But come now, you have worked in a house like this. You know very well why they are treating you this way. You are a Richmond now.”

“I do not feel like a Richmond. I feel like an interloper. I do not belong in this world.”

“But you do! The fault is ours—we have been attempting not to overwhelm you and have evidently succeeded only in neglecting you. Please believe that we are thrilled to have you here. None more so than my mother.”

“I do not know how you can think that after I horrified her at dinner yesterday with my tales of working at High Brook.”

“On the contrary, you delighted her with your anecdotes about Lady Grisham.”

“But she corrects everything I do.”

“She only wishes to help you make a successful transition into your new life. Believe me, she is as convinced as I am that you are my sister. Everyone knew it the moment they set eyes on you.”

“Everyone but the earl.”

“Especially him. He would not be so troubled if he were not so certain. But as I have said before, he is a practical man. Once Bentley returns with proof, he will cease fighting it.”

Ceasing to oppose something was not the same as happily, or even graciously, accepting it, and Adelaide held considerably less hope than Oakley appeared to for a warm welcome into the family. Undesirous of distressing him, she smiled but could think of nothing to say. The silence made her conscious of having shed tears in front of him, and she stiffened in embarrassment. Lord Oakley seemed equally at a loss, and they lapsed into silence, until he abruptly clapped his hands together.

“I know! Should you like a sword fight?”

“Pardon?”

“With sticks, I mean. I suppose we could use blades, but I had a fancy to try it with sticks. Seems more apt.”

Adelaide stared at him, diverted but wary. “Apt for what?”

“I used to long for a brother with whom I could have sword fights. Perhaps you and I might make up for lost time.”

“I hardly think that will help convince your father I can be a proper lady.”

“No, I suppose not.”

He looked genuinely disappointed, prompting Adelaide to add, “I would beat you more assuredly than a brother would, in any case.”

“Well, you had no qualms stabbing me, so that is very probably true.”

After a brief pause, they both laughed—tentatively at first, but with rapidly rising mirth—and Adelaide felt better for it than she had in days. Indeed, longer than days: better than she had for longer than she could remember. And that, she supposed, was what a good brother would do.

### CHAPTER EIGHT

Adelaide's French was not excellent, but she could make herself understood, and Lady Tipton's maid did indeed prove far friendlier once able to converse in her own tongue. This she discovered when the woman came, later that day, to see whether the adjustments she had made to her mistress's loaned gowns were satisfactory.

The gowns were of such fine quality, it was hard to believe her ladyship had been willing to allow any alteration at all. Adelaide said as much and was surprised when Blanchett exclaimed—in language so animated that her French was difficult to understand—that Lady Tipton did not intend that they should ever be returned. Her mistress had, it would seem, chosen them specifically to match her 'new niece's' colouring.

Adelaide was touched by Lady Tipton's enthusiasm and cherished the prospect of owning such exquisite clothes. The periwinkle-blue morning gown was particularly beautiful; she had quite fallen in love with it the first time she tried it on and was all anticipation to see how well it looked now that it had been fitted to her.

She caught her breath when she saw herself in the mirror. The gown was every bit as elegant as she had hoped, but that was not what enraptured her. She had not noticed before—perhaps she had not stood in this exact spot or perhaps the light had been different. Perhaps, as downcast as she had been at the time, she had merely paid no attention. Whatever the difference, this time it could not be missed how the shade of the gown brought out the colour of her eyes—and they appeared unmistakably, strikingly violet, just as Lord Oakley had avowed. Adelaide had never much dwelt on her appearance—there had never seemed any point—yet she delighted in this

discovery.

“ Vous êtes très belle!” Blanchett said admiringly.

“ Merci! I must show Lord Oakley! Do you mind?” At Blanchett’s blank expression, Adelaide repeated herself in French but did not wait for a reply. Calling over her shoulder that she would return directly, she hastened out of the room and along the landing. As she neared the top of the stairs, raised voices reached her ears. One was unmistakably Lord Oakley’s. The other sounded familiar but for the angry tone; she could not quite place it.

“...an explanation for your precipitate departure.”

“You did not need to come all the way here to ask for that,” Lord Oakley replied churlishly. “A letter would have sufficed.”

“I would not like to put my thoughts on this matter into writing. They would not reflect well on either of us. ”

“Oh, would you drop your airs! You do not have sole prerogative over the moral high ground, you know. There are things afoot that you do not comprehend.”

“I comprehend that I spent three days vigorously defending your honour, believing that you left in distress over Lady Veronica’s defection, only to be informed by Grisham himself on my last day what really happened. So tell me, have I made a fool of myself upholding your good name to all our friends? Did you abscond with the Grishams’ maid?”

Lord Oakley gave a bitter laugh. “Did you not hear? They kicked her out without a second thought. She was no longer a maid.”

“I heard they dismissed her without a character because she was discovered in an indecorous tangle with you !”

“It was not what it seemed.”

“Dear God, Oakley, that is what every fellow who was ever caught out says! How could you stoop so low? I expected you to know bet—” He stopped abruptly and snapped his head up to look directly at Adelaide. She had crept down the stairs, bowing low so the stranger’s face would be revealed before she descended far enough to be seen herself, but her first glimpse of him drew a loud gasp of recognition from her lips, banishing all possibility of stealth. She straightened, wishing she would not blush but feeling heat creep up her neck regardless.

“Ah...Adelaide,” Lord Oakley said awkwardly. “Lord Kemerton has come.”

“I can see that.”

The earl did not greet her; he only stared at her. And stared. And stared . She felt herself grow redder still, only now with vexation. Was it so shocking to him that she should be dressed finely?

He began to look vexed too. As she watched, the surprise leached from his countenance, leaving anger in its wake. He turned back to Lord Oakley. “What the devil ? I hoped I was mistaken about the whole sorry tale, but at worst I thought you had taken her somewhere for a night or two. But you have installed her here ?”

“Not ‘ installed ’! It?—”

“Do not insult me with prevarications. Your intention is clear. You have dressed her as your...your... Damn it, man, have you no shame?”

“Kem, would you cease railing for one minute and listen? I have not brought Adelaide here for... that . I have brought her here because by rights it is her home. She is my sister.”

Lord Kemerton recoiled, then spent a few seconds looking between his friend and Adelaide in astonishment. “Your sister ?”

The longer he frowned at her, the more indignant Adelaide grew. It was one thing for Lord Tipton to question her parentage—he was directly affected. Lord Kemerton had no business being sceptical of the discovery. It was not so great a leap of imagination that she should be highborn! Exactly how many polished grates was too many before a woman forfeited her claim to nobility, in his lordship’s opinion?

“It seems increasingly likely,” Lord Oakley replied. “My father has sent Bentley to confirm the particulars, but I do not need convincing. Allow me to introduce you.”

“Pray excuse me,” Adelaide interrupted before turning on her heel and storming back upstairs.

“Adelaide! Wait!” Lord Oakley hastened to catch up with her, arriving at her side slightly out of breath. He looked displeased, though he was evidently unsure how to express it. “Why did you leave? That was... I was trying to introduce you!”

“There is no need. Lord Kemerton obviously remembers who I am.” And what I am.

“Who you were .”

“Either way, it was clearly enough to repulse him.”

“I think he was only shocked. Which, in his defence, we all were. Nobody thought I had any brothers or sisters.”

“Would that you had let him continue in the belief that you do not. I would have been spared his scorn, and you would have saved yourself an awkward explanation. I thought we were going to tell the world I was your cousin?”

“Oh, do not worry about that. Kem will not tell a soul.”

He continued to regard her expectantly until it became clear she had no choice but to consent to being introduced.

“Very well—only may I be excused from the introduction at this present moment? I am in the middle of a fitting with Blanchett and am in no fit state to greet callers. I would not have come downstairs if I had known you had company. ”

“I beg your pardon—I did not realise. I shall introduce you at dinner.”

“Dinner?”

“Yes. It is half a day’s ride to Kem’s estate. He will need to stay the night and leave in the morning.”

Adelaide thought it best to refrain from giving any response and set off back to her room with her teeth clenched tightly.

“ Lord Oakley a-t-il aimé votre robe, mademoiselle? ” Blanchett asked upon her return.

“I have no idea whether he liked it—he did not mention it. He was with Lord Kemerton, who, by the way, thought it made me look like a—” She could see Blanchett struggling to understand and searched for the correct French word. “ Une courtisane. ”

Blanchett gasped. “ Impossible! Lord Kemerton est trop gentleman. ” Reverting to English, she added stiltedly but with great earnestness, “You must be mistaken.”

Adelaide did not argue. In her experience, lady’s maids and menservants were invariably wedded to the notion that consequence was synonymous with honour; it made their jobs easier. She let the matter drop and indicated for Blanchett to help her change.

“I was right to choose that gown for you. The colour does wonders for your complexion.” Lady Tipton accepted the cup of coffee Adelaide had refilled for her and continued, “I shall instruct the modiste to use the same colour again when she comes.”

“When who comes?” enquired Lord Tipton, strolling through from the dining room with the Lords Oakley and Kemerton in tow to join the ladies in the drawing room.

“The modiste. I was just telling Adelaide how well this gown looks on her. Do you agree?” Perhaps anticipating that her husband would not answer, she immediately directed her enquiry to her son.

Lord Oakley grimaced. “Forgive me, but I cannot get animated about any gown my mother was wearing a few days ago. You had better ask an impartial observer. Kem?”

“It looks very well indeed, Miss Booker,” he told her. “Though the one you had on earlier showed your eyes to better advantage.”

“Thank you,” she replied, gratified that somebody had noticed but piqued that it should be him.

Lady Tipton smiled at his compliment. “And how is your young lady, Lord Kemerton? She was at High Brook also, I take it?”

“You have a young lady?” Lord Tipton enquired. “I was not aware. What is her name?”

“Lady Sophia.”

Adelaide clamped her mouth closed—she had not meant to say that aloud, but now everybody was staring at her with obvious discomfort, no doubt aware that she must have gleaned the intelligence in the servants’ quarters. She fixed her eyes on the far wall and waited in agonies for the conversation to resume.

“I cannot claim the honour of referring to her as ‘my’ young lady, but she was in good health when I left Southampton,” Lord Kemerton said presently .

“Come now, you were halfway to being engaged when I was there,” Lord Oakley teased. “What happened?”

“I felt obliged to leave. To ensure all was well with...”

“Say it, go on! You felt you had to check up on me,” Lord Oakley finished for him, grinning gamely, though if that was the case, Adelaide knew not why Lord Kemerton had been staring at her .

“Do not leave her waiting too long, Kemerton. You’d not like to be pipped at the post like Oakley here,” Lord Tipton said.

Lord Oakley’s blustering protests were interrupted when a servant arrived to announce that Mr Bentley had returned to Chiltern Court and had news for the earl. The room fell into silence. Adelaide swallowed. At least, if he brings bad news, I shall be able to keep the gowns, she assured herself. They would fetch a pretty penny—enough to keep her fed until she could find work.

“Send him in,” Lord Tipton announced. “We must all learn what he has to say eventually. We might as well all hear it at once.”

Lord Kemerton came to his feet. “I thank you for a wonderful dinner, Lady Tipton. I shall leave you now.”

Her ladyship, her fingers tangled in her necklace, stilled and looked at him as though she was unsure how to respond. Her husband answered for her.

“Sit down, Kemerton. You are as good as family. I doubt you will hear much that will come as a surprise.”

Lord Kemerton inclined his head and retook his seat, casting a guarded look at Adelaide as he did so. He was probably anticipating the likelihood that she was about to be turned out on her ear and attempting not to betray his satisfaction. She wished he would not look so handsome when he was being superior; it made him difficult to despise properly. She pretended not to notice his attention, and indeed forgot him entirely when Lord Tipton’s man of business appeared in the doorway.

The earl waved him in and instructed him to relay his findings.

Mr Bentley bowed. “I have spoken to Mr Booker. He has confirmed that this young lady was adopted from Princess Caroline’s Home for the Care of Unfortunate Waifs in Oxford, in May of 1799. I have seen and made a copy of the papers provided to the family by the home at the time. Her birth name was recorded as Adelaide Richmond.”

Lord Oakley let out a whoop of delight. He quieted when the earl barked an instruction for him to desist, but that did not wipe the delight from his face.

Adelaide rather knew she ought to be happy than felt it in earnest, for it was such an extraordinary circumstance as to be almost impossible to believe. It gave her heart to

see Lady Tipton smiling at her encouragingly. She glanced at Lord Kemerton to see whether he was disappointed, only to be embarrassed by the intensity with which he was watching her; she averted her eyes and was left guessing as to his opinion.

Lord Tipton, all serious concentration, gestured for Mr Bentley to continue.

“The young lady’s natural parents are recorded as the Honourable Mr and Mrs Robert Richmond. She was brought to the home by an anonymous well-doer upon their deaths. There is no mention of a brother in the paperwork, and Mr Booker has no memory of there being one at the orphanage. Indeed, he professed to have no memory of the orphanage itself or Miss Richmond’s retrieval thence.”

Lady Tipton gave a little gasp. “How can that be? No one could forget the day a child came into one’s life.”

Adelaide knew how. She bowed her head and left Mr Bentley to explain—and explain he did, in as unembellished a fashion as he had relayed everything else.

“Mr Booker is a drunkard. His estate is being managed by his sons, because he is no longer capable, and he is bedridden with gout.”

The sound of four people shifting forwards in their seats and the thrum of heightened attentiveness filled Adelaide’s ears.

“Estate?” Lord Tipton repeated. “Do you mean to tell me that Mr Booker is a gentleman?”

Mr Bentley must have nodded because Lord Oakley exclaimed a second time. “I thought your accent was refined for a servant, Adelaide! Why did you not say you were brought up as a gentleman’s daughter?”

She shrugged slightly. “It was a long time ago.”

“So it was,” Lord Tipton said gravely. “And pray, how did a gentleman’s daughter end up in service?”

The hope Adelaide had previously held that this part of the tale might somehow be overlooked seemed suddenly ridiculous. Of course they would wish to know. “I ran away,” she admitted reluctantly.

Lord Tipton threw his hands in the air. “If ever we needed proof that she was Robert’s daughter, here it is! He was an ungrateful, self-serving rebel as well. ”

“My lord,” said Lady Tipton in a cajoling voice. “That is unjust. We must not tar our niece with Robert’s misdeeds.”

“Besides,” Lord Oakley chimed in, “she is with her rightful family now. She will have no need to run away again. Will you, Sister?”

His happiness was palpable, and Adelaide felt the warmth of his acceptance, but it made Lord Tipton’s continued opposition seem petulant by comparison and provoked her to answer flippantly.

“I do not know. Will you make me stand in a storm in my chemise if I get mud on my skirts?”

“Do not talk gibberish, girl,” Lord Tipton snapped. “You grow more familiar by the moment. My brother had a sharp tongue in his head, too.”

“Always armed with a sharp implement of one variety or another,” Lord Oakley said jovially.

“It was your idea to play with swords,” Adelaide retorted with a grin.

“Not the first time you stabbed me it wasn’t!”

“She stabbed you?” Lord Tipton exclaimed in dismay.

Adelaide would have regretted the turn of the conversation, except she happened to catch sight of Lord Kemerton’s appalled expression and decided to drive the point home. “It was more of a jab, really. I did not break the skin.”

Lord Tipton stood up. “Very well, I concede. She is undeniably Robert’s. Utterly ungovernable! I hope you know what you have brought upon us, Oakley.”

He left with Mr Bentley, and Lady Tipton very soon after directed everybody to their beds—though not before she and Lord Oakley both expressed their delight at being able to officially welcome a new member to their family.

That night, the quietness of her room did not trouble Adelaide at all. She slept soundly in the knowledge that she was, at last, home.

### CHAPTER NINE

A delaide did not immediately get out of bed when she awoke the next morning but lay pondering the drastic turn her life had taken. It is true! she repeated, over and over. I am Adelaide Richmond! It made her alternately marvel, giggle, and bite her lip with anxiety that a mistake must have been made, and it would all be undone in a flash.

Lord Oakley—Oakley—her brother! —seemed to hold no shred of doubt. His unswerving enthusiasm was deeply touching, though in a strange way, and made Adelaide yet more nervous. Her Booker brothers and sisters' chief resentment had been that she was not their real relation; thus, the fear that some conflicting proof might yet be uncovered, that she might yet lose the name Richmond and Oakley's esteem with it, lurked at the back of her mind.

She would wager that it lurked a good deal closer to the front of Lord Tipton's mind. Practical he may be, but happy to have inherited a previously undiscovered dependent, he was most assuredly not—not if his caustic remarks and disgruntled looks were any indication. She did not think he would turn her out without good cause, but neither did she think he would be sorry if she was found not to be his niece.

She wondered again how like him her father had been. She knew what Robert Richmond had looked like now; there were no portraits on display in the house, but Oakley had shown her a miniature. His looks, like Oakley's and Lord Tipton's, had been very much in the Richmond way. He had the same green eyes as his brothers, and the same white-blond hair as she had herself. He was smiling mischievously in

the picture, and Adelaide speculated whether he had been as troublesome as Lord Tipton often implied. Likely, for he had run away, after all, just as she had. His brother evidently condemned the act. She clung to it with all her heart, for it gave her a greater sense of affinity than she had ever had with her natural parents before.

She wished she knew what Robert would have made of her finding her way back to the family that had disowned him. He must be pleased that she had reunited with Oakley, at least, but was this the life he and her mother had wanted for her? What, indeed, would she even do with herself now? She had no idea how wealthy people occupied themselves. She would hate to become as pampered and conceited as some of the lords and ladies she had met over the years, but she was not averse to a little luxury. Bar soap instead of barrel, a feather mattress, shoes that did not pinch her toes—the sorts of things she had never allowed herself to covet, but which now seemed within easy grasp.

At the first opportunity, she would send a boar bristle hairbrush to Patty, she decided. It was the only thing her friend had ever openly admitted to wanting—other than a tumble beneath the sheets with a viscount, and that she was not willing to arrange.

The wave of protectiveness she felt at the thought of anyone using Oakley so carelessly made her smile. How quickly the idea of him being her brother had made itself at home! Though, as brothers went, he was so wholly unlike her others as made it impossible not to be endeared to him. He was unspoiled, good-humoured, unprepossessing—a genuinely kind soul. But she had seen, already, how that sweetness made him vulnerable to the Lady Veronicas of the world, and she felt quite prepared, by this point, to guard him from the worst machinations of her sex.

At length, reflection and indolence lost their appeal. She got out of bed and dressed in one of her old gowns, for Lady Tipton's—her aunt's! —required a second pair of hands to fasten them, and she was certain nobody would arrive to attend her for hours. Then she made her way through the house and out into the park.

At the far end of the formal garden was a small folly, which looked out over the estate. Adelaide had whiled away the early hours in it on several other mornings as she waited for the rest of the household to wake up. Each previous time, her thoughts had been occupied with what it would be like to sit in that spot, certain in the knowledge that she was a member of the family who owned everything that could be seen from it.

“Well, now you know,” she said quietly as she stepped inside.

“Now I know what?”

Adelaide gasped upon realising the folly was not empty; Lord Kemerton was within. He came to his feet and bowed, though that did not conceal his infuriating little smirk.

“It amuses you to have startled me, my lord?”

“I beg your pardon, Miss Richmond. It is not your shock that diverts me but rather your manner of expressing it.”

Adelaide frowned until it occurred to her that she might have cursed when she saw him. It was a habit she would need to work hard to break, though he was no gentleman for drawing attention to it. She blushed but refused to apologise.

“I did not expect anyone to be here.”

“I often come here in the mornings when I am staying. Oakley and his family keep such leisurely hours, I have grown used to finding my own entertainment until they rouse themselves.”

The early hour had evidently not deprived him of an attendant as it had done

Adelaide, for he was pristinely turned out, his side whiskers crisply shaven along his cheekbones. Rueing her hasty decision to dress in her dowdiest gown, Adelaide folded her arms over herself in a way she hoped covered most of the bodice and watched as he checked his fob watch .

“Seven o’clock,” he said. “You are an early riser, too, I see.”

“Seven is not early for me. Until two weeks ago, I would have been up and working for hours by now.”

She enjoyed his discomfort at first—he deserved to be punished for all those times he had scorned her situation. She began to regret reminding him of it when his mouth twisted with something like distaste.

“It is profoundly regrettable that you ended up in service.”

Humiliation flared hot in Adelaide’s breast. “It is profoundly regrettable that I ended up orphaned, but I can hardly be blamed for it.”

“I meant subsequent to being taken in by the Bookers.”

“Oh,” she said stiffly. “I suppose you agree with Lord Tipton that my running away from them proves I am trouble.”

“I do not know what it proves, although I have my suspicions.”

“I am sure you do. And I am sure none of them are correct.”

He held her gaze steadily. “I hope not.”

Something about the way he regarded her, as though he was looking at more than her

countenance, made Adelaide indescribably self-conscious. What was it he thought he saw—a menace? A contemptible wretch, incapable of restraint? “Oh yes, because an ‘ungrateful, self-serving rebel’ would be a most unworthy connection for your friend to inherit, would it not?”

“Indeed, but those are Lord Tipton’s accusations, not mine.”

Not for one moment believing that he disagreed with the earl’s qualms, she pasted a false smile on her face and said with exaggerated ebullience, “But I was ungrateful. Mrs Booker told me so every day. In her opinion, I ought to have been thankful just to have a roof over my head, given that I was not one of them—and she made certain I never forgot that.”

“It grieves me to hear that.”

“Oh, she stopped saying it eventually. When she died. But she had taught her children well, and they took over where she left off, ensuring I knew what a burden I was.”

“Is that why you left?” He was frowning deeply, displeasure etched across his brow. Adelaide felt yet more uncomfortable, yet more exposed, and she spoke to stave off the sensation.

“Had you convinced yourself I was merely disobedient? You might as well think it, for it is true, I was. No matter how often I was told to stay in my room while my brothers and sisters had their lessons, I never did. I was forever being disciplined for being caught listening at the schoolroom door. I was terribly greedy, too— always wanting more food. But then, I was always hungry, for there was rarely much left to eat once my brothers and sisters had piled their plates high.”

Lord Kemerton opened his mouth to speak, but words had begun pouring off Adelaide’s tongue, and she knew not how to stop them—and how she hated him for

opening the floodgate! These were things of which she never spoke, ordeals that made her shudder to recollect. Her tone grew more resentful with every revelation that spewed out of her.

“There can be no doubt that I was wicked, for I was punished all the time—when my brothers wore out their shoes, when my sisters neglected their practice, when Cook burnt the dinner. And my goodness, I must have been pitiable, for I was the constant object of their derision. Not a day went by when I was not laughed at for some deficiency or other.”

“Miss Richmond, this is unnecessary,” Lord Kemerton interrupted, quietly but so firmly he sounded angry regardless. “I apologise. My enquiry was clearly ill-judged. It is none of my business what made you leave your home.”

“But I have not told you the best bit,” Adelaide replied with false cheer. “You will like this, for my leaving was one of the only things I ever did that was not defiant. I left because my father told me he wished I would. And I know I pleased him in that , at least, because if he ever bothered to look for me, it was not hard enough to find me.”

The torrent stopped; Adelaide had no more words to say—and Lord Kemerton did not fill the silence. He looked furious, and she comprehended, abruptly, that she had gone too far. Newly minted sister to a viscount she may be, but he was an earl, and such an outburst was unlikely to be countenanced. It was his own fault, of course, for always needling her into insolence, but it would hardly do to try and excuse herself by blaming him.

“It is my turn to apologise,” she said reluctantly. “I did not mean to speak so intemperately, only it is a subject that provokes me. I beg you would not inform Lord Tipton of my ill-manners. I hope, in time, to convince his lordship that I will not make trouble, and this was probably not the best way to go about it. If you could see

yourself to?—”

“Madam, please stop.”

She did, though less because he asked it and more because he had come a step closer, and his entire demeanour was arresting.

“I never suspected, and neither will I ever be convinced, that you are ungrateful, or rebellious, or self-interested—and I certainly will not hear it said that you are wicked. I am profoundly sorry for the injustices you have suffered, but you have displayed a remarkable strength of character in overcoming them. Oakley is fortunate to have such a sister.” He stepped away from her. “Now, pray, enjoy the view as you came to do. I shall intrude on your privacy no longer. Excuse me.” He bowed and walked away, but before he exited the folly, he turned to add, “Mr Booker is a fool. I would never have stopped looking for you.”

When he was gone, Adelaide sank onto the stone seat and exhaled shakily. She had not been expecting kind words. Shame threatened to unbalance her, but she pushed it away, for there had been excellent grounds to believe Lord Kemerton held her in contempt and no reason whatsoever to anticipate that he would be sympathetic. How many times had she heard him deride her condition in life? Recalling them all, she resolved not to regret revealing her history to him. She nevertheless undertook to apologise for her somewhat childish attempt to shock him with it.

That turned out to be impossible, for he had already departed by the time she returned to the house. It irritated her, because although Lord Kemerton had seen through her facetious claims to disobedience and wickedness, he had not withdrawn his opinion of her inferiority, and she would rather not have given him further cause, with her incivility, to think ill of her. She would credit him with one thing, however. He would almost certainly make a far better father than Mr Booker, who she knew full well had never looked for her at all.

### CHAPTER TEN

“Shall we ride into Barford today?” Oakley suggested at breakfast. “Now that you are official, so to speak, there is no need to keep you hidden away.”

Adelaide winced. “I have not ridden a horse for above a decade, and I was not what you would call proficient then.”

“Should you like to learn again?”

“I suppose it would be prudent if I am to pass myself off as a woman of high society.”

“There will be no ‘passing off’—you are a Richmond, regardless of how skilled a horsewoman you are.” He gave her an encouraging look and waited for her to acknowledge it before continuing. “But if you should like to learn, I can certainly arrange it. I could even teach you myself.”

“That might be fun,” Adelaide agreed with a heartfelt smile, delighted that Oakley should wish to give her so much of his time. After a short break in the conversation, she ventured, “Lord Kemerton left early this morning. Was that planned?”

“I do not know that he specified his plans. It is not unusual for him to go without saying goodbye, though, for he is always up hours before the rest of us. He is a long-standing friend of the family, you understand. He comes and goes from Chiltern Court as readily as I do from Avonwyke.” He waved his fork in the air and gave the superfluous explanation that Avonwyke was Lord Kemerton’s estate. A moment

later, he cast her a querying look. "I did not think you would be sorry to see him go. You did not seem overly fond of his company."

"No, but then, he did not seem overly fond of mine."

"Give the man a chance—he has only seen you at one dinner."

Adelaide did not remind Oakley of their encounters at High Brook, for he had evidently disassociated his new sister from the housemaid she had been then. Neither did she think it wise to admit to eavesdropping on several of his conversations with Lord Kemerton while there.

"Actually, I saw him again before he left this morning. The subject of how it was that I went into service arose, and I might have been unguarded in my responses. When I got back to the house, he had gone. I hope he did not leave on my account. I would not like to think I had offended a family friend."

Oakley shook his head. "He is not the resentful sort. Perhaps he has gone to call on Lady Sophia. 'Tis about time he came to the point with her."

"Oh yes, of course." Adelaide had forgotten about her.

"Well then! Is it riding lessons for us today? "

"Not today, I am afraid. I do not own a riding habit. But I should be happy to walk into town with you."

Oakley curled his top lip in revulsion. "I shall take us in the curricule."

"You do not like walking?"

“Not if it can be avoided. Tedious waste of energy. If I cannot arrive at a place by horse or carriage, I should rather not go.”

Adelaide laughed, for he evidently thought this was diverting. Nevertheless, she could not help but think that the Fates had known what they were about when they consigned her to a life in service and handed Oakley into the care of the nobility. If the thought of walking exhausted him, goodness only knew what state a day of laundry would leave him in.

The ride in the curricule was thrilling. The seat was absurdly high off the ground and bounced about precariously the whole time they were in motion. Adelaide clung to the side with one hand and her bonnet with the other, shrieking as much with glee as fright each time they bounced over a rut. Oakley seemed surprised the first time she whooped her pleasure but laughed gaily with her the second and third times. Then he slowed the horses.

“Is something the matter?” she enquired.

“Not at all! It pleases me greatly to see you having so much fun. Only we are nearly there, and I know you would rather not embarrass yourself.”

“Embarrass myself?” she replied weakly.

He glanced at her and seemed concerned by whatever he saw. “I meant no offence. Laughing with you like this is a joy, but you know how people can be. I do not pretend to understand all the rules about ladies’ comportment, but Mother is forever remarking that this girl has laughed too loudly, or that one has shown too many teeth. I cannot see that it matters in what manner one enjoys oneself, but it seems to.”

“No, I did not know either. Thank you. I shall bear it in mind.”

He beamed at her, seemingly pleased with this exchange, though Adelaide could be nothing but mortified. She and Patty had often joked about the lengths to which Lady Grisham and her guests had gone to make themselves appear fashionable. It had not occurred to her that she would now be required to learn the same tricks—or how deficient she presently was in such arts.

The next turn in the road brought them over the crest of the hill, revealing Barford in the valley beyond. Oakley manoeuvred the curricule through the narrow arch and into the tightly packed mews of an inn on the main thoroughfare. He seemed disappointed when he came round to her side to find she had already clambered out on her own.

“I was going to hand you down.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I did not know I was supposed to wait. I will, next time,” she replied, chastened again.

Oakley only laughed. “No need to apologise. I only meant that I am enjoying playing the gallant older br— cousin . Come!” He gave a coin to a boy nearby, along with the instruction to keep the horses harnessed for they would not be more than half an hour, and strode towards the door of the taproom .

Adelaide had begun to follow him when she caught a glint in the boy’s eye. She stopped and regarded him with suspicion. “Do you work here?”

The boy shrugged. “I do if he’s paying me to.”

“But you do not, usually?”

He grinned. “Nah. I’m the baker’s boy.”

She could not help but grin with him but had not replied before Oakley called her

name. She turned to shout that she was coming, and by the time she looked back, the boy was gone. She would have mentioned it to her brother, but no sooner had they fought their way through the crowded taproom and out into the town than they were hailed by a young man and woman coming towards them along the street.

“Well met, Oakley,” said the gentleman. “I did not know you were back in our little corner of the world. Good to see you. And might we have the honour of being introduced to your companion?”

“Indeed, you may,” Oakley replied proudly. “Mr and Mrs Greene, this is my cousin, Miss Adelaide Richmond.”

“Delighted to make your acquaintance, Miss Richmond,” said Mrs Greene. “I confess I did not know Lord Oakley had any cousins.”

“And certainly, none so charming,” her husband added. “Where have you been hiding Miss Richmond all these years, Oakley?”

“Oxfordshire—not so very hidden,” he replied with a chuckle.

“How long are you staying at Chiltern Court, madam? Might we see you at any gatherings? ”

“You surely will,” Oakley interjected. “For my cousin has come to live with us.”

Mr and Mrs Greene expressed their delight, but with her brother answering every question for her, Adelaide did not feel obliged to attend to the conversation closely. She glanced surreptitiously past Mrs Greene in an attempt to see what shops the town boasted and saw the baker’s boy step out from the door of the inn. Their eyes met, and he smirked saucily and flicked his coin so that it spun through the air and landed back in his palm.

Diverted by his boldness, Adelaide smiled back and called, “Off to spend it before you are discovered?”

“Too right! See yer!” He took off at a run.

Adelaide’s amusement dissipated upon turning back to her party and finding all three of them staring at her—Mr and Mrs Greene both somewhat horrified, and Oakley rather more chagrined. She knew instantly what she had done. Mrs Booker had used to act as though she did not know her own lady’s maid if she saw her in the street, never mind exchange banter with the baker’s boy.

“I beg your pardon,” Adelaide began, but she could think of nothing that would explain her outburst and fell quickly into a silence that Mrs Greene was all too eager to fill.

“It was lovely to see you, my lord. Do give your mother my regards. Good day.” She curtsied, her husband inclined his head, and they both hastened away.

Adelaide’s shoulders sagged. “I was not thinking. I am sorry.”

“Now, now, less of that,” Oakley said kindly. He took up her hand and replaced it on his arm, tugging her gently into motion. “What did you do but speak to a boy in the street, hm? The Greenes ought not to be so fastidious.”

“You are kind to say so, but we both know I made a spectacle of myself.”

“I know nothing of the sort. Chin up, now. Look here, I am sure I recall you saying you liked ribbons and such. Let us see what they have in here.”

Had Oakley brought her to any other shop, Adelaide might have asked not to go in and to be taken home instead, but he had brought her to the haberdashery, and she did

not wish to squander her first visit to one in many years.

She was not vain—indeed, Patty had often remarked that it would do her no harm to take a little more pride in her appearance—but Adelaide adored elegant fabrics. The patterns, the drape, the colours all appealed to her in a way that only someone who had worn dull, patched-up, and scratchy work-clothes all their life could appreciate. She drifted about the shop in a state of ecstasy, touching ribbons and stroking lace, her humiliation quite forgotten.

“Look at this one!” she implored her brother. When he did not reply, she turned to look at him. He was standing at the window with his back to the shop. She huffed a little laugh. “Charming!”

“Madam?” the shop assistant enquired.

“Oh, I was just laughing at my cousin, but I expect you are used to men standing about looking dull when they come in here.”

The woman glanced nervously at Oakley, then said timorously, “Um...his lordship honours us with his patronage, madam.”

“Are you sure? I should say he is more likely to scare the customers away, standing in the window looking impatient like that.”

Oakley turned around at last, a broad smile on his face and a different ribbon dangling from each hand. “What a cheek! I was choosing you a gift.” His gaze passed to the assistant, and his smile dissipated. In a conciliatory voice, he said, “A yard of each please, madam. And rest assured, I am neither dull nor impatient.”

The woman bobbed a curtsy and set about cutting and wrapping the ribbons. Adelaide stared at the floor, wishing it would open up and swallow her. Even when

Oakley gently touched her arm and guided her out of the door, she did not look up, she did not speak.

“Do not be distressed. You must know that the haberdasher’s opinion is of even less importance than the Greenes’,” he said once they were outside.

“That is not the point. I keep embarrassing you. I keep embarrassing everyone. I ought to have known she would not want to make a joke at your expense—I have lived in that world, I know it is not acceptable for a shopkeeper to laugh at a viscount!”

“Do not be so hard on yourself. There is no harm done.”

Adelaide was saved from replying by a shout from behind.

“Ho! Is that you, Oakley?”

They both turned to see a gentleman approaching on his horse. He dismounted, and Oakley introduced him as Lord Tipton’s nearest neighbour, Mr Thomand. “And this is Miss Adelaide Richmond, my cousin.”

Mr Thomand expressed his delight to make Adelaide’s acquaintance, then with a sceptical look, asked Oakley, “Not Damian’s?”

“Robert’s. We have only lately found out he had a daughter.”

“What a wonderful discovery! Your father and I used to play together as children, Miss Richmond,” Mr Thomand told her. “He was a fine man.”

She smiled and nodded in acknowledgement. She longed to ask him to elaborate but did not trust herself to frame the question with any grace.

After a prolonged pause, Oakley cleared his throat and said, “My cousin is only recently arrived. She is still settling in.”

“Of course,” Mr Thomand replied. “I shall leave you both to explore the town. A very warm welcome to you though, Miss Richmond. I hope we shall meet again soon.” He waited for a moment more, looking awkwardly between her and her brother, but eventually tipped his hat and led his horse away.

“Why did you not speak to him?” Oakley asked quietly. To Adelaide’s dismay, a note of frustration rang in his voice. As kind as he had been—and seemed always to be—it made the fact that she had displeased him all the worse.

“Forgive me. I have made such a muddle of everything so far today, I thought it would be safest not to. I did not mean to give any offence.”

Her brother sighed—very quietly, but she heard it, and with some panic, she asked, “Was he offended? I’m sorry!” She felt suddenly tearful, though she might have withheld them had Oakley not taken up her hand and squeezed it.

“Nobody could be offended by you, Adelaide. You are entirely too sweet.”

She let out a small sob. “How can you say that? I have offended everybody we have spoken to.”

“Easily. If you were not sweet, you would not be troubled about having offended any of them.” He tapped her on the chin with his thumb. “You will get used to it soon enough.”

“Will I?”

“Of course! You forged a whole new life for yourself once before. I see no reason

why you cannot do it again.”

“But that is just it! I did that because I felt so out of place, but it did not help. I have always felt out of place, wherever I have gone. I thought it would feel different now that I am with my proper family, but it doesn’t. I am just as much a fish out of water as I ever have been.”

“Give yourself a chance! This is your first time out of the house since you found out who you are. And in any case, you have not done as badly as you seem to think. A few misplaced comments here and there are scarcely worth mentioning.”

Adelaide almost wished he would try less hard to convince her, for his exuberance was having the opposite effect of making him seem wilfully blind to her defects. Yet, her own doubts notwithstanding, she treasured his faith in her and, not wishing him to lose it, decided against contradicting him. She tried for levity instead.

“Definitely do not mention them to Lord Tipton. He might decide I am too much trouble after all and send me back to High Brook.”

Oakley gave her a mock glower. “That is not how families work. I shall say this as often as it takes to make you believe it—you are a Richmond. We cannot simply decide we do not want you.”

“The late Lord Tipton decided he did not want our father.” She regretted saying as much when his countenance constricted in dismay.

“Yes, I suppose he did,” he said earnestly. “But I hope you will take me at my word when I say that I would never forsake you.”

Nobody had ever championed Adelaide as earnestly as Oakley. That was largely what made it so difficult to believe it could possibly last. It was also what made it so easy

to promise, “Nor I you.”

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

Either Mrs Greene, her husband, or Mr Thomand had a loose tongue, it seemed. Within four-and-twenty hours of Adelaide and Oakley's trip into Barford, neighbours began to arrive at Chiltern Court, eager to make the acquaintance of a previously unheard-of Richmond cousin. By the end of the week, two visitors from outside the county had come seeking an introduction, and on the following Tuesday, Oakley received word that one of his old friends from university, a Mr Hanson, was on his way from London—ostensibly to speak to Oakley, though he made no bones in his letter about having heard of his friend's happy discovery.

Lady Tipton insisted all the interest was a consequence of Adelaide's fine looks; Lord Tipton grumbled that it was because she was single—and he was rich; but Oakley maintained that the chief culprit was people's curiosity.

“Unearthing a long-lost relation of high birth is fascinating, no matter how you look at it. ”

“We must be diligent in ensuring that fascination does not lead to anyone discovering Adelaide's full history,” Lady Tipton warned. “It would not do to mention that she grew up in Banbury, for example, for that might direct someone to the Bookers, and they would almost certainly reveal that Adelaide ran away, which would beg the question of where to.”

The matter of what to say about her formative years did not much trouble Adelaide; she had been avoiding those questions all her life. Of far greater concern to her was that one of her unending faux pas would expose her. She had used to think working

for a noble family meant adhering to a ridiculous number of exacting practices, but it was nothing to the vast quantity of bizarre and arbitrary customs to which the family subjected itself. Wear this gown for that pastime, those shoes for this activity, and never that hat in these places. Use this fork for that food, but that spoon for this drink; do not talk too much, never ignore your host, always arrive precisely on time, and stay too long at your peril. Adelaide could not even pretend to recall all Lady Tipton's advice on her manner of walking, or how she was supposed to hold a cup, or the angle at which she ought to flap her fan. She had erred in almost every conceivable way thus far—and several she could never have imagined—and she did not believe it would be long until one of their many callers guessed at her chequered past.

“Not too low. You rank higher,” Oakley whispered, surreptitiously taking her by the elbow to lift her out of the curtsey she dipped into upon greeting Mr Hanson when he arrived at the end of September .

Adelaide blushed—and blushed again upon realising she had mouthed an oath in frustration at having mis-stepped already. It truly was proving a difficult habit to break, but to her relief, Mr Hanson did not appear to have noticed—or if he had, he was too much the gentleman to remark on it, placing him well in front of Lord Kemerton in Adelaide's estimation.

“It is an absolute delight to meet you, Miss Richmond. I hope you will forgive me for obtruding on your family reunion.”

“It is no imposition. It is a pleasure to meet any friend of my cousin's.” This was particularly true when they were as charming as this one appeared to be. His countenance was friendly and expressive, with eyes that crinkled when he smiled in a way that showed he did it often. She thought it rather endearing that his hair remained ruffled when he removed his hat; it gave him the appearance of an adventurer, wind-tousled and energetic.

“What did you want to see me about?” Oakley enquired with a cheerful bounce on his heels and a wink in Adelaide’s direction. “You were tiresomely vague in your letter.”

“I have come to invite you to a ball.”

“That is very good of you, though I am baffled by this sudden fashion for driving halfway across the country to ask questions that could be sent by letter for a fraction of the cost.”

“Come now, if I had posted the invitation, I should never have been able to discover for myself whether the rumours flying all over London were true.”

“What rumours?” Oakley asked warily .

Mr Hanson smiled broadly and answered looking at Adelaide. “That your newly discovered cousin has your legendary fey eyes, but that unlike on your hobgoblin phizog, they render her quite the most bewitching creature anyone ever saw. I shall be happy to report, when I return to town, that it is perfectly true.”

Adelaide was not wearing her aunt’s periwinkle gown that day and knew full well that her eyes looked their usual, rather ordinary blue. It somehow made the praise prettier, for Mr Hanson had evidently wished to flatter her, and somebody must have thought it, and said it, for him to repeat it; thus it was as though she had received two compliments at once.

She had no notion of how she ought to respond, however, and instead said to Oakley, “Your eyes are legendary? No wonder you were offended that I could not see anything special about them.”

“Hardly ‘legendary’. He is exaggerating. You will find he does that a lot.”

“I am forewarned,” she said, grinning at Mr Hanson.

“And I am bewitched!” cried he, one hand on his chest in affected wonder.

“See?” Oakley said wryly. “Admit it, Hanson, you have come with the sole purpose of flirting with my cousin.”

“I came to invite you to my ball, but now that Miss Richmond and I have met, it would be most unkind to make her the only woman of my acquaintance with whom I do not flirt. Speaking of which, where is your mother? I must tell her how sorely I have missed her since my last visit. ”

Oakley rolled his eyes and directed his friend to the orangery, whither he went directly. Adelaide’s bafflement must have shown on her face, for he chuckled slightly and explained, “It is his way. My mother is used to him. He is an old friend.”

“So is Lord Kemerton, but he does not flirt with your mother.”

Oakley affected a shiver. “Heaven forbid! Kem is more like a brother to me—it would be grotesque were he to flirt with her. But that is not his style in any case. Hanson is more gregarious— and an incorrigible flirt. He is harmless, but you must tell me if you find him too much. I shall tell him to leave if you do.”

Adelaide had no objection to him remaining. Indeed, on reflection, she rather liked the thought of being flirted with, for nobody had ever paid her any such attention before. “I shall be sure to let you know, but I have not tired of his company yet.”

She had not tired of it two days later, either. In fact, she was coming to enjoy it a great deal. He was a flirt, it was true, and unashamedly foppish with it, but his liveliness was refreshing, and his looks such that his courtesies could hardly be considered an imposition. He was not as handsome as Lord Kemerton, but Adelaide

did not hold that against him, for few men were. Few men were as high in the instep as the Earl of Kemerton either and, unlike him, Mr Hanson had proved himself wonderfully patient with her occasionally feeble attempts at propriety.

“Well then,” said he, on his last night at Chiltern Court. “May I tell my sister that she can expect the Richmond cousins at our ball next month?”

Adelaide gasped slightly, inhaled some of the tea she was sipping, coughed into her cup, splashing most of the contents into her lap, and spluttered her way to drawing a rasping breath. “Both of us?”

Lord Tipton pursed his lips and shook his head at her exhibition but said nothing, for his wife had placed a hand on his arm and given him a look that implored him to hold his tongue.

Mr Hanson did not so much as blink an eye, casually passing her his handkerchief as he answered. “Why yes! You did not think I would be so cruel as to steal Oakley away and leave you mouldering here in the country by yourself, did you?”

“But...it is very soon.” She looked to her brother for assistance, hoping that, after her disastrous foray into Barford, he would share her misgivings.

He seemed to, for he nodded his understanding and turned to his friend with a conciliatory grimace. “It is quite soon. Adelaide has only recently come to us, and she has not been used to...that is, she has not moved in the same circles as we have.”

“Who cares about that?”

“Everybody,” Lady Tipton said quietly. She was toying with her jewellery, which Adelaide had begun to suspect meant she was anxious, and her being anxious about a trip to town made Adelaide even more so.

Mr Hanson made a dismissive noise and waved his hand in the air. "'Tis not as though it is the Season. Scarcely anyone will be there."

"I cannot imagine it will be a ball anyone would be sorry to miss, then," Lord Tipton opined .

"It is a kind offer, Mr Hanson," Lady Tipton said. "But I hope you will understand that we find ourselves in uncharted waters. We would not hasten to put Adelaide into any position that might disadvantage her in the months to come."

Mr Hanson inclined his head in surrender. "I understand entirely. I cannot pretend I am not disappointed, though." He looked at Adelaide. " Vous aurais été la belle du bal ."

Adelaide felt a flash of regret for having balked at his offer. Her apprehension aside, wearing a beautiful gown, being whisked around the room all evening by refined, attentive gentlemen—being 'the belle of the ball'—that would really be something. She replied in stilted French, and with what she did not doubt was lamentable grammar, that she hoped they would have another opportunity to dance.

"I hope so, too," he replied—just as Lord Tipton said crossly, "You told me you could not speak French!"

"I beg your pardon," she replied stiffly, "but your lordship said that. I did not."

"But you did not correct me."

She had not corrected any of his prepossessions, for at the time, she had not believed she could truly be his relation and therefore had not thought it a battle worth fighting. Now it had been proved that they were related, it was not a battle she needed to fight. " Pardonnez moi, mon seigneur ."

Lord Tipton's eyes widened slightly before he turned to his wife, all indignation. "I see more of Robert in her every day. "

"I rather think," Mr Hanson whispered in Adelaide's ear, "that your new family are underestimating you, Miss Richmond. Are you quite sure you do not want to come to my ball?"

She felt his breath on her neck and grew flushed at the sensation of such intimacy. "You are very kind, sir," she said as collectedly as she was able, "but Oakley was not wrong. I have not been much out in society. And it has been a long time since I danced. I am sure I would make a fool of myself trying to remember the steps."

He startled her by sitting up taller in his chair and addressing the room loudly. "My lord, my lady, Oakley. A travesty has occurred. Miss Richmond has just informed me that she has not had the pleasure of a dance in—how long did you say? Weeks? Months?"

"Years, sir."

He put the back of his hand to his brow and closed his eyes theatrically. "The injustice!"

Oakley rolled his eyes, and Adelaide grinned with him at his friend's silliness, but a short while later, her amusement was replaced with heartfelt gratitude. For, once he was done play-acting, Mr Hanson persuaded Lady Tipton to play the pianoforte for them, while he, with Oakley's help, took Adelaide through the steps of several of the latest à la mode dances. Although she was exceedingly rusty, and Oakley, it transpired, exceedingly heavy-footed, Mr Hanson was steadfast in his patient directions. They employed chairs to represent the lines of dancers, and at one point cajoled her ladyship into abandoning the instrument to dance with them in a four, sans accompaniment. At the end of it, they were all breathless and merry, and even

Lord Tipton was stirred to applaud their final turn.

“I remember when I used to dance like that all the time,” Lady Tipton said wistfully as she resumed her seat.

Mr Hanson accepted a glass of wine from a footman and leant against the instrument. “If your ladyship accompanied Miss Richmond to town, you would be required to be her chaperon at every ball she attended. Think of all the dancing you would have then.”

Oakley tutted. “Not this again. We have made it clear—my cousin is not ready to enter society.”

“Pay him no heed, Miss Richmond, I thought you danced very prettily indeed,” Mr Hanson replied.

“Pretty I may have been, but proficient, we both know I was not.”

“Where better to practise than town? At least there, you will not have to resort to dancing with the furniture.”

“That is a fair point,” Oakley remarked.

“I suppose we could visit my modiste while we were there,” Lady Tipton said, a gleam of anticipation in her eyes.

“You have provided me with more than enough gowns already,” Adelaide said, though in truth, the prospect of visiting one of London’s famous modistes filled her with excitement.

“That is not possible, dear,” her aunt replied. “And with a countenance like yours, it

would be a crime to put you in anything but the very latest fashions.”

“Hear, hear!” Mr Hanson agreed.

“I thought you said I was not ready,” Adelaide said to her aunt .

“Mr Hanson has put my mind at rest on that score. If he says London is quiet at this time of year, I shall not argue. I am not in town often enough to know better.”

She seemed genuinely eager, and it made her appear twenty years younger than she usually looked. Her necklace and all her many bracelets hung freely about her person, untouched by nervous fingers. Adelaide’s reservations receded, just a little.

“What say you, then, Miss Richmond?” Mr Hanson asked. “Will you delight my sister and I and come to our ball?”

“’Tis open season in a week. I am not going anywhere near London while there are pheasants to be shot here,” Lord Tipton said flatly. “And if you had any sense, Oakley, you would stay as well. Only the dregs are in town at this time of year. No offence, Hanson.”

“None taken, my lord,” he replied, though Adelaide thought she could perceive a good deal of affront in his fixed expression. It was that which decided her. She knew what it was to be looked down upon—and Mr Hanson was assuredly not so far below Lord Tipton as to deserve his derision. He owned his own house in town and, according to Oakley, had inherited the fortune to purchase one in the country whenever he chose. Moreover, he had not belittled her once.

“I should be delighted to accept your invitation, sir. If my cousin and aunt are in agreement, you may tell your sister she will see us in London in October.”

### CHAPTER TWELVE

With much to prepare before a ball could be successfully compassed, they travelled to Tipton House at the end of that week. The London into which they arrived was as unfamiliar to Adelaide as Chiltern Court had initially been, though not for want of previous visits; she had been many times in the capacity of servant to a wealthy family. The London she knew was a dirty place, full of squalor and hardship. A place in which women toiled in cellars and ran errands in backstreets, well away from the beautified world of the Quality.

Knowing what deprivation swirled about just out of view tainted all her pursuits—her present one, sipping tea in an opulent parlour at two o'clock in the afternoon—with a sense of absurdity.

“Are you listening, dear?”

Adelaide blinked her gaze back into focus and apologised to her aunt. “Could you repeat that? I was quite lost in my thoughts.”

Lady Tipton tried to give her a stern look, though Adelaide was learning that her aunt was not particularly good at being stern, so she did not take it too much to heart.

“Never admit to not paying attention, Adelaide. You would have done better to smile and respond with a question of your own. Better yet, do not allow your attention to wander in the first place.”

“Sorry.”

Her ladyship put her cup down and frowned worriedly at her. “Is something the matter?”

Adelaide was on the cusp of saying no, but the concern in her aunt’s face stopped her. They were tentatively working their way towards a closer understanding, and moments such as these were becoming steadily more frequent and less awkward. She forced herself to answer honestly.

“Everything is just so...different. It was at Chiltern Court, too, at first—only it mattered less there. Here, everybody will see me. I feel a greater expectation to succeed—and a far greater likelihood of failing.” She dropped her gaze to her lap and added, “I am not sure that my coming here was such a good idea.”

After a brief silence, Lady Tipton surprised her by rising from her seat to come and sit next to her.

“I shall not insult you by pretending that we do not all have some reservations. But you are such a brave girl, and so deserving of some happiness.”

Adelaide looked up, surprised again to hear her say such a thing.

Her aunt corroborated her words with a warm smile and a nod. Then she patted Adelaide’s knee affectionately. “ But we are here now. What say we stop worrying about what might go wrong and make the most of what London has to offer? You have some time to settle in before we must see anyone, regardless, for I have not made our presence in town widely known. And in the meantime, we have a visit to the modiste to look forward to. That will be pleasant.”

“And I shall fill up the rest of your time with sightseeing,” said Oakley from the doorway, startling them both. He came into the room and went directly to the table to pick up a cake. “How should you like to see the lions at the Tower of London?” With

his mouth full, he sounded like an excited schoolboy, which cheered Adelaide considerably.

“I should like that very well. I heard them roar once when I was down at the river, buying cockles for my mistress. It was so loud, I thought it was thunder. I flatly refused to believe the cockle seller when he said it was lions.”

Lady Tipton made a little noise that drew Adelaide’s attention to her anxious expression. “That is most diverting, dear, but perhaps do not tell that story when we begin to call on people.”

“You will have new tales to tell them by then,” Oakley said cheerfully, “for we have plenty to see besides the Tower.”

He was true to his word; though somewhat limited by their desire to remain inconspicuous, they still managed to see much of the capital over the following days. Indeed, Oakley traipsed Adelaide around so many galleries, cathedrals, and historic monuments that she went to bed some nights as tired as when she had been labouring for a living. When the day of the ball arrived, she was almost fatigued enough to contemplate crying off, though the delivery that arrived from the modiste after breakfast soon put paid to any such foolish notions.

Her gown for that evening was by far the finest thing Adelaide had ever worn. She felt resplendent in it—until she stepped through the front door of Mr Hanson’s house and beheld at least two score ladies with prettier faces in finer gowns. Then, she did not so much wish that she had stayed at Chiltern Court as that she had never left High Brook, for she had not a hope of convincing anyone present she was of noble birth.

“I thought Mr Hanson said it would be a small affair,” she whispered to Oakley in alarm.

“It is compared to some of the crushes we shall attend in next year’s Season. Look lively, here come our hosts.”

Mr Hanson, looking exceedingly well in a distinctive red velvet coat, greeted them warmly, then introduced his sister. She was handsomer than her brother, and taller than Adelaide, but with a countenance that appeared dissatisfied whenever she was not speaking. Between every smile, her expression flattened out, making it excessively difficult to gauge her sincerity.

“Lady Tipton, Lord Oakley, it has been too long! You are exceedingly welcome,” Miss Hanson began. “And Miss Richmond, I cannot tell you how delighted my brother and I are that you agreed to come, too. I see now why he has been in such raptures since meeting you. You are every bit as handsome as he described.”

“Oh. Why, thank you. Um...and you,” she mumbled, never quite sure how to accept a compliment gracefully, and even less so when it might be disingenuous.

Miss Hanson smirked. “My brother told you I was handsome?”

“No, he...I did not mean?—”

“May I look forward to the honour of a dance this evening, Miss Hanson?” Oakley interrupted.

She accepted, and Adelaide agreed to dance the first set with Mr Hanson before allowing herself to be led away from the embarrassing encounter.

“Sorry,” she whispered to Oakley. “I do not know why I said that.”

“You are nervous, but there is no need to be.”

“Thank you for intervening.”

“My pleasure.” He grinned down at her. “It is just what an elder brother—or cousin—ought to do.”

It was fortunate that he thought so, for he was obliged to disguise her missteps several more times before Mr Hanson arrived to whisk her into the first dance. It was one of the more complicated of those Adelaide had learnt, and she began awkwardly, consumed with trepidation that she would make a fool of both of them. A few minutes into the set, she was reminded how well she liked her partner. Mr Hanson had lost none of the patience he had exhibited at Chiltern Court and remained in good cheer, even after she had trodden on his toes five or maybe six times.

“Pray do not concern yourself, madam. The fault is clearly mine,” he assured her. “I neglected to practise with you enough. I am a heartless beast. ”

“Would you believe that I have been practising? Oakley has tried his best, but I fear I am not a natural.”

“Nonsense! A lady always excels at dancing. If there is any deficiency, it must be her partner’s fault.” He spun prematurely into the next figure, giving her feet no opportunity to go near his. “Have you enjoyed your time in London so far?”

“Yes, very much. It is so unlike how I remember it from when I was here before, though. I have never noticed some of the things my cousin has shown me this week.”

“I am intrigued. What have you seen at other times?”

Adelaide faltered. She had been thinking of the tearoom Oakley had taken her to that afternoon, which had turned out to be just around the corner from the gin palace, whence she and Patty had once rescued the Grishams’ footman, Gregory. Scarcely a

politic example to give.

“Oh, the same things, only in more detail,” she hedged. “Like the Tower. I have seen it many times, but never the menagerie. Did you know they accept meat for the animals as payment for admittance? We saw one man throw a stray cat in with the lions. It was ripped to shreds, poor thing.”

The ladies on both sides of her cried out in disgust, and she cursed privately at the realisation that she had trespassed, so early in proceedings, onto one of her aunt’s vast lists of unacceptable topics of conversation. To her relief, Mr Hanson rolled his eyes at the women’s responses and winked at her .

“And did your cousin take you to the painting exhibition at Christie’s?” he enquired.

When she answered that he had, he asked how well she liked it.

“It was fair. Two dozen bowls of fruit and a few naked old men can only hold one’s interest for so long.”

This time, she realised she had erred before the women alerted her to it with their stifled laughter. Looking at them made her fumble her steps—and Mr Hanson his, in turn. He showed not a whit of vexation for it, but it drew more jeers from the other dancers in the line and stole much of her enjoyment of the rest of the set. She hardly knew what answers she gave to his continued questions, for she was too preoccupied with attending to her feet, and when the time eventually came for her to return to Lady Tipton’s side, she drained her glass of punch as though she might swallow her mortification with it.

“Calm yourself. I am sure it was not as disastrous as you think,” her ladyship said soothingly.

“Oh, it was!” she insisted. “The more nervous I get, the more stupid things I say, and the less I am able to control my feet.”

“You danced very well, all things considered.”

“Did you not see me trip?”

“No—and neither can Sir Rodney have, for he is coming this way, no doubt to ask for a dance.”

Sure enough, a gentleman appeared before them and asked Lady Tipton for an introduction to Adelaide, whose hand he then requested for the next set. After him came three others, and though all of them were pleasant gentlemen, she was too nervous to speak much to any of them. Every dance seemed more complicated than the last, and her performance showed no sign of improvement—a circumstance made worse by dint of the glass of punch they each insisted on fetching for her at the end of every set. By the time a Mr Dunnock approached to engage her for the sixth, her head was spinning, and she was desperate to escape the crowd.

“I am terribly sorry, sir, but I am feeling rather bilious.”

“Would a glass of wine help?”

“Thank you, but I think I must regretfully sit this one out. I do beg your pardon.”

His displeasure was obvious, but he still bowed politely before stalking away across the room. Adelaide wasted no time in slipping through the nearest door. It led to a small anteroom, in which a footman was filling a row of glasses on a table. He jumped when she burst in, then watched her nervously as she pressed her back against the wall.

“Do you think you could pretend not to have seen me?” she asked quietly.

He looked relieved and with a quick nod shoved all the glasses onto a tray and went on his way.

Adelaide let out a deep sigh and willed her head to stop spinning. Whenever there had been balls at High Brook, she and Patty had spied on the guests from an anteroom not dissimilar to this one, pointing out which of the men they most wished to dance with, deciding which ladies wore the finest gowns, and generally envying everyone such an extravagant evening. Now she was finally at a ball, she found that, up close, the dancing was far harder than it looked, the conversation was stilted and uninteresting, and the drink was nauseating. The memory of sitting quietly in the workroom, stitching napkins while she and Patty chatted, made her heart ache with longing.

She allowed herself to feel it for a while, wiping away the few tears that arose as she did. Yet, once the pang of homesickness had faded, the foolishness of her distress made itself known. If Patty was presently enjoying a quiet night of sewing, it would only be after a full day of backbreaking work. If the most Adelaide had to complain about was too much entertainment, well then, she had nothing to repine at all. Less than nothing, in fact, for as well as a life of luxury, she had a brother—and he would surely begin to think his sister had been lost again if she did not return to the party soon.

“Miss Richmond!” came a familiar voice when she exited the anteroom. Miss Hanson approached with another lady at her side, whom she introduced as her good friend, Miss Nugent. “I do hope you are enjoying yourself. You are certainly the woman of the hour. Everybody is alive with talk of your remarkable story.”

“Indeed,” Miss Nugent added. “To be discovered like that, after so many years. How on earth did Viscount Oakley find you?”

The musicians struck up for the next set, and Adelaide began to wish she had remained hidden a little longer, for her light-headedness had not abated as much as she thought.

“By chance,” she said carefully, wary of revealing too much with her head spinning as it was. “He was not looking for me, nor I him. He only happened to see me in passing and recognised my likeness to our grandmother.”

“How extraordinary! But what a shame so many years were lost.”

“We are more than making up for lost time.”

“Yes, I heard that your cousin has been showing you some of London’s more insalubrious sights. Cat-mauling lions and the like,” Miss Hanson replied. With a sympathetic smile, she added, “Men do not always know the best ways to please a lady. Miss Nugent and I could take you shopping, if you like.” This time, her smile remained after she stopped speaking.

Adelaide had no complaints about Oakley’s methods of demonstrating his brotherly affection—but neither was she averse to Miss Hanson’s offer of companionship. “I should like that very much. I have not yet made any friends here.” That felt a pitiable admission to make. She tried again. “I was hoping I might make a friend of my new lady’s maid.” And that made her sound imbecilic. “But we hired a woman who is quite a bit older, so that seems unlikely.”

A look passed between the two women that made Adelaide rue ever touching the punch, for clearly, she had been reduced to a babbling fool.

“Shall we call on you, then—to make arrangements?” Miss Hanson asked.

Adelaide had time to do no more than nod her agreement and see Miss Hanson’s

impassive expression return before they were all interrupted by Mr Hanson, who stumbled over to them in a manner that made it clear he had drunk at least as much punch as Adelaide, and likely a good deal more.

“There you are, Miss Richmond! Come! My toes have quite recovered. You must dance the next with me, for I am quite pining away without you.”

She gave him her hand, eager to leave behind the humiliating exchange, and could not help but laugh as he pulled her with him, shouting and gesturing at his guests to get out of his way. As they joined the line, she caught Lady Tipton’s eye. Her aunt’s expression was poised, but her fingers were working frantically at her necklace. Adelaide felt a twinge of alarm.

Another couple joined the line beside them, and when Adelaide realised the gentleman was Oakley, she asked him what was troubling her aunt.

Oakley gave her a pained look. “She was hoping to dissuade you before you joined the line. You refused the last dance with Mr Dunnock. He will take it as a slight that you are dancing with someone else now.”

“Oh! I did not realise.” Adelaide searched the line of dancers and discovered the gentleman in question at the far end, glaring at her with undisguised displeasure. “Oh my.”

Mr Hanson laughed. “Ignore him. He’s a pompous ass anyhow. My sister should never have invited him.” He took up her hands. “Come, Miss Richmond. Let us have some more practice!”

It was not until the carriage ride home that Lady Tipton had the opportunity to fully explain to Adelaide the grievous slight she had afforded Mr Dunnock.

“I beg you would forgive me! Would that I could stop embarrassing you! I told you we should not have come.”

“No, no, it is I who should apologise,” her ladyship replied. “I did not explain properly. Some of these conventions are so commonplace, it does not occur to me that they require explaining, but I ought to have thought of it. Still, there was no harm done, and you will know for next time.”

“Mr Dunnock would not agree there was no harm done.”

“My dear, this is one of those occasions that you will feel the benefit of having an uncle who is an earl. Mr Dunnock’s affront will be quickly forgot. Mr Hanson’s opinion mattered a little more, since it was his ball, but he seemed to find the whole thing diverting.”

“He was very kind. Even though I must have bruised his toes terribly. I did not show myself to great advantage in any of the dances, did I?”

Oakley snorted. “Neither did I. I never do. Two left feet must run in the family.”

Lady Tipton gave a little chuckle. “They do. I cannot speak for Robert or Damian, but Charles is an atrocious dancer.”

They all laughed, though it felt to Adelaide more like camaraderie than real amusement, for she did not believe they could truly be happy about her performance.

“Cease fretting,” Oakley said. “You gave a good account of yourself this evening. I heard nothing but praise for you.”

“Nor I,” Lady Tipton agreed. “And it will get easier, now you have crossed this first hurdle. You will see.”

Adelaide was not convinced, but she had no wish to disappoint her family any further and so did not argue. Besides, they were right that Mr Hanson had not seemed to object to any of her gaucherie. He had merely laughed it off. She only wished his laughter had felt as companionable as that which she had moments earlier shared with Oakley and her aunt, and not completely disinterested.

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

So made up was Adelaide's mind that the previous day's foray into society had been a disaster, it did not occur to her that the stream of callers she could hear arriving downstairs had come to wait upon her. She was busy wrapping the brush she had bought for Patty when her door burst open.

"Bloody hell!"

"Adelaide!" Lady Tipton admonished as she thrust her head around the door.

"I am so sorry! You startled me."

Her aunt dismissed the matter with a shake of her head. "Why are you not coming down?"

"I did not know you wished me to."

"Never mind what I wish. There is a swarm of young men in my parlour, all here to see my niece, and my niece is idling in her bedchamber. Make haste!"

"What do they want with me?"

Her aunt came farther into the room and looked at her with a raised eyebrow. "What do you think? "

Adelaide blushed at the implication. "What am I to say to them? What am I to do?"

“I should keep doing whatever it is you were doing last night, dear. They were all evidently pleased enough by it to come in search of more. Do try not to curse, though.”

Adelaide managed to avoid any uncivil outbursts that morning, and the next, and even the next. That was, regrettably, the extent of her triumph. Unhelpful though it was, her aunt’s suggestion that she conduct herself as she had the night of the ball turned out to be remarkably accurate, for it seemed she was unable to act in any way other than gauche, bordering on vulgar, no matter how hard she tried not to. Indeed, it seemed the harder she tried, the more vulgar she became, her anxiety defeating all her good intentions. Nevertheless, though she spent three consecutive mornings in an agony of embarrassment, the callers would keep coming.

Mr Lyle came but once but stayed a full hour, which Lady Tipton assured Adelaide was beyond presumptuous. Mr Keech called twice, bringing flowers the first time and his mother the second. Mr Jones came to invite Adelaide for a walk in the park, which Oakley declined on her behalf at a beseeching look from her. Mr Levy invited the whole family to dinner—and was refused by Lady Tipton. Even Mr Dunnock called to assure Adelaide that no ill feeling persisted and to issue an open request for another dance when the opportunity arose.

Of all of them, Mr Hanson was the most persistent. He came every day at the same time and always managed to seat himself closest to Adelaide. He was the least troubled by her frequent blunders, always dismissing them with a laugh whenever they could not be overlooked. Indeed, he laughed at most things and passed the majority of his visits making sport of the other men’s attempts to win her favour.

“Of course Miss Richmond does not wish to attend the opera with you, Rodders,” he said during his fourth call. “She has no doubt heard about the time you fell asleep and snored all the way through Tenducci’s finest air.”

Sir Rodney reddened and glowered sullenly at him. "I was not snoring. I had a cold. As you well know."

"Oh yes, you might be right. I was likely thinking of the time I fell asleep during that poetry recital you gave that went on for five hours."

"It was ten minutes."

"Do you write poetry, sir?" Adelaide enquired.

"No, madam. I was reading Wordsworth. It was a charitable event."

"It certainly was, for they allowed you to speak at it," Mr Hanson interrupted, though he receded somewhat when Sir Rodney gave an exasperated sigh. "I jest, old fruit! Do not take it to heart. No doubt Miss Richmond would prefer to listen to you mumble a few sonnets than wheeze your way through an entire opera."

"I really think I ought to be allowed to decide that for myself," Adelaide said testily.

Mr Hanson looked mildly taken aback, but it was no more than the blink of an eye before his next joke occurred to him, and he was off again, amusing himself with another witticism .

The visit mercifully ended not long after, and both gentlemen departed.

"Is something the matter?" Oakley enquired when they were gone. "You scarcely said a word except to bite Hanson's head off at the end there."

"I beg your pardon. I did not mean to insult another of your friends, but he seems incapable of taking anything seriously."

“I did warn you.”

“You did.” She let out a sigh. “And perhaps I am being unfair. It may only be that I have seen so much of him. He would probably be less tiresome in smaller doses.”

Oakley popped a grape in his mouth and shrugged. “That is well. No one said you were obliged to take him in larger doses. Choose someone else to marry.”

Adelaide stared at him, attempting to divine some aspect of teasing. There was none. “I am afraid I do not take your meaning.”

“If you do not think you would do well with Hanson, pick elsewhere. It is not as though you are limited for choice—you have been inundated with callers this week.”

“Callers, yes. Not suitors. I have been to one ball, and you would have me choose my future husband?”

“You may as well begin thinking about it.”

Adelaide sat agape, dumbfounded with dismay. “I have only been a part of this family for a matter of weeks, and you would parcel me off to someone else already? Are you that eager to get rid of me?”

Oakley rolled his eyes. “You are right—you have been spending entirely too much time with Hanson, for you have assumed his propensity for gross exaggeration. I never said you must marry now . But you must understand that you will need to marry.”

“Why? May I not stay with you?”

“Surely you would not wish to—not indefinitely. Do you not desire children?”

“Upon my life, I have hardly had time to settle my feelings on being your sister, let alone on whether I should like to be a mother!”

“I comprehend that—truly, I do—but time is not on our side. We are not sure of your true age, but if we presume it to be twenty, and we take your history into account, there is good reason for not delaying an alliance. As your brother, it behoves me to ensure you make a suitable match.”

He almost swaggered as he made this presumptuous claim to her fate, and it was the most he had ever looked like Adelaide’s stepbrothers. She repressed the urge to shrink away from him. “You have only been my brother for a grand total of about two minutes. You have not yet earned the right to tell me what to do.”

“I am not attempting to be some sort of tyrant. I will do everything I can to accommodate your wishes—but it is not only my right, it is my duty to ensure you are well situated. You are my responsibility now.”

“Only because you got me dismissed from my post.”

“I make no apology for that. You belong with your family.”

“Except, apparently, you do not want me!”

“Do not be absurd.”

Feeling a sudden surge of an all-too-familiar emotion, Adelaide pushed herself to her feet, but Oakley put himself between her and the door.

“Adelaide, please, I did not mean to distress you.”

“No, I am sure you thought it would give me nothing but comfort to hear that I must

marry a stranger before my reprehensible past is discovered and I become a pariah with whom you will be lumbered for the rest of your life. Thank you. You are all compassion, Brother . Excuse me.”

When he did not move, she pushed past him and strode out of the room, slamming the door behind her in the hope it would deter him from following. She had known this would happen—though, even in her worst imaginings, she had not thought he would tire of her as quickly as this. She ought to have known better than to allow herself to become attached to any part of this family. She arrived in her bedchamber and was about to slam that door also, but something prevented her. She had run here in search of sanctuary, but the recognition that no part of this new world felt secure overwhelmed her with the desire to be as far away from it as possible. On a whim, she dug out her old boots from her trunk, shoved them on her feet and a bonnet on her head, then walked down the stairs and directly out of the front door.

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

She walked a long way. Far enough that her feet began to smart. Far enough that the familiar merged into the unknown. Far enough that when it began to drizzle, she knew not which way to turn for shelter. It would have been better had she lost herself in the slums of St Giles, for at least there she might have known where to find a friendly face or two. There was no help to be had wherever this place was—only the looming frontages of vast, closed-up houses and the disapproving stares of strangers.

“Miss Richmond?”

Adelaide spun around. Relief warred with resignation upon seeing the Earl of Kemerton hastening towards her. It stood to reason that he should be the one to discover her wandering aimlessly about, damp and bedraggled, wearing nothing but a morning gown and mangy old boots.

She dipped a desultory curtsy. “My lord. ”

“I thought I recognised you. What has happened? Are you in any difficulty?”

He had removed his coat as he approached, and she was about to spurn his unspoken offer of draping it around her shoulders, except when she felt the warmth of it, she could not bring herself to refuse. She smiled her thanks and pulled it more tightly closed.

“I am lost,” she admitted reluctantly. “Would you be so kind as to point me in the right direction to get home?”

“To Chiltern Court?” he asked dubiously.

“No, we have come to stay at Tipton House.”

He frowned but did not explain why. “I shall escort you myself. This way.” He gestured for her to go with him. “Have you been separated from your friends?”

“What friends?” she retorted without thinking. Then, more collectedly, added, “Forgive my ill humour. No, I have not been separated from anybody. I walked out alone.”

He did not say anything. He did not need to; she knew he disapproved. She wished she did not care but nevertheless heard herself making excuses.

“Oakley and I had a disagreement. I left the house in a pique.”

Still, he said nothing, and it was with a sinking heart that Adelaide realised she had yet again admitted to running away.

“I know what you are thinking, but I do not always bolt when things are difficult. ’Tis only that I was in high dudgeon, and Tipton House did not feel like much of a refuge.”

“You do not need to justify yourself to me, madam. It is perfectly understandable that you should wish to find solace. I am only sorry that you could not find it at Tipton House. Would that you had been allowed to stay and find it at Chiltern Court.”

“You consider me better suited to life in the country, I suppose? Unworthy of moving in the same circles as you?”

The slight pause before he responded made Adelaide think he might have been

repressing a sigh.

“Miss Richmond, if I may—your propensity to assume everyone is looking down on you is wholly unjustified. I meant only that it would have been better had you been allowed more time to accustom yourself to your altered circumstances. Society can be a hostile place for anyone unused to its peculiarities.”

“Precisely why we thought it would be a good idea for me to practise while London was quiet.”

“It is rarely quiet at this time of year any more.”

“So I discovered at Mr Hanson’s ball.”

“Mr Hanson?” he asked with a distinct note of disdain. “How long were you in town before he issued that invitation?”

“No time at all, for he came to Chiltern Court to invite us.”

He looked at her sharply. Then, although he gave a short, sardonic laugh and shook his head, he said no more.

“Have you forgotten that you also came to Chiltern Court, my lord? ”

“And left directly, once I comprehended the delicacy of the situation.”

Adelaide was caught unawares by a flicker of relief that it had not been her incivility that chased him away. She pushed the thought aside. “I did not consider Mr Hanson’s visit intrusive. Why should he not show his support? He is a good friend of Oakley’s.”

“I know.” His tone dripped with disapproval.

“You do not like him?”

“Not especially.”

“Because he is not titled?”

That earned her another frown. “No—because he has a reprehensibly cavalier approach to life.”

His censure so closely mirrored Adelaide’s own misgivings that it shamed her, for Mr Hanson had been nothing but attentive since the first moment of their acquaintance. “That is as may be, but he is the only person who has shown me any kindness since I arrived here!”

She regretted her petulant words as soon as they were out of her mouth. What an absurd thing to say to a man who had lent her his coat and was getting damper by the minute for the want of it. She risked a glance at his face. What he made of her outburst was unclear, but his unwillingness to return her gaze was telling.

Something in his aspect captured her attention. Perhaps he was clenching his teeth. Whatever it was, it gave even greater definition to the contours of his face—and being a face that was by no means in need of enhancement, it was rather an arresting sight. She did not realise how enthralled she was by it until he spoke .

“If I had known you were here, I certainly would have come as well to offer my support—to you and Oakley. I regret that I have been out of town until today.”

Too flustered by her own distraction to think of any better response, Adelaide mumbled, “You are getting wet.”

“Not very.”

“Still...” She looked around and saw an alcove in the plinth at the foot of a nearby building. “We could wait under there until it eases off.”

He fixed her with a curious look for a moment or two, then inclined his head and altered their path thither.

It was a smaller recess than it had looked, and heaven to goodness he filled the space! A full head and shoulders taller than she and seeming as solid as the walls enclosing them. Adelaide had known farmhands with less muscular builds.

“What did you argue about with Oakley?”

“Pardon?” She pressed herself into the cold stone and attempted to sound composed. “Oh, husbands. He thinks I should marry soon, what with everything as it is. But, well...we are not in accord.”

“One must assume he has your best interests at heart.”

“Foisting me onto yet another family to save him from having to care for me feels very much in his best interests, not mine.”

“A man need not relinquish all affection for his sister when she leaves home. I cannot but think it would be impossible to do. It saddens me that life has taught you otherwise.”

Adelaide had tried to convince herself that she had revealed nothing of significance about her childhood to Lord Kemerton during her outburst in Chiltern Court’s folly. With this remark, he confirmed that she had. Mortified, she knew not how to respond and waited self-consciously for him to say something else. When he did, it was with a

startlingly consoling tone.

“I have known Oakley since I was a young boy, and I have never seen him more animated than when Mr Bentley brought the proof that you are a Richmond. He is elated to have found you. I rather think his eagerness to find you a good match shows too much affection than too little. I suspect he is keen to act the part of brother. He is the best of men, but he can be a little impetuous.”

It was generous praise—and just. It was, after all, Oakley who had rescued her from a life of service, believing in her in the face of every reasonable objection—and doing nothing to earn her distrust.

She twisted her mouth ruefully. “A defect that seems to run in the family.”

“I would not say that going for a walk was disastrously reckless,” he said with a small chuckle. “Even in the rain.”

“No, I—” She floundered. His smile was magnificent. “I meant coming to London. What you said before was right—it was a mistake to come so soon. I have made a fool of myself at every turn, always saying or doing the wrong thing. And I cannot dance for toffee. So much for being a Richmond—I am walking proof that nobility is not defined by birth, for impetuosity and two left feet are the only family traits I can boast. ”

“And extraordinarily fine eyes.”

She was once more at a loss for how to reply—even more so when he smiled again at her discomposure.

“Come, it has stopped raining. Let us get you home. We are not far away now.”

Adelaide shrugged out of his coat and handed it back to him as they set out. “Are you sure? I was walking for a lot longer than this before you found me.”

She had walked in circles, apparently, for they turned but three more corners before arriving at Tipton House.

Oakley leapt to his feet when they entered the parlour. “Adelaide, I am heartily sorry for—Kem! I did not know you were in town. What brings you to Tipton House?”

Lord Kemerton gave Adelaide the subtlest sidelong glance before answering calmly, “Do I need a reason to call on my friends?”

Adelaide sent him the briefest of smiles in return. It seemed Oakley was unaware she had left the house, and she was thankful Lord Kemerton did not mean to expose her.

“Of course not,” Oakley replied. “You are very welcome. And as it is you, I shall not delay the two things I must say to my sister.” He turned to her. “Will you allow me to apologise for being the most ham-fisted idiot of a brother? I dearly wish to do my best for you, but I allowed myself to get carried away. Can you forgive me?”

For all that Adelaide had thought him like her stepbrothers before, with this apology, he proved himself as different from them as he could possibly be, for none of the Bookers had ever shown the slightest contrition for the distress they caused her. “Maybe by dinnertime,” she said with a grin. “What was the second thing?”

His countenance took a more serious turn. “I have received a note from my father.” Gesturing for her and Lord Kemerton to join him in sitting, he retrieved an open letter from the table. “It seems the discovery that his brother had another child besides me prompted him to investigate whether there are more.”

Adelaide baulked. She had wondered often over the years whether she had brothers

and sisters from her natural parents, but the discovery of one had quite banished the question of others from her head. She glanced at Lord Kemerton. He was watching her with concern, which to her surprise, she found rather comforting.

“Bentley was not Father’s man of business when I came into the family, but a Mr Linford,” Oakley continued. “It was this Linford who retrieved me from the orphanage after somebody who worked there wrote to my father to inform him I was in their care. But Linford is long dead, and unable to shed any more light on the matter, and therefore Bentley has been to the orphanage himself. He has discovered that there used to be two buildings—one each for the boys and girls. The girls’ quarters burnt down in 1799.”

“The year we were orphaned,” Adelaide whispered.

Oakley nodded. “The girls were all put up temporarily by neighbouring families until permanent homes could be found for them. I have no brothers on file, but all the girls’ records were lost in the fire.”

“Mine were not. ”

“Because the Bookers adopted you in May, and the fire happened in June.”

“So, there is no way of knowing whether you have other sisters,” Lord Kemerton said.

“No—and we might never find out.”

“I do not care,” Adelaide declared. Both men looked askance at her, but she did not quail, for she meant it. “I have changed brothers and sisters quite enough for one lifetime. No matter how many I began with, I was separated from all of them when my parents died. The Bookers took me in because they were childless, so it was only

me until Mrs Booker had a baby of her own, and I was an older sister for the days until they both died. Then Mr Booker remarried, and his new wife brought two of her own children to the marriage, so I became the youngest of three. Then two more babies came along, and I became number three of five. Then I ran away, and all four of them washed their hands of me. Now I have but one brother, but he is genuinely mine, and he is by far my favourite. He will most certainly suffice.”

Oakley could not have looked better pleased. “And there I was worried that you would hate me after my performance this morning!”

“You are fortunate indeed that she does not,” Lord Kemerton remarked. “I am sure you do not deserve such clemency.” He did not appear to be joking, and Adelaide wondered whether he had been angrier with his friend than his earlier defence of him indicated.

“How do you know? You were not even here,” Oakley retorted .

“It is a safe assumption,” Lord Kemerton replied more sportively.

A thought occurred to Adelaide. “You had better hope that if we do have other sisters, they also have violet eyes or a striking resemblance to one of your ancestors.”

“Why?”

“How else will you know you are related? If you do not know who she is, you might fall in love with her.”

Oakley’s face fell. “That is not funny.”

Lord Kemerton evidently thought it was, for he began laughing. “It would be just your luck, though.”

“You can stifle it, too!” When Adelaide giggled, Oakley turned to her, shaking his head incredulously. “It is a good job you are my only sister, for if I had another, you would most certainly not be my favourite!”

It ran on that way for a while, with Oakley good-naturedly accepting their teasing. Their earlier schism notwithstanding, Adelaide was coming to deeply appreciate his easy manners—and even more deeply, his determined esteem for her. She was inordinately grateful to Lord Kemerton for reminding her of it. He must care a good deal about Oakley to take such an interest in whether he and his new sister got along. As she watched him smiling his ridiculously handsome smile at her brother, she decided that perhaps he was not quite so objectionable after all.

### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Lord Kemerton had been correct when he said London was not quiet at this time of year. Adelaide and Oakley received numerous other invitations over the next few days, though Lady Tipton carefully curated which were accepted. She claimed it had to do with the distinction of rank; Adelaide suspected it was to minimise her exposure to the less forbearing members of the ton.

The shopping trip with Miss Hanson and Miss Nugent came and went with little ado. They were kind enough yet, despite Adelaide's dearest wish to make friends of them, there was no overlooking the fact that they were both as dull as ditchwater. They had never travelled, never lived in the world, never experienced anything but luxury and indulgence. As a consequence, they had nothing of note to talk about, and the excursion turned out to be the nadir of Adelaide's week.

The zenith was the Countess of Trowbridge's ball. The invitation called it an 'intimate, autumnal dance'. In the event, it made Mr Hanson's gathering look like an impromptu after-supper jig. For a start, her house was twice the size of his, and it was filled with easily twice as many people. Immediately upon arriving, Lady Tipton found a seat with some other matrons, leaving Oakley to escort Adelaide around the room.

"Is this more like the balls that take place during the Season?"

"Getting there, though they can be much larger. There were over three hundred people at the Duke of Pevensey's ball last year." He pulled her in a different direction abruptly, giving the whispered explanation, "You will learn that balls of this size are

often just an exercise in avoiding the people you do not wish to see.”

“Who are you avoiding?”

“Lady Veronica. I have no wish to see her parading around with her new beau.”

“Should you like me to trip her up in the dance if I get the opportunity?”

“Yes, please,” he replied with a grin, although a moment later, he stopped grinning.

“You do know I am only joking?”

She gave a burst of laughter—far less elegant than Lady Tipton had taught her, but beyond her ability to repress. “I am not sure whether to be honoured or offended that you think me capable of it.”

“Honoured enough not to be offended—offended enough not to attempt it.”

She was still smiling at this when Mr Hanson stepped into their path.

“Miss Richmond! I thought it must be you. None of these other ladies ever enjoy a joke as well as you. You are in exceedingly fine looks this evening. And you have not scrubbed up too shabbily either, old boy,” he added, giving Oakley a playful punch to the shoulder.

Adelaide thanked him, hoping her embarrassment did not show and privately resolving to laugh aloud no more for the rest of the evening.

“If you have only just arrived, might I be fortunate enough to sneak in a request for the first two dances before anyone else?”

“I am afraid I am already engaged for the first set, sir.”

“Dash it! Some lucky devil wasted no time. The second, then?”

She agreed but was distracted when Oakley began gesturing for somebody else to join them. Adelaide turned to see who, and her stomach did a funny little pirouette when she espied Lord Kemerton approaching. She had never seen him in full dress before, and he was quite a sight to behold. He seemed somehow taller even than usual, and sleeker, his broad frame precisely tailored into an exquisitely fitted ensemble. His eyes were fixed intently upon her.

“Good evening, Miss Richmond, Oakley.” In a colder tone, he added, “Hanson.”

“My lord,” the latter replied, all ease and friendliness.

Oakley detached Adelaide’s hand from his arm. “Good. Now you are here, I can go and find Lady Eugenie. She will think I have forgotten our dance.” He hastened away into the crowd.

“You are already acquainted, I see,” Mr Hanson remarked, somewhat less amiably than before. “I am pleased for you, my lord—Miss Richmond is a rare jewel. We first met some weeks ago at Chiltern Court, did we not, madam? Indeed, it was I who persuaded her to come to town.”

“Was it, indeed?” Lord Kemerton replied stonily.

“You are surprised?”

“Not in the least.”

Mr Hanson began talking about the times they had been in company, but Adelaide stopped listening and shifted nervously on her feet. As Oakley had warned, there, cutting across the room in front of her, was a woman she would much rather avoid.

“Is something the matter?” Lord Kemerton enquired.

Mr Hanson stopped talking and followed Adelaide’s gaze. “Ha! That’s a good jape, ’tis Lady Grisham. I heard Oakley got himself in a spot of bother at her estate a few months ago. He had better keep out of her path if he knows what is good for him.”

His bark of laughter brought the baroness’s head whipping around to look at their party. Adelaide cast a desperate glance at Lord Kemerton, but he only smiled reassuringly.

“If you will excuse us, Hanson. There is someone I should like to introduce Miss Richmond to.”

One of the musicians struck a note.

“Have a care, my lord. Miss Richmond will miss her first dance if you keep her to yourself much longer.”

“Since that dance is with me, I do not anticipate a problem.”

Adelaide was sorry to see Mr Hanson’s disappointment, but there was nothing for it—she needed to escape her former employer’s notice before everything came unstuck.

Lord Kemerton led her to the far corner of the room, where a group of men were gathered at the refreshment table. She recognised one of them as the Earl of Worthe. He had stayed at High Brook some years ago, and he was not the sort of man one easily forgot, for he could give Lord Kemerton some serious competition in looks. She thought it unlikely he would know her—she had been but a stillroom maid at the time—but it did little to diminish her agitation.

“Miss Richmond, may I introduce my good friend Lord Worthe and his brother Mr Ashley. Gentlemen, this is Miss Adelaide Richmond, Oakley’s cousin.”

“When did Oakley acquire a cousin?” Mr Ashley enquired.

“One presumes at birth,” Lord Worthe quipped, then bowed over Adelaide’s hand. “Utterly charmed to meet you, Miss Richmond. Alas, the first set is almost upon us, and I must away directly to find my partner.”

“No matter, you have served your purpose now in any case, Worthe,” Lord Kemerton replied. “Our path is clear once more.”

“Oh? And from whom have I been hiding you?”

“Lady Grisham.”

“I do not blame you, then. Terrifying woman!”

Still anxiously searching the room for her, Adelaide made a noise of ambiguity. “Less so when she is on her back beneath the Bishop of Alton.” Only when a chorus of strangled exclamations erupted behind her did she comprehend what she had done. She turned back to face the group, her face flaming. “So I have heard.”

Lord Worthe laughed first and hardest. “What a breath of fresh air you are, Miss Richmond. If you are not already engaged for every dance, I should be delighted if you would honour me with a set at some point in the evening.”

His request was followed by one from his brother, and Adelaide accepted them both before being led by Lord Kemerton to join the line of dancers.

“I should not have said that. I am excessively nervous.”

“Do not concern yourself. We have all heard the rumour. It is only that no one has ever been brave enough to say it aloud before.”

“I was not brave enough to see it when I stumbled across them in High Brook’s chapel.” She glanced at him, then laughed despite herself upon discovering he was equally amused. “Thank you for rescuing me from her.”

“You are welcome, although I do not think she would have recognised you. You look sublime this evening.”

Adelaide was not sure he could have heard her thanks, for it came out as an almost inaudible whisper. She found her voice again when Lady Trowbridge called the dance—a quadrille with a baffling arrangement of steps.

“I hope you do not live to regret this, my lord. I did say, if you recall, that I do not dance well.”

Lord Kemerton smiled a smile that could have banished a thousand qualms. “And I said, if you recall, that I do not anticipate any problems. ”

His confidence was not misplaced. He was a more proficient dancer than anyone else she had partnered, and when he was not directing her with surreptitious nods and nudges, he was manfully leading her through the figures. So effortless did he render the activity that for the first time, Adelaide truly enjoyed it. She was able to appreciate the music, and her fewer mistakes relieved her of concentrating on her footwork and allowed her to talk more. Indeed, if it were not that she forgot what she was saying every time she felt the heat of Lord Kemerton’s hands, she would have been quite the conversationalist.

“Are you feeling any more settled at Tipton House?” he asked during one of the quieter parts of the dance.

“A little, thank you. It will take time to really feel like home—I recognise that now.”

“Do you miss your old life?”

“It may surprise you to hear, but yes. Bits of it, in any case. It does not help that my aunt does not like me to talk about it.”

“Did you leave many friends behind when you moved away?”

“I did not really have time for friends. But the one I did have was wonderful. Her name is Patty.”

“Have you been able to keep in touch?”

Adelaide shook her head, and when the next figure took her dancing close behind him, whispered, “She does not know her letters.”

He did not reply. Worried she had put a damper on their pleasant exchange, she said as cheerily as she could, “I shall make new friends in time, I am sure.”

“That I do not doubt. ”

When the set ended, he led her back towards Lady Tipton’s table. Adelaide thought she could feel someone watching her and turned to see Lady Sophia glaring at her venomously. She looked away quickly, abruptly conscious of her arm looped through Lord Kemerton’s.

“That, madam, was the most I have enjoyed a dance in a very long time,” he said to her, oblivious.

“That was the most I have enjoyed a dance...ever.”

“I am delighted to hear it.” In a lower, more serious voice, he added, “I hope you know you can count me among your friends.”

“I do, I...” Adelaide knew not when he had gone from conceited and uncivil to gentle and attentive in her estimation, but the transformation was apparently complete. “Yes, I do.” She was startled out of a rather overwhelming sensation of warmth by the appearance of Mr Hanson.

“You have had your turn now, Lord Kemerton. You must give the rest of us a chance to enjoy Miss Richmond’s company.”

Mr Hanson extended his hand to receive Adelaide’s, and after thanking Lord Kemerton for the dance, she took it and was immediately whisked away.

“Earls, eh? Think they own everything,” Mr Hanson joked.

“They generally do.”

“True! Though that one most certainly cannot stake any form of claim on you . He is practically engaged to Lady Sophia.”

“Yes. I had almost forgotten about her.” She could have done without the unpleasant reminder moments before .

This dance ought to have been easier, for there were far fewer complicated figures involved. Adelaide was nevertheless obliged to concentrate carefully on remembering them, and her conversation suffered for it. Mr Hanson was too good to remark on her distraction and carried on the discussion almost as well without her. By the end, she could recall little of what he had said, but he did not seem to mind. He even extracted the promise of a second dance from her before returning her to her aunt’s chaperonage afterwards.

The complacency with which these two encounters suffused Adelaide persisted for much of the evening. Until supper, to be precise. Oakley escorted her and Lady Tipton to a table and left to fetch them both a plate of food. Everybody nearest to them quieted when they sat down, seemingly unwilling to meet Adelaide's eye. The reason soon became obvious. At the next table, Miss Hanson and Miss Nugent were entertaining the other guests with a noisy account of their recent shopping trip.

"She was in raptures over a swatch of the commonest sarcenet. I declare, it was as though she had never seen its like before."

"I should not be surprised if she had not. From what I can tell, she must have grown up in the wilderness. She profanes like a farmer."

"She is intimate friends with her servants."

"She cannot ride, you know. Her poor cousin is having to teach her."

"Ignore them," Lady Tipton said under her breath. "Rise above it, and nobody else will pay it any mind either. "

"She speaks French, I grant you," Miss Hanson said.

Miss Nugent snorted inelegantly. "If you can call it French. Madame Beaujolais could not understand her. I had to translate."

Mr Hanson wandered past their table as the ripple of ill-concealed laughter this remark produced spilled over to more of the surrounding tables. Lady Tipton called him over, her tone furious despite how quietly she spoke.

"Your sister is engaged in traducing my niece. I should be obliged if you would make her desist forthwith."

Mr Hanson glanced at his sister then smiled ruefully at her ladyship. “I shall talk to her, if that is what your ladyship desires, but I beg you would not concern yourself. My sister is all bluster. Nobody ever listens to her.”

But everybody was listening. When Mr Hanson momentarily drew everybody’s attention by approaching her, Adelaide fled from the room. She made it two yards beyond the door before being accosted.

“Miss Adelaide Richmond.”

“I am afraid I do not know you,” she lied. She knew perfectly well who the stunningly attractive woman was—had changed her bed linens many times—had even emptied her chamber pot. The same woman who had watched her walk across the room with Lord Kemerton, hostility writ plainly across her countenance.

“My name is Lady Sophia, and you may not know me, but I know all about you. You are the upstart little nobody who has come from nothing to assume a position she does not deserve and cannot possibly fulfil. You will never make friends of these people. Why do you not crawl back to where you came from and allow the adults to get on with their lives without interruption?”

It seemed suddenly as though it was Mrs Booker standing in front of her, spewing her usual vitriol. Adelaide wished she could crawl away, into the nook at the back of her closet where she had used to hide until the world forgot about her.

“Sophia, that is enough.”

Where Lord Kemerton had come from, Adelaide neither knew nor cared; but he was there, and he was evidently furious. Lady Sophia must have known it as well, for she flushed deeply red.

“It is obvious to everyone that she has been brought up by savages,” she railed at him. “She does not belong here.”

“You ought to be ashamed,” Lord Kemerton said balefully. “I expected better of you. Come, Miss Richmond.” He took Adelaide gently by the arm and led her away. “My deepest apologies. I ought to have foreseen that she would dislike our dance.”

Of course! He had asked Adelaide for the first set days ago, when she was still anxious about making a good impression. It was a thoughtful gesture, but she recognised now that he ought to have danced the first with his intended. No wonder Lady Sophia was vexed.

“Adelaide, what on earth is going on?” cried Oakley, hastening towards them.

Lord Kemerton passed Adelaide into his care. “Get her out of here.” Then he turned on his heel and strode back towards Lady Sophia, no doubt to make amends for slighting her .

Oakley instructed a footman to have his carriage brought forwards and then led Adelaide outside. Lady Tipton arrived moments later and began shushing her consolingly as she wiped her face with a handkerchief—the first indication Adelaide had of the tears she was crying.

“Please take me home, Oakley.”

“We are leaving now.”

“I mean to Chiltern Court. I should not have come. I am not ready for this.” She was not sure she ever would be. She would certainly never be as well suited to society as the beautiful Lady Sophia, with her flawless countenance, luxurious chestnut hair, noble bearing, impeccable upbringing. And paragon future husband. She was not

worthy of any of it.

“I do not belong here.”

### CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Their removal to the country was expeditious; within days they were once more entrenched at Chiltern Court, the drawbridge well and truly drawn up. That was to say, Lady Tipton had decreed no visitors would be permitted until Adelaide was fully settled.

What she had meant was fully transformed. To ensure there was no repeat of the debacle in London, all Adelaide's unsophisticated habits were to be eradicated and all reminiscences about her past forbidden, even amongst the family. Masters were hired to advance her learning and teach her the pianoforte; Oakley was encouraged to fulfil his promise of returning her to full confidence in the saddle; Lady Tipton introduced her to the management of the household. Days rolled into weeks amidst an endless stream of instruction, but the more of her old life that was brushed under the carpet, the less Adelaide felt like herself—and the longer she was prevented from putting her manifold lessons into practice, the harder it was to know who she was supposed to become.

November came and went with not a single caller to liven things up. Adelaide could have sworn she saw Lord Kemerton once, striding towards the house from the stables. He was not announced into the saloon, however, and his name not mentioned by anyone at dinner; thus she glumly accepted it must have been one of Lord Tipton's friends. He received visitors still, but they always remained sequestered in his study.

If her aunt rued the want of society, she concealed it remarkably well. Oakley conducted all his engagements elsewhere. Adelaide was sure he thought himself discreet, and Lord and Lady Tipton might be fooled, but she had seen enough people

bedevilled by drink to know when someone was nursing an aching head.

“Will you take me with you next time?” she asked him one day, when he was riding beside her with his eyes all but closed against the low winter sun.

“What is your meaning? I have brought you with me this time. And all the times before.”

“I do not mean riding. I mean when you next go into Barford.”

He prised one eye open to squint at her. “I ought to have known better than to think you were fooled.”

“Will you take me, then? Please? I shall go distracted without something to do soon. An assembly is hardly comparable to a London ball. No one will care how badly either of us dance.”

He chuckled. “I have not been attending assemblies, Adelaide. There are other places available for a gentleman’s diversion. No, not those sorts of places!” he added hastily when she gasped. “I meant clubs, card dens, cock fights, that sort of thing.”

“Then can you take me with you to one of those?”

“Upon my word, I cannot, and I will not! You do not belong in any establishment of the kind—not in this life or your previous one.”

Adelaide nodded. “No gentlemen’s pursuits. I understand.”

After that, Adelaide directed her petitions towards her aunt. Her pleas to be introduced to more of the local families fell on deaf ears, but a few days before Christmas, Lady Tipton relented and invited her to help deliver seasonal baskets to

the tenants.

The row of cottages they visited was less than a mile from the house, but they nevertheless rode in the carriage. Evidently her ladyship considered a certain level of pomp compulsory, for she had worn a hat that almost filled the first kitchen they entered. She also did not drink the tea that the woman who lived there poured for them, which Adelaide thought unpardonably rude until she sipped it herself. She could not help but grimace at the bitterness of leaves that tasted as though they had been steeped a hundred times. When Lady Tipton went with the woman's eldest daughter to admire the gurgling infant in the crib in the corner, Adelaide whispered an apology to the woman.

"I beg your pardon for pulling a face at the tea. I hope I did not offend you."

"No, ma'am," she replied tightly, her cool expression indicating quite the opposite .

"Truly, I understand better than you would think that not everyone can afford the luxury of brand-new leaves. I have not always lived as I do now."

"I know. I've heard."

Adelaide baulked. "What have you heard?"

"Enough to know that you've no right turning your nose up at anything I serve you." With a nasty snarl, the woman got up from the table and went to coo over her baby with the others.

Adelaide said as little as possible in all the remaining cottages, aware thereafter of how everyone seemed grateful for Lady Tipton's condescension but indifferent to hers.

“You were excessively quiet all morning,” her aunt remarked on the short ride home. “I thought you were desperate for society.”

“I do not think any of those women liked me being there,” she replied glumly.

“Do not take it to heart, my dear. Women of noble birth do not belong in their world any more than they belong in ours. It is always an intrusion, but provided such visits are kept brief, it is bearable for everyone.”

Adelaide nodded. “Keep one’s stay brief. I shall bear that in mind.” She turned disconsolately to stare out of the window and wondered where, exactly, she did belong, for it did not appear to be in any of the places she had been so far in her life.

As they approached Chiltern Court, she saw, with a start, that a familiar figure was exiting the house. His face was obscured, for he was reaching up to put his hat on, but Adelaide thought she recognised him all the same. “Is that Lord Kemerton?”

“I do not believe so,” her aunt replied, yet as she spoke, the man lowered his arm, looked directly at Adelaide, and smiled. There was no mistaking him then. A happy laugh bubbled up to her lips, and she raised her hand to wave, but her pleasure was short-lived. His eyes moved from her to Lady Tipton, his smile vanished, and with a quick nod, he continued to the stables.

“Is he leaving?”

“I expect it was only one of your uncle’s acquaintances. Come along now, out you get. It is too cold to be dallying out here.”

Adelaide walked into the house, her thoughts awhirl. Perhaps her aunt was right, and it had not been Lord Kemerton at all. Yet, why, if she was to imagine she had seen anyone, should it be him? Would that she had mistaken one of the miserable women

that morning for Patty, but they had all stubbornly remained their own unwelcoming selves.

The puzzle was solved a few weeks later, for he came back again. Christmas had passed with little ceremony in the meantime, and Adelaide was sitting at her bedroom window, staring at the grey sky, when a carriage rolled up the drive. Her heart gave a little leap when Lord Kemerton stepped out. It continued to race as she left her room and, from the landing, saw a footman escort him into the house. When nobody sent for her, she tramped indignantly down the stairs and threw open the saloon doors herself, ready to complain at being left out. The room was empty .

A little sneaking around revealed him—and Oakley, from the sound of it—to be in Lord Tipton's study. Adelaide returned to the saloon and waited while they concluded their business. When she grew tired of waiting, she left again, resolved to knock on her uncle's door and ask to join them there.

She did not make it that far; as she passed through the morning room, she happened to glance out of the window. There, walking back towards the stables, was Lord Kemerton. She was out of the house before reason could prevent her.

“I thought you said you were my friend!”

He whipped around to face her. “Miss Richmond!”

Why did he look pleased to see her when he had gone out of his way to avoid an encounter? And why was she always surprised by how handsome he was—it was not a new discovery and certainly not a timely observation. “Well?” she demanded.

“I am your friend.”

“Then why have you ignored me every time you have visited? And do not deny you

have been before today, for I saw you with my own eyes both other times.”

He winced. “Then your anger is perfectly justified. I am sorry. I would happily have spoken to you on both occasions—indeed, I came with the express intention of seeing that you were well—but her ladyship is adamant that you should be allowed time to recover from your ordeal.”

She let out an exasperated sigh. “I wish she would cease calling it that! An ordeal is being orphaned, or tormented, or destitute. Being the object of a few unflattering rumours is barely an inconvenience. But she cannot mean for me to stay away from you. My uncle said you were as good as family.”

“I am afraid she particularly means me. She holds me responsible for the damage done by your encounter with Lady Sophia.”

“That is ridiculous. Granted, you probably ought not to have humiliated her by dancing the first set with me, but you did not put any of those words in her mouth.”

“I would not have forgone that dance with you for the world. But I do regret that it caused Lady Sophia pain, and I am deeply grieved that it provoked her to speak to you as she did.”

Adelaide gave a lopsided shrug. “I have had worse things said to me. I shall not deny it was hurtful at the time, but it was months ago. My aunt is only making it worse by not allowing me to forget it.”

He regarded her in silence for a moment, his expression inscrutable. “You are quite remarkably resilient, Miss Richmond,” he said at length.

“That is well, for I should be out of my head with ennui by now otherwise. ’Tis like being in prison, stuck here with no one to talk to and nothing to do.”

“I think most people feel like prisoners at this time of year in the country.” He paused, and in a cautious tone, added, “Though, I imagine it must feel vastly different to the pace of life you were accustomed to at High Brook, even over winter.”

His expression was utterly devoid of derision, persuading Adelaide to bite back the defensive retort that had flown instinctively to her lips .

“It does,” she admitted instead. “I was too busy to take notice of the weather most of the time, but in winter, I always knew when it was snowing, for nothing makes carpets wetter or muddier than traipsed-in snow.”

“That is an enlightening perspective. I shall take a good deal more care to stamp the snow off my boots in future. Or use it as an excuse not to go out in it.”

She smiled brightly. “That was often my only chance to get out of the house. It did not snow often, for we were too close to the sea, but whenever it did, I always offered to deliver the post, for no one else liked to brave it. I would offer to do the same here if only the weather would comply—and if I thought Lady Tipton would allow it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I am not permitted to go into Barford. I am not permitted to go anywhere . Other than my family, the only company I have had since we left London is that of my masters—and with the greatest of respect, they are not good company.”

Lord Kemerton frowned. “I had no idea your aunt was restricting you quite that much.”

“You think it restrictive, too? I did not know what was considered commonplace, but if you agree it is unusual, then...” She was uncertain which came first, the knot of anxiety in her stomach or the tremble in her voice, but each amplified the other

disagreeably. “I think I must have made a worse misstep than I realised, for I am not sure she ever means to let me out. I expect she thinks I will do something else to disgrace them the moment I step foot in public. ”

“I think it is more a case of her ladyship being ashamed to have expected too much from you too soon. After everything you have suffered, to expose you to more unpleasantness was extremely regrettable. But I am sure, come the Season, she will be proud to take you back to London.”

“The Season ? That is months away!” The tremble in Adelaide’s voice progressed to a catch in her throat, and the back of her nose began to burn with the threat of tears. “And even that is probably not long enough. I could have forever and still not know how to be the person they want me to be.”

The concern on Lord Kemerton’s countenance almost lost Adelaide the battle not to cry.

“I shall speak to Oakley,” he said gently.

“Oh, no—please do not! I should hate for him to think I am ungrateful.” She forced herself to affect a more cheerful tone. “You are right—the Season is not so very long a wait. Please, promise me you will not say anything.”

Though he looked supremely unhappy about it, Lord Kemerton nevertheless gave his word. “Will you be well? You seem quite shaken. Shall I take you to your aunt?”

His offer brought all the inelegance of Adelaide’s outburst to the fore. She attempted to stand a little taller in the hope she might at least feign the appearance of refinement. “Thank you, but I can see myself inside. I know you only ever seem to see me when I am in the midst of some catastrophe that has made me snivel or carp, but believe it or not, I am not usually so frail.”

His lips quirked slightly. "I have never met a woman less suited to the term 'frail'. If you are quite sure you are well, I shall take my leave. I hope I shall see you again soon, but until I do, good day." He tipped his hat and walked away.

"Good day, my lord."

Without turning around, he replied, "My friends all call me Kem."

It ought to have made Adelaide happy to know she had at least one friend beyond the walls of Chiltern Court. It had the opposite effect. Kem was the epitome of the world she was attempting to inhabit—noble, erudite, sophisticated. All the things she was not and, she was increasingly convinced, never would be. Thus, all it did was add to the sense of disaffection that she was finding harder and harder to ignore.

One evening towards the end of February, when her aunt was abed with a cold and her brother was late home, Adelaide found herself dining alone with her uncle. Lord Tipton complained heatedly about Oakley's tardiness for a minute or two, then fell into a sullen silence that looked set to last for the remainder of the meal.

His reticence stirred up all Adelaide's misgivings. "I am sorry my company is so disagreeable to you," she said into the stillness.

"I never said that it was," the earl replied testily.

"I assumed it was, since you do not speak to me very often."

He pursed his lips and shook his head. "Would that women comprehended—conversation and esteem are entirely unrelated. "

"Are they? I am your niece. We live in the same house. Are you not interested in talking to me?"

“To what end?”

“To become better acquainted.”

“What more is there to know, girl?” He said the word ‘girl’ as though, by itself, it fully explained his indifference.

“I may be a girl, but I am still your brother’s child. Are you not even a little curious to know me?”

She jumped when Lord Tipton banged his knife and fork down on the table.

“You are sitting opposite me. I can see you, and Lord knows I can hear you. Why should I be curious to know any more?”

Adelaide knew she ought to desist, but something inside her—be it reckless defiance or a desperate need for answers—goaded her to persevere. “It was another assumption, founded on my own curiosity to know more about my father.”

“I could never see any advantage in talking about people who are no longer with us.”

“I would know who I am, my lord.”

He looked at her with a mix of bafflement and contempt. “You are a Richmond! I am at a loss to know how you can still be unsure of it, for I am reminded at every moment of the day. You are all your aunt and your brother talk about. You are all anybody talks about. I must get a dozen letters a week from families trying to wheedle out of me how much I intend to settle on you.”

“Settle on me? I do not understand.”

Her uncle sighed. “That ought not to surprise me. Your father made absolutely no provision for you. It is little wonder you should be ignorant of the usual arrangements.” He picked up his knife and fork and returned to cutting up his meat as he spoke. “An earl does not acquire an orphaned niece without also inheriting the obligation of providing her with a fortune.”

Heat flooded Adelaide’s face at the humiliation of both the cost to her uncle and her ignorance of it. “I never wanted to be a burden. But then, I never wanted to be orphaned either.”

“Young lady, we all have hardships and regrets. If you think I enjoyed having my brother taken away from me, you are a fool, but you will not persuade me to sit about wallowing in the injustice of it.”

“It was not my intention to wallow, my lord. I only wondered what he was like. I have no idea where I came from or where I belong.”

“Where you belong!” he cried contemptuously. “Where do girls these days get such fanciful notions? I shall tell you where you do not belong, and that is at my table, giving me indigestion with your infernal inquisition!”

Adelaide took in a deep, shaky breath and nodded. “I understand.” And she did. At that moment, she knew precisely what she must do.

### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The sun had long since set, and the moon was but a quarter full. Only Adelaide's knowledge of the path saved her feet from a soaking in the grass on one side and the gully on the other. This approach to the house might be unlit, but the great stone edifice itself was lit up like a beacon. Candlelight blazed from every window on the principal floor, and singing could be heard drifting down from the music room. Enticing smells wafted from the kitchen block, and somewhere in the dark, a peacock screeched its goodnight. It was at once a heartening and a depressing prospect: the familiarity of the place vastly welcome; the inevitability of her return there considerably less so.

It had been a long three days. She had left Chiltern Court without any real idea of where she would go, only the conviction that she could not stay. To be a burden on her new family was the last thing Adelaide had ever desired. She well knew what happened to people thus imposed upon—they grew resentful. Having been the recipient of more than her share of resentment, she had not the stomach to sit about waiting for more to be directed her way. She had taken Lady Tipton's advice and resolved to keep her stay in that world short.

It had proved a decision easier in the making than the executing. Gratitude, affection, and an inconvenient bout of probity had prevented her from stealing a horse on which to make her escape. She had been obliged to leave on foot—a case full of clothes under her arm and a purse full of pin-money stuffed down her stays—and beg the assistance of a kindly passerby on his dogcart.

She was well used to staying out of trouble and knew to attach herself to other

travellers whenever she could to avoid unwanted attention on the road. She had variously lied, pleaded, paid for, and demanded assistance as circumstance dictated. She had changed—at inns, in woods, behind stables, once in a church vestry—back and forth between her old brown work-clothes and new blue gown as best suited whatever means of travel was before her. She had slept one night on a stagecoach and walked right through another, too cold to stop moving.

She considered it good fortune to have only been accosted thrice. The first offender, a thief, had been disappointed enough at finding her pockets empty as to provoke an exceedingly credible threat of violence. That woman, Adelaide had outrun. The second, a clergyman wishing to make an example of her and a paragon of himself, had launched into a scathing attack on the immorality of young women travelling alone. He, Adelaide had outranked, and though he evidently knew not whether to believe her, informing him of it had been enough to stifle his diatribe. The third, a drunk, had wanted something far more valuable than piety or coin, and he Adelaide might not have evaded, but for Mrs Bunce's letter opener.

Adelaide's old gown was now in tatters, and her new blue one was almost completely brown. Her feet were blistered, her face and hands were filthy, and there was no quantity of pins and no bonnet gay enough to hide the disaster that was her hair. She had run out of money the previous afternoon and not eaten since she finished her last piece of bread that morning.

She had come to the only conclusion she could—this entire chapter of her life had been one huge mistake from beginning to end. Thus, as she approached the house, she reconciled her muddled feelings by telling herself that she really ought never to have left in the first place; this was clearly where she had belonged all along.

The door opened before she had quite reached it. She stopped, unsure how to explain herself.

“What are you doing back here?”

“I did not know where else to go.”

“Well, you’d better sling your hook before anyone sees you. You’ll likely not get a pleasant welcome.”

“Who are you talking to, Gregory?” somebody called from within.

The footman called back “no one” then stepped outside and pulled the door closed behind him. “I am not overstating it. They were fuming when you left.”

“They kicked me out!”

The door was abruptly yanked open, and the aperture filled with a looming silhouette, instantly identifiable as High Brook’s butler by his stentorian voice.

“That is correct, young woman, we did. We also told you never to return, but you seem to have given that instruction considerably less credence. What do you want?”

Adelaide refused to cower. “I came to ask whether?—”

She stopped speaking when Mary’s face appeared over Mr Hardcastle’s shoulder and promptly contracted into a vicious sneer.

“Would you look at who it is! Miss high and mighty herself!”

“I am not high and mighty.”

Mr Hardcastle scoffed and made no effort to curtail Mary’s invective.

“Why have you come here dressed like that, then?” she asked spitefully. “Expecting us all to bow and scrape, were yer?”

Adelaide glanced down at her mud-encrusted gown, visible beneath her similarly bedraggled pelisse, mystified as to how Mary could think it any indication of superiority. Yet she could not deny that, even covered in dirt, both were still very clearly finer garments than a housemaid could ever hope to own. She sighed despondently.

“I would have changed, but?—”

“No point. Leopards cannot change their spots. You always were a snooty cow and looks like you still are. Or are you going to tell us you ain’t related to the viscount after all?”

“No. I am definitely his sister. No—his cousin! I mean his cousin. ”

“Get your story straight!” she said with a mocking laugh.

“Mary, get back to work this instant!”

Mary was unceremoniously hustled aside, and Mrs Bunce appeared in her place. She cast Adelaide an inscrutable look then turned to the butler. “I shall deal with this, Mr Hardcastle.”

“She is no longer an employee of this house, Mrs Bunce, and therefore no longer comes under your jurisdiction. She will not set foot across this threshold.”

“Unless it is your intention to make an enemy of the Earl and Countess of Tipton and Viscount Oakley, pray allow me to make Miss Richmond a cup of tea to warm her before she continues on her travels.”

Mr Hardcastle's face was still in shadow, but Adelaide could perfectly picture the familiar curl of his lip. She could certainly hear it in his clipped tone when he replied, "Keep it brief, Mrs Bunce."

The housekeeper nodded once, reached to grab Adelaide's elbow, and tugged her through the door and all the way to her sitting room. She did not offer her a cup of tea. She did not even offer her a seat.

"I do not know what has happened between you and their lordships, but you cannot have a grain of sense in that pretty little head of yours, coming back here in this manner. What on earth were you hoping to achieve?"

Adelaide shrugged. "I did good work here, did I not? Now everyone knows the truth—that I was not carrying on improperly—I hoped I might be allowed to come back."

Mrs Bunce stared at her incredulously. "You thought— you actually thought—I would be at liberty to employ the granddaughter of an earl as one of my maids?"

"Well, no. In truth, I did not think about it in that light. I only thought of coming back to...to... I do not fit in at Chiltern Court. I do not have any—" She had been about to say 'friends' but stopped when her eyes fell upon the chest of drawers in the shadowy corner of the room. Upon it lay the boar bristle hairbrush she had sent to Patty, unwrapped, and with hair amidst the bristles.

Mrs Bunce's gaze followed hers, and she had the decency to blush. "Patty is no longer with us. She left shortly after you. I was not about to let such a fine thing go to waste. Better to put it to good use than?—"

"Where did she go?" Adelaide felt as though the bottom had fallen out of her world. She had not truly wanted to return to service—no one in their right mind would. She

had wanted to see her friend. And her friend had gone.

“I do not know,” Mrs Bunce said. “I wrote her a character, but I have never been approached by anyone to verify it.” When Adelaide said nothing more, she continued, “Should you like me to let the mistress know you are here? You would do better upstairs with the family.”

“No, thank you.”

The housekeeper observably wavered over her next words, but ultimately asked, “Have the Richmonds changed their minds? Have you been turned out?”

“No.” Though they undoubtedly would now. “But I find I am not well suited to their way of life.”

Mrs Bunce continued to regard her for a moment or two, during which Adelaide thought she might be forming some words of understanding or sympathy. She only sneered and shook her head.

“Her as cannot find a way to suit herself to the lap of luxury is as great a fool as ever I met. Not well suited? To what, pray? Were the beds too soft? The food too rich?” She tugged meanly at Adelaide’s sleeve. “Clothes too comfortable? Heaven and earth, girl, what is it you were hoping for?”

I do not know! Adelaide cried in her head. She had discovered her true family; a brother and aunt who were trying, in their own way, to protect her, and an uncle who, if he could not love her, was at least willing to provide for her. And she had thrown their every kindness to the gutter for the conviction that it was not what any of them wanted—that she did not belong with them. What in blazes had made her think she belonged here instead was anyone’s guess.

“I am sorry to have intruded on your evening. I shall leave you now.” She dashed out of the room before Mrs Bunce could reply. Ignoring every curious look as she ran along the passageway, she was at the door before the housekeeper caught up with her.

“Here, take these.” Mrs Bunce pressed a stale roll and a very sorry-looking carrot into her hands. “If you happen to pass Norbury Manor on the Kingsway, ask for Mrs Rushworth. She might have some work. Mind not to give your real name. It’ll do you no favours if you truly mean to stay in service.”

Adelaide whispered her thanks and fled into the night.

### CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

If Adelaide were forced to choose whom she was angriest with, it would be a tight race between Mr Hardcastle, for driving her out of High Brook, Mr and Mrs Booker, for driving her out of her adoptive family, and the late Lord Tipton, for driving her father out of his trueborn family. Mostly, however, she was furious with herself.

“What a stupid, stupid thing to do!”

She kicked a stone; it skittered along the track into the darkness and left her blistered toes throbbing. Though she hated to admit it, Mrs Bunce was right. She had been handed the sort of life of which most people could only dream, where money was no concern, comfort was assured, and most importantly, that did not involve working her fingers to the bone until the day she died. Why was it, then, that she could not like it? Perhaps Mrs Booker had been right, and she was an outcast who would never fit in anywhere.

One thing was certain: the Richmonds must be rueing the day Oakley brought her home. She had used to pride herself on being quick-witted and resourceful, but clever people faced their problems head on. She had to wonder whether it was no more than ingratitude and petulance that sent her scampering at the first hint of any turn of events that was not to her liking.

“Well, there is no facing this problem head on, you bottlehead. You have run away one too many times. There is no one left to face.”

She hefted the straps of her case higher on her shoulder and took another bite of roll.

Her case promptly slid all the way off, landing in the crook of her elbow and jostling the bread out of her hand into a puddle.

She swore. Then she sighed. No point crying over it, for it was nothing she had not brought upon herself. Still, she had no intention of losing her carrot the same way and thus dropped her case down next to the wall that ran alongside the track and climbed to sit atop it so that she could eat sitting still.

She was heading into Southampton. What she would do when she got there, she had not yet decided. Working at Norbury held no interest for her; a household so close to High Brook would soon discover who she was, and nothing would convince her to risk their scorn. Perhaps she might steal onto a stagecoach without being noticed. Perhaps she would find work at the docks. Perhaps she would get on a boat and sail away from all her regrets.

The sound of hooves caught her attention. She held herself still as someone galloped past on a horse, recklessly fast for after dark even given the smattering of moonlight. They took no notice of her, and she let out her breath as they were swallowed up by the night once again.

She pulled the carrot out of her pocket and wished glumly that she had possessed gumption enough to steal a horse from High Brook. Neither affection nor gratitude could have prevented her in this case—only knowing that the Grishams did not deserve to be burgled on account of her mistakes. As though to chide her for the decision, a gust of cold wind buffeted her, slapping the collar of her pelisse against her cheek. She tugged it down and bit off the tip of her carrot.

She stilled upon hearing hooves again, this time from the opposite direction, and this time not at a gallop but a walk. The horse re-emerged from the shadows, its rider leant forwards in his saddle, peering her way. Adelaide tensed, ready to leap down behind the wall, but she froze when the man let out a strange cry, half shout, half

strangled laugh.

“Upon my life! I have been imagining the absolute worst and there you are, sitting on a wall, eating, as though nothing is wrong in all the world! I ought to have known. Colour me wholly unsurprised.”

That made one of them. Adelaide was too shocked to do anything but stare as the Earl of Kemerton jumped down from his horse and strode towards her. He held his hands out to help her down. She took one, unwilling to relinquish her last bit of food, and landed awkwardly as a result, wincing at the fire that ignited on the soles of both feet.

“What is it? Are you hurt?” he asked in alarm .

She hastily swallowed down her unchewed mouthful and mumbled, “Only a few blisters.”

Kem had taken her by the shoulders—gently, but with unmistakable concern—and was running his eyes over her searchingly. He even brushed her hair aside to check her face. “Are you unharmed otherwise?”

Adelaide nodded. She wondered whether such familiarity was common amongst those within his circle or reserved for the wayward sisters of long-time friends—or something else entirely. No acquaintance of hers had ever touched her so tenderly.

He continued to question her—Was she hungry? Thirsty? Cold?—until at length she grew impatient with his determination to find something wrong.

“I am not some cosseted little princess, unable to walk from one end of a garden to the other without a man’s arm to cling to. Would that it was not always you who found me like this!”

He let go abruptly and stepped away from her, looking wounded.

Adelaide thought she would be relieved, but the sudden coldness only made her more conscious of where his hands had been, and the distance between them only reminded her of what he must think of her dishevelment. She ran a hand over her hair—her bonnet long since mislaid—and shoved a handful of loose strands behind her ear.

For some reason, Kem seemed cheered by her discomfiture and smirked. “I am not sorry for it.”

As always, his smile flustered her most unfairly. “What are you doing here?” she asked, more tersely than she intended.

“Helping Oakley find you.”

“Oakley is looking for me?”

“Of course! We went to High Brook first and found—eventually, after talking at cross-purposes for far too long—that we had missed you by less than half an hour. We did not wish to lose track of you again, so I rode ahead to intercept the stagecoach, lest you were on it. I left your brother smoothing matters over with Lord and Lady Grisham.”

Adelaide hardly knew what to say. The notion of two peers of the realm dashing about the country in search of her was bewildering enough as to be wholly unbelievable. That Oakley had overlooked all her ingratitude, had refused to forsake her in spite of it, was still more astonishing. She had assumed all bridges would be burnt beyond repair. They must, at the very least, be precariously scorched.

“Is he very angry?”

“No, only desperately worried. We both were.”

“Oh. But...I did not mean to give anyone any distress. Indeed, my intention was quite the opposite. I did not think anyone would... I am not used to...”

“People caring?”

Adelaide’s throat unexpectedly constricted. “No. I suppose not. I thought... It seemed as though they did not want me there.”

Kem gave a slight nod and smiled sadly. “Oakley said you left him a note to that effect. He will tell you this himself, I am sure, but he never thought of you as a burden.”

“I do not know what else he would call a sister whose company is so disagreeable that he feels he must sneak out of the house to escape it.”

“Miss Richmond, there is not a brother alive who has not occasionally attempted to evade the notice of his sister when he wishes to engage in a less than salubrious pursuit. Especially a sister whose good opinion is important to him.”

“If he valued my good opinion, he would have done better to earn it by spending time with me, instead of skulking about in fear of forfeiting it. It seems a backwards way of going about it.”

“I agree,” Kem said with a small chuckle. “And I have said as much to him, but he has never had a sister before, and he has turned himself in circles trying to do his best by you. If you knew how often he has asked me whether my sister and I?—”

“You have a sister?”

“Yes. Emma.”

Adelaide felt a pang of guilt for not knowing that before. That she had called Kem’s friendship into question, without ever troubling herself to know the least bit about him was unpardonable.

“I would have introduced you before now,” he was saying, “but she has been in Harrogate with my aunt until very recently. She has come down for the we?—”

“I am sorry I never asked about your family. I have been entirely too preoccupied with my own.”

“And rightly so,” he said, more generously than she deserved. “I have had since I was four to get used to having a sister. You and Oakley have had less than a twelvemonth.”

“What of Lord and Lady Tipton? They are not new to playing mother and father, and yet I have managed to vex them at every turn.”

“They are new to being mother and father to a daughter. It is a different kettle of fish entirely.”

“Yes, an expensive one! They have had to pay for masters, and gowns, and a dowry...”

“That would have been the case even if you were their own daughter.” His gaze intensified, and he regarded her in that way he often did, as though perceiving more than merely that which he could see. “But you are not used to being dependent on anybody. It sits ill with you, I think.”

As abruptly as she had felt, earlier, that the bottom had fallen out of her world, with

this sentiment, it felt as though Kem had reaffixed the missing piece. Nay, more than that—he had given her a reason as to why everything about her new life had chafed so.

“That is it!” she cried. “I am too used to fending for myself. My , but self-sufficiency is an unlucky quality for a lady of fashion! But you must think me an ungrateful wretch, complaining at not always being able to have my own way.”

“Not at all. I have a great respect for your independence.”

She smiled ruefully. “It is a rum sort of independence at that, for I still needed you to rescue me.”

“Rot! You were perfectly well, sitting there with your carrot. I have no doubt you would have continued to do perfectly well without any intervention from me or Oakley or anyone else. This is a far more selfish undertaking than a rescue. Your family wants you to come home. As do I.”

Adelaide caught her breath, surprised by the strength of the feeling his admission stirred in her. She knew not how to answer, though. She was dreadful at responding to kind sentiments at the best of times, but this felt like more than kindness, and it tied her tongue in knots.

Her silence made Kem frown. “Assuming you wish to come back, that is. If not, tell me at once, and I shall ride on and pretend I never saw you.”

“You would do that?”

“If it was truly what you wanted. But you must know it is not what I want.”

The wind rushed in Adelaide’s ears; Kem’s horse nickered; her own breathing

became erratic—every sound around her seemed thunderous compared to the hushed anticipation that overtook her heart. Kem had stepped closer, and though she could not be certain, for it was not something she had ever experienced before, to her mind, he looked very much as though he wanted to kiss her. How Patty would laugh at her to know how dearly she wished he would!

“It is not what I want either,” she whispered.

The expression that overtook his countenance diffused Adelaide’s entire person with heat. A great many things might have been felt or said or done in that moment had not her brother arrived. His horse skidded to a halt next to them, and the anger that Kem had assured her Oakley did not feel, erupted from him in a torrent of abuse as he leapt out of his saddle and rounded on her.

### CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Better off without you? Is that what you really think? Better off without my own sister? I have been without you my whole life—why would I want to throw it all away again now?”

“Oakley,” Kem warned, but he was ignored.

“What have I done to deserve it, Adelaide? Was it not enough that I pulled you from obscurity and declared proudly to all the world that you were my relation? I thought you wanted to be in this family!”

“I do! I?—”

“Yet still you ran away, and all I have to show for my troubles is one trifling little note thanking me for your new shoes ! After you swore never to forsake me!”

Kem abruptly stepped between them, his back to Adelaide. “Stifle it, Oakley. Your sister is tired and hungry and wishes to go home. Now is not the time to vent your spleen.” His voice was low and his tone implacable, and Adelaide did not need to see his face to know his expression was fierce, for her brother capitulated directly.

“Just so,” he said sullenly. “Come, then. The carriage is at High Brook.”

With the minimum of words exchanged, Oakley helped Adelaide onto his horse and set out back towards the house on foot, leading them by the reins. That left both her hands free, one to clutch her case in her lap and the other to resume eating her carrot.

Her brother maintained his petulant silence, only hurling irritated glances her way every time she took a bite. It was not her design to be antagonistic, but she was tired and hungry. She was also somewhat vexed that he had assumed the role of injured party, conveniently forgetting the distress that had chased her away. And she could not deny that seeing Kem smirk every time she provoked Oakley to scowl was encouragement enough to make her crunch all the way to the end.

Adelaide begged that she not be obliged to face anyone at High Brook, either above or belowstairs, and waited in the carriage while both men offered the necessary platitudes within. Her uncle's carriage afforded her the first bit of comfort she had felt in days, and she began to feel all the aches and fatigue she had hitherto been stoically ignoring. She was mid-yawn when Oakley opened the door and climbed in, Kem close behind. She tried to suppress it, but Oakley still looked concerned.

"I am sorry," he said as the carriage jerked into motion. "You must have had a hellish few days. I ought not to have said all those things, only I have been out of my head with worry."

From the corner of her eye, Adelaide could see Kem watching like a hawk. She could not help but wonder what had been said between them, for it seemed as though he would pounce if Oakley spoke angrily again. She felt a frisson of pleasure at the notion.

"Apology accepted," she told her brother. "And I am sorry to have given you so much distress. It truly never occurred to me that—" She interrupted herself with another yawn.

Oakley reached to squeeze her hand. "It is well. I am just relieved to have found you, and that you came to no harm. I am amazed you made it so far on your own without incident."

“I am not a stranger to making my own way in the world.” She began to describe her journey south, but after her third yawn, Oakley stopped her.

“There is plenty of time for all that. If you are tired, you ought to try and sleep.”

Adelaide would have protested, but then he unfurled a travel blanket and laid it over her, and the temptation was too great. She tucked her feet up on the seat next to her, rested her head on the squabs, and knew nothing until she woke up to a blast of cold air from the open door. Oakley was climbing back into the stationary carriage. Kem was nowhere to be seen.

“My apologies. I was trying not to disturb you.”

Adelaide sat up and looked out of the window. It was still dark outside. “Where are we?”

“Basingstoke. Changing horses. I thought it easiest to keep going straight to Tipton House rather than try and find rooms somewhere. The roads are good—we ought to get there before noon tomorrow if we are lucky enough to secure fresh horses at every stop.”

“Whatever you think is best. Where is Kem?”

Engaged in banging on the roof to signal to the postilion to set off, Oakley paused and cast her a quick, dubious look, but otherwise did not remark on her informality. “He is returning to Avonwyke. He insisted upon not waking you but promised to call at Chiltern Court next week.”

“I see.” Adelaide was disappointed he had to go but could scarcely blame him. Notwithstanding his kind words, he must think her an impetuous little fool.

As must her brother.

“Oakley, I truly am sorry. I really thought it would be best for everyone. I comprehend now that I was wrong, but by the time I realised it, I assumed it must be too late to go back. That you would hate me for leaving.”

“I was angry at first. Until Kem made me see why you had done it.”

“Kem? What did he make you see?”

“That you have been taught to expect that you are not wanted.” Very gently, he added, “He told me how the Bookers treated you.”

Adelaide recoiled, and Oakley splayed one hand in a gesture of reassurance.

“Do not blame him—he had good reason to tell me. I went there, you see. To where you grew up. It was the only place I could think to look for you. But you were not there, the Bookers did not seem to care that you were unaccounted for, and the housekeeper told me you would never return of your own free will, none of which made any sense to me.

“I returned home to find that Kem had paid another visit. When I explained the situation, the first thing he said was that I had wasted my time—that you would never go to the Bookers. Then, of course, he was obliged to explain why not.”

Adelaide could think of nothing to say. Oakley winced and shook his head slightly.

“I was appalled to hear how cruel they were to you—and appalled that I never knew. I assumed you went into service because your family’s condition in life required it. I ought to have known, once I found out you were raised as a gentleman’s daughter, that was not the case. I cannot think why I never asked you about it. Why did you

never say anything?"

"I do not like talking about it."

"Yet you told Kem."

"He caught me off guard." He has a talent for it. "I did not intend to tell him. Indeed, I rather hoped he had forgotten everything I said."

"I am afraid not. At least, he remembered enough to know you would not go there. Enough to comprehend that your wish not to be a burden was born of them bringing you up to believe you were one. Enough to know straight away where you would be—at High Brook, with your friend Patty."

"He remembered her name?"

"Kem rarely forgets anything. Especially not gambling debts, by the bye."

Adelaide smiled vaguely at his quip but was not truly paying much attention. She was thinking about the reckless speed at which Kem had been riding his horse through the night to find her. "To think how vehemently he disdained me at first!"

Oakley frowned. "Disdained you? Hardly!"

"You need not pretend on my account—I heard him with my own ears. At High Brook, when he thought your interest in me was... not brotherly, he said you were demeaning yourself by chasing after a maid."

"Yes, but that was not because he thought ill of you. It was because he thought I was behaving dishonourably." He grimaced. "I ought to explain. Do you remember that Lord Tipton had two brothers?"

“Yes. Our father, Robert, and Damian.”

“Quite so. Well, many years ago, Damian...gads, there is no delicate way of telling it—Damian had a dalliance with a maid at Avonwyke and got a child on her. Disgraced, and facing dismissal, the young woman attempted to—how can I put this?— resolve the matter precipitately. By unnatural means. Tragically, her attempt went awry, and she suffered a catastrophic bleed, which killed her.”

“That is horrible.”

“Indeed, and it was Kem who found her. He was only thirteen at the time. He has been staunchly opposed to such involvements ever since. Indeed, he makes a point of treating all servants with a degree of respect that occasionally puts the rest of us to shame.”

“What about when he followed us to Chiltern Court and was fuming that you had accepted a maid as your sister? ”

Oakley grinned. “That was a rather awkward series of misunderstandings, was it not? But again, his disapproval was not for your situation, but rather what he believed to be my abuse of it. He had heard that I got you dismissed and came to see whether he could find out where you were and help secure you a new position—and to give me a flea in my ear for causing you such trouble. Only, then you came down in your pretty gown, and he thought I must have made you my mistress, and he was positively livid.”

“So, he did think I looked like a courtesan?”

“Upon my word, nobody could have thought that! You looked perfectly respectable—and quite lovely, I might add. He only thought—briefly—that I had bought your favour with fine clothes.”

“Oh, I see. It must be quite challenging, having a friend who holds you so strictly to account.”

“I like to think I do not often behave in a way that requires me to be held to account. This was the only time I have ever run off with a housemaid. Though Kem has had more occasion to take issue with my conduct since I acquired a little sister than he ever has before. He tore strips off me for taking you to London last October.”

“He did?”

“Oh yes! Said I had thrown you to the lions before I had taught you how to hunt. I told you—he really is a good sort.”

Adelaide required no more convincing. She had assumed, at every turn, even as they grew better acquainted, that Kem scorned her lowly beginnings. Not only was that untrue, but he had also apparently comprehended her every motive better than she had herself—why she could not bear the idea of being an encumbrance; why she always expected that people would think her inferior; why compassion always surprised her. All those times she had felt as though he was looking beyond her person, he had been. He had been looking at—and he had seen—her . Adelaide. All of her.

“It is a shame he had to go. Who will admonish you if you vex me now?” She attempted to sound light but managed only a faint, shaky titter.

Oakley slumped back in his seat. “Knowing Kem, I expect he mostly left to give us some privacy, but he had to get back sooner rather than later anyhow, for the wedding is in two days. He ought not to have come with me to Southampton, really, but he would not hear of me going alone.”

Adelaide held herself very still—a feat made easier by the weight that had plummeted

to the pit of her stomach, pinning her in place. The wedding. Why it always slipped her mind that Kem was engaged, she could not say, but she wished she would cease forgetting, for every reminder of Lady Sophia was accompanied by a nauseating hollow feeling.

“Here, I got you this at the last stop.” Oakley handed her the tied muslin parcel that had been forgotten on the seat next to him. “There is a bit of pork pie and some biscuits. Please eat something, Adelaide. You look very ill.”

If stupidity were a disease, then she was not surprised she looked unwell. She was an idiot to have thought Kem’s solicitude stemmed from anything more than his own perceptiveness, intelligence, and kindness. That she had not understood he was all those things until now, while also idiotic, was really neither here nor there. It was for Lady Sophia to admire his fine qualities, not her. She thanked Oakley and took the food, grateful that having something to chew on relieved her of the necessity of any more conversation.

### CHAPTER TWENTY

“We are nearly there.”

Adelaide stirred to the sensation of someone gently shaking her arm and groaned at the rush of stiffness and aches that arose to greet her as she came to full wakefulness. She had feigned sleep after finishing the impromptu picnic Oakley gave her, but the pretence had rapidly progressed to real and benumbing slumber, so deep she had apparently not moved an inch for the remainder of the journey. Her neck was not thankful for it.

Outside the carriage, the sun was up and the streets of London bustling. “Sorry—I did not mean to sleep for so long.”

“Neither did I, but I was dead on my feet! I have only just woken up myself,” Oakley replied, stretching. “This adventuring rigmarole is exhausting.”

“Thank goodness you did not have to do any of it on foot.”

He frowned at her until she grinned; then he comprehended her tease. “Very droll, but I would have followed you even if it meant I had to walk. Which ought to prove just how sincerely I wanted you to come home.”

She smiled shyly. “You have already proved it. I cannot imagine my aunt and uncle wish it as dearly, certainly not if they were as angry as you were.”

“I did not tell Father you had run away, for I, too, thought he might take the news

badly. I hoped I would find you before he discovered it. I left word that I had taken you to Avonwyke for the celebrations. He will not question that.”

“And my aunt?”

“She knows.”

Oakley’s countenance had taken on a distressingly sad turn, prompting Adelaide to ask, guiltily, “Was she very unhappy?”

His face said it all. If it were not that Adelaide’s stomach had already twisted in knots at another reminder of Kem’s imminent nuptials, this revelation would have done the trick. She sagged disconsolately in her seat. “I have been utterly selfish. I shall do better. I promise.”

Oakley took her hand in his. “She was unhappy that you left, but only because she blamed herself. She has grown very fond of you, Adelaide. She was dismayed to have done such a poor job of earning your affection. As was I. We must all do better.” With a last squeeze, he let go and sat up straight. “And I have every faith we shall. Besides, do not all families quarrel? This merely shows we are a proper one. All will be well. You will see.”

Adelaide treasured his assurances and, for a full ten minutes, was persuaded he was right. Then they arrived at Tipton House and discovered that Oakley’s attempt to keep her desertion a secret from the earl had failed miserably, and all was very far from well.

“You do not have to do this, Adelaide.”

“Yes, she does!” Lord Tipton shouted before Adelaide could reply to Oakley’s strained interjection. “With this reckless act, your sister has done everything I feared

she would—proved herself every bit as disloyal and troublesome as her father. I had allowed for her unsavoury past and whimsical manners. I had even reconciled myself to her impertinence. But I will not risk this family's reputation with another estrangement like Robert's. I do not care who she is. This family has been through enough. There is nothing else for it. She will marry! ”

“Very well, but to a man of her choosing, surely? Mother? You cannot mean to let this happen. Say something!”

“It is well, Oakley,” Adelaide said quietly. “I like Mr Hanson.” And, in any case, the man I would choose has not chosen me. “I shall marry him if that is what my uncle wishes.”

Mr Hanson, it transpired, had been the first to express an interest in an alliance with his lordship's newly discovered niece—a proposition put forward during his stay at Chiltern Court the previous autumn, apparently. He had also been one of the few men willing to accept a lesser fortune than was more commonly settled on a woman of such consequence. Moreover, he happened to be the lowest ranked and therefore least conspicuous man in the running.

Thus, when Lord Tipton found out that Adelaide had absconded—which, he informed them, happened five minutes after Oakley and Kem set out for Southampton, courtesy of his distraught wife—Mr Hanson had seemed the obvious solution to the problem. A flurry of expresses and little more than twenty-four hours later, the two men had met at Tipton House in London and agreed to all the particulars of the marriage that would tie Adelaide down for good.

“What I wish ?” his lordship replied bitterly. “Young lady, my wishes are so far removed from this outcome as to be entirely immaterial. All that matters is that your reckless escapade remains undiscovered.”

“It was not so very reckless, Father,” Oakley tried, but he succeeded only in earning himself further reproof.

“Try telling me that when all your prospects are blasted because the world has discovered you are cousin to a renegade upstart. You have enough trouble with the ladies as it is. Do not wish any further impediment upon yourself!”

“Charles, please!” Lady Tipton begged, her voice quivering with distress and one hand working furiously at her pearl necklace. “There is no profit in stooping to meanness.”

“You think that is mean? It is nothing to what will be said if, because of the attention this exploit brings us, it is discovered that Adelaide is actually Oakley’s sister, and he is not my heir at all! Reflect on that and then tell me you think I am being unfair! ”

Frankly, listening to the litany of possible consequences to her flight, Adelaide rather thought he was erring on the side of leniency. By her own estimation, she was the most thoughtless creature ever to have lived. She had never stopped to consider that this would have been the second estrangement they had weathered. The impact of another scandal on Oakley’s chances of a good match had never crossed her mind. As for the wishes to which Lord Tipton had eluded, she had no idea what they might be, for she had never taken the trouble to ask.

She had welcomed Kem’s avowal of respect for her independence, but even the finest self-sufficiency did not excuse a total disregard for the hopes and dreams of those around her. His praise had been especially generous considering he was one of those people whose private concerns she had blithely overlooked. No wonder he was marrying someone else. She ought to be thankful Mr Hanson was willing to have her.

“I will marry him,” she said again. “Mr Hanson has always been kind to me. And he is a good friend of yours, is he not, Oakley?”

“Yes,” her brother replied, “and if you had come to me of your own accord with this news, I should have been delighted, but you told me a few weeks ago that it was too soon to be thinking about marriage.”

“That was months ago, and you told me then there was good reason for not delaying an alliance. Now...” Now, Adelaide had learnt an exceedingly hard lesson. She would not run from her problems this time. “Things are different. ”

Oakley looked as though he wished to continue arguing, but Lord Tipton forestalled him.

“The matter is decided, boy. Cavilling will change nothing.”

It was sage advice, which Adelaide resolved to espouse. Thus, it was with as much ebullience as she could muster that she met Mr Hanson to accept his proposal the next day.

“You are even more beautiful than when I last saw you,” he began.

It was as good a way to begin as she could imagine. He had brought her flowers, too, which for the time of year was an extravagant gesture. She reminded herself, as he bowed to her, how charming his manners had always seemed, how invigorating his warm and open smile was, and how kind he had always been to her.

“Thank you, sir. I wore this gown especially. I remembered that you liked it.”

“My dear, you could dress like a scullery maid and still be the handsomest woman of my acquaintance.”

Adelaide supposed it did not matter that she blushed, for it was far likelier he thought her flattered than nervous of detection. He did not seem to notice; he stepped towards

her and took up her hand.

“Your uncle assures me all is settled, but it seems the decent thing to ask you directly.” With an abrupt flourish, he flicked his coat tails out of the way and dropped onto one knee before her. “Dearest Miss Richmond, will you make me the happiest of men and agree to be my wife?”

Before she could reply, he stood up again and, brushing off his knee, continued, “Of course, after your recent jaunt, you are not likely to refuse, but you must have something to tell the ladies when they ask about it. You can hardly tell them the arrangement was forced after you sneaked off to Southampton in the middle of the night!” He chuckled at the notion.

At least he is not disgusted by it. “I have promised my uncle, and I shall give you the same promise—I will not do it again.”

He looked at her quizzically. “It did not occur to me that you would. His lordship said you went against his wishes to wave a cousin off at the port. You cannot wave her off twice.”

Adelaide laughed nervously. “No. Of course not. I meant only?”

“What think you of Chiswick?”

“Chiswick?” she murmured. His constant twists and turns in the conversation were dizzying.

“Yes. I have seen a house I think will suit us.”

“Chiswick is a long way from Tipton House.”

“If you had seen how angry your uncle was two nights ago, you might not be averse to such a distance!” He chuckled again. “But take heart, we shall show him that we can make a good thing of it, eh?”

“I hope so.”

“There is no question! You are handsome, I am witty, your uncle is an earl, and—well, and that is sufficient, really. We shall be the most popular couple in London.”

“I should settle for making a few friends. I look forward to meeting yours, for I have not made many of my own, yet.”

“Good Lord, we shan’t be mixing with that rabble. We shall move in far higher circles from now on. We can look forward to balls in Mayfair, dances at St James’s...” He had been wandering about the room as he spoke, gesturing, but he stopped to peer at her. Possibly because she had let out a small groan. “You like balls, do you not? Dancing, jewels, gowns, all that?”

“I have not had much success at balls,” she admitted. When he frowned, she hastened to add, “But I like fine clothes.”

“As I thought!” he exclaimed, resuming his turn about the room. “I never met a lady who did not like to dress herself up fancily.”

“Oh, it is the fabric itself that fascinates me, not the ornamentation.”

He laughed. “No, indeed, for what is the point of embellishment if one is never seen! I think I shall take the Epsom house, you know.”

Adelaide tried her best not to appear thrown but talking to him felt like being tossed

about in a gale. “Epsom? I thought you said the house was in Chiswick?”

“Yes, but there is another in Epsom, quite close to the racecourse. A little flutter on the horses now and again would make life entertaining, do you not think?”

“Oakley does not like me to engage in gentlemen’s pursuits.”

“No? Well, I daresay he has the right of it. I never heard of a marriage being successful because the man and woman spent more time together than they absolutely needed to.” He laughed at his own joke again, but Adelaide could not join him, for she was too busy fighting to suppress a swell of panic .

“We shall have to find something to do together, sir. Else we shall scarcely deserve the epithet ‘husband and wife’.”

She regretted her phrasing when he fixed her with a covetous look and assured her that nobody would have cause to doubt their connubial felicity. In principle, Adelaide did not begrudge him the sentiment—it was surely to the good that her future husband anticipated pleasure in their union—it was only that his expression reminded her of the way Kem had looked at her on the moonlit lane in Southampton. It was an unfortunate recollection, for without it, she would not have had cause to consider that, while one gentleman’s gaze had left her breathless and aching, the other’s had left her entirely unmoved.

More to silence her own misgivings than to give any encouragement to Mr Hanson, she smiled and said, “I am sure you are right. We shall be very happy.”

### CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Mr Hanson left with the promise to call again the next day; thus, when Adelaide heard someone being admitted to the house before noon the following morning, she assumed it must be him. She was sitting alone in the morning room, wishing her family kept earlier hours, for if any of them were awake, they might have done a better job enumerating all Mr Hanson's virtues than she was managing to do. Supposing the man himself was better placed than anyone to help her, she stood up and arranged her skirts and tried to compose herself in readiness for his appearance.

She let slip a curse when the door was thrown open hard enough to bang against the wall. After that, all words failed her, for to her astonishment, it was Kem who burst into the room. He did not say anything; he only stared at her, breathing hard and looking furious.

"What are you doing here?" she stammered.

"Never mind what I am doing—what the devil are you doing?" he replied heatedly, advancing towards her .

Adelaide's heart sank. He had heard, then. "How did you find out?"

"Oakley sent an express, despairing that he could not talk you out of it."

"He asked you to try instead, did he?"

"No, but I mean to nevertheless."

She shook her head. “You cannot. It is for the best.”

“For whom?”

“For everyone.”

He laughed bitterly. “You cannot be serious.”

“It is about time I was. I risked everything when I left Chiltern Court—my family’s reputation, their happiness, their belief in me. ’Tis high time I had the mettle to stop running away from every little thing that frightens me.”

“What halfwit has told you that running away was cowardly?” He took another step forwards. “Adelaide, it took real courage to take your fate in your own hands like that. Hard-earned courage and resilience that were forced on you in the worst circumstances, which you have nevertheless made your greatest accomplishments. For God’s sake, do not give them up now—not for Hanson !”

Adelaide bristled at the suggestion that she would be required to give up any part of herself when she married. “I beg you would not speak ill of the man who will be my husband.” She saw him wince, and it made her angry. “You cannot value my independence as much as you say if you are this determined to oppose my choice!”

“I refuse to believe it is your choice.”

“Well, it is!” she retorted sharply, because raising her voice seemed the best way of smothering the doubts that clamoured in her head. “I choose to make my uncle happy. I choose to protect Oakley’s reputation. I choose to show gratitude for my aunt’s unwavering esteem. I choose to do what is right for someone else for a change, instead of always looking to my own inclination. I choose my family!”

Kem took one last step. He was toe-to-toe with her, piercing her with his dark, unblinking gaze. “But do you choose him?”

Adelaide took a shuddering breath. She wanted to beg him not to be angry, to understand. She wanted him to unclench his fists and wrap her in his arms and never let go. She wanted to scream at him, You are the one who is marrying someone else! You have denied me my choice!

“You have no right to ask me that!” she cried, but all the fight had gone from her voice, and it sounded pitiful.

His eyes seemed to darken further still. “Tell me! Do you choose him?”

“Of course she does.”

It was Kem who swore this time as he stepped hastily away from her. Adelaide tensed as Mr Hanson crossed the room and kissed her on the cheek. He took up her hand and held on to it.

“The footman informed me you were here, my lord. I thought he must be mistaken, for I would have thought your presence would be sorely missed at Avonwyke at the present time.”

Kem glared balefully at him. “The wedding is not until tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? Then may I offer my heartiest congratulations to both parties. ”

“I shall pass them on. If I remember to.”

“I doubt you will forget so soon, for you must be heading back imminently.”

Kem did not respond, and Adelaide felt Mr Hanson's grip tighten. She glanced at him and saw what looked like nervousness in his eyes. He thinks Kem will change my mind, she realised with a start. It would not do. Kem could not be allowed to break her heart and ruin her engagement. Mr Hanson was not a monster, after all. He might be irreverent and occasionally careless, but at least he was not so cruel as to try and deny her happiness on all fronts—and he was all she had! She stood a little taller, allowing her arm to press against his so that they might present a united front.

“May I offer my congratulations as well, my lord, and wish you a safe journey back to Avonwyke. If you will excuse us, Mr Hanson and I have much to discuss.”

Kem stared at her, his complexion heightened and his eyes stormy. After looking between them a few times, he said tersely, “My best wishes to you both,” gave a curt bow, and left.

Mr Hanson let go of Adelaide's hand and exhaled heavily. “The damned cheek of the man! Thinking it is his prerogative to insert himself into everyone else's affairs! One of these days, he?—”

“Will you excuse me for a moment?” Adelaide interrupted. “I...excuse me.” She fled the room and dashed through the house, her heart beating wildly. The footman was closing the front door, and with a hasty apology, she tugged it open again and ran outside. “Kem! Wait!”

He stopped on the bottom step and turned to look up at her. The turn of his countenance made Adelaide bilious. She descended the steps until she was at a height with him.

“We are still friends, are we not?”

His handsome face contorted in a way that made her sure he was thinking something

very ugly.

“Please say we are,” she begged. “I could not bear it otherwise.”

He clenched and unclenched his jaw a few times, his eyes darting over her in a far more superficial way than usual, as though he was trying not to see her this time. He ran a hand over his mouth, then after one brief nod, he stalked away.

Mr Hanson did not remark on Adelaide’s brief absence when she returned, choosing instead to act as though Kem had never been there. She sat down next to him and listened to him rhapsodise about the many members of the haut ton he meant to invite to all the card parties he planned to host in their new house. She did not ask where she was supposed to go while these gatherings that she was not permitted to join were taking place. In truth, she did not care. She could attend to very little other than the conviction that Kem had not meant it when he agreed they could be friends, and the despair that was carving a tangible hollow directly beneath her breastbone.

With the Season approaching, the next week saw more people of fashion begin to trickle in dribs and drabs back to London. Adelaide could not but notice the increased bustle, for Mr Hanson insisted every day that they go on some jaunt or other, to this gallery, or that warehouse, this assembly, or that soiree. Her hope of seeing Kem while she was out and about was tempered with the dread of meeting his new wife—but neither came to pass since he was in none of the same places.

She soon felt the benefit of her winter of erudition, for everywhere she and Mr Hanson went, they were closely observed. Or, rather, he made sure they were noticed, and close observation always followed. She tried to tell herself she was flattered by his pride in her, but it was not long before his determination to introduce her to the entire population of London grew tiresome. That slight vexation was soon joined by others. He laughed at everything, whether or not it was funny, and most often at his own jokes, which invariably were not in the least amusing. He talked over people. He

exaggerated—which Oakley had warned her he did, but she had not comprehended that anyone could do it to such a degree while still expecting to retain credibility.

One morning, when Mr Hanson was being particularly irksome, Adelaide attempted to make herself feel better by thinking of all the ways Kem would have vexed her, had she married him. The somewhat mean-spirited exercise rebounded on her, however, and rather than a list of annoyances equal to that which she had compiled for Mr Hanson, she managed only to remind herself of all those endearing mannerisms which she had previously managed to bury at the back of her mind.

It did not signify, she assured herself, for Mr Hanson had already told her he did not mean to spend every hour with her once they were wed. These niggles would surely irritate her less if they could be suffered less frequently. There was precious little she could do about it in any case; thus she resolved to set her misgivings aside and concentrate on enjoying her first Season.

Their next excursion was a promenade along Rotten Row at the fashionable hour, with Mr Hanson's sister as chaperon. Adelaide's new walking dress was exquisite, and Lady Tipton had paraded her up and down Chiltern Court's long gallery enough times that her posture was faultless. Still, she felt deficient compared to some of the women they encountered. One in particular left her feeling distinctly wanting.

"Brother, attend," Miss Hanson whispered. "The Marquess of Sawlton—and his new wife."

Mr Hanson glanced along the path, a peculiar expression taking over his countenance. Adelaide followed his gaze and saw a handsome young couple approaching.

"Lord Sawlton, what a delight!" Mr Hanson said as they drew near. "I hear congratulations are in order."

“I thank you, yes,” his lordship replied. “Allow me to introduce my new wife, Lady Sawlton.”

The woman curtsied, very slightly, but did not smile. Indeed, she looked exceedingly provoked.

“An honour, Lady Sawlton,” Mr Hanson replied. Looking inordinately pleased with himself, he went on, “I have lately become engaged myself. Might I introduce my betrothed, Miss Adelaide Richmond, cousin to Viscount Oakley and niece to?—”

“We know who she is,” Lady Sawlton interrupted. Her unhappy gaze was now fixed unwaveringly on Adelaide, to whom she said, “I have heard much about you, Miss Richmond. I had been looking forward to becoming better acquainted. Dare I say, even friends.”

Adelaide had time to do no more than mumble a few incoherent expressions of gratitude before Mr Hanson said cheerily, “Alas!”

The woman looked at him sharply, then with no little scorn repeated, “Alas.”

The marquess gave a small, disbelieving huff and led his wife away, both of them shaking their heads.

Adelaide exhaled forcefully. It had been a less scathing setdown than Lady Sophia’s, yet somehow more hurtful—and she had no idea what she had done to deserve it.

“For heaven’s sake, was it absolutely necessary to goad them in that fashion?” Miss Hanson asked her brother in an angry whisper.

“Probably not, but I enjoyed it,” he replied. “It could have gone worse, anyhow. They could have given us the cut, and then the divine Lady Ardley over there might have

uninvited us from her soiree.” He gestured to a small group of women, standing a short distance away, watching them.

“I cannot say I would have minded if she had,” Adelaide said wearily. “We have attended at least one engagement if not more every day this week. Must we go?”

“Of course we must! Lady Ardley’s soiree will be my first chance to introduce myself to this Season’s notables as the future nephew of the Earl of Tipton.”

“Oh,” Adelaide said flatly. Less gratified by your future wife than her connections, I see. “Well, you do not need me there for that.”

She expected that he would laugh. Instead, he shrugged.

“As you please. But I must say, I find your distaste for society most peculiar. Other young ladies expend all their energy attempting to gain the ton’s attention. You seem to be forever running away from it. I do not understand it at all. But not to worry. As you say, I can just as easily tell people we are engaged without you standing next to me.”

Adelaide did not speak again for the remainder of their outing, and Mr Hanson did not seem to notice. Seeming determined to prove her point for her, he informed every person they met of their engagement without once deferring to her. He had been right about another thing, too—he did not understand her. How could he when he knew nothing about her? And why was it that he knew so little? Because he had never sought to find out.

He was entirely ignorant of her parentage, adoption, and years in service. That was a fiercely guarded secret, but it was one she would have trusted her husband with if he had asked. He knew nothing of her upbringing—Oakley had assured her that history would never be passed beyond his lips, but she would have shared it herself if Mr

Hanson had shown the slightest interest. Then there were the things even her brother did not know—how intensely she missed her former workmate, Patty; how much she had struggled to feel part of this new world; how she loathed idleness and adored learning, liked to wake up early and hated being hungry, loved the snow and abhorred being laughed at. Indeed, there was but one person who knew that much about her.

She stopped walking. She had used to think that she was forever disclosing her deepest, most intimate secrets to Kem because he caught her unawares, repeatedly surprising or goading her into it. But that was not the reason. It was because he was the only person who had ever asked, and she had wanted to confide in him.

Because she loved him.

“Are you quite well?” Mr Hanson enquired. He looked genuinely concerned, which Adelaide tried to concentrate on, for any evidence of affection was welcome at this stage.

“I should like to go home, please. I have a headache.”

She told him that because it seemed more politic than mentioning her heartache.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Once the notion of evading Lady Ardley's soiree had entered Adelaide's head, it would not leave. The prospect of being paraded around yet another social gathering as 'the future Mrs Hanson' made her miserable. She tried desperately hard not to begin to resent him, but now that she had realised her true feelings, every moment she spent with Mr Hanson seemed designed to make her like him less and love Kem more.

Lady Tipton could tell she was unhappy, and tried several times to discover what was wrong, even pressing her to admit it if her engagement was the cause. Yet, much though Adelaide cherished her aunt's attempts to renew a more affectionate bond, she had refrained from confiding in her. It would not have altered her own situation and would have made her aunt feel either worried, or guilty, or both.

Her brother nagged at her to attend the soiree, promising her it would be fun, telling her she looked stunning in her newest gown and assuring her Mr Hanson would agree. In his dear, inimitable way, Oakley had accepted her decision to marry his friend and championed it steadfastly since. If he had any lingering reservations, he kept them well hidden, and Adelaide loved him for it. She needed to feel hopeful, to see Mr Hanson's good qualities through her brother's friendly eyes. She needed to believe that one day, she might learn to love her husband as dearly as she loved Kem. Attempting not to wallow in the futility of such a hope, she yielded to Oakley's persuasion and attended the soiree, resolved to enjoy Mr Hanson's company.

As soon as she walked through the door, she wished she had followed her first instinct and stayed at home. She had assumed a soiree would be an intimate

gathering; this was the greatest crush she had attended yet, and likely the only thing preventing it being called a ball was the want of space for anyone to dance in. There were even musicians who might have exchanged their graceful, ambient melody for a lively reel at a moment's notice.

Feeling instantly nervous of embarrassing herself and everyone associated with her, she glanced around in search of friendly faces. She recognised nobody but did see a few people whispering and pointing her way. Evidently Mr Hanson's efforts had not been in vain, though why their engagement should be of such interest to anyone here was beyond her.

"I told you that gown looked well on you," Oakley whispered in her ear.

"You think it is what I am wearing that interests them? "

"Well, it is certainly not my brother," Miss Hanson remarked sardonically.

Mr Hanson ignored her, as he often did, and began asking Oakley to put names to the faces of those people with whom he was not acquainted. Adelaide thought she heard one of the people who had been pointing at her giggle, but when she turned to look, nobody was paying her any attention.

Miss Hanson put a hand on her arm. "Come. Let us find some refreshments."

As they painstakingly made their way across the room, Adelaide's skin itched with the weight of what felt like every pair of eyes upon her, and she said as much to Miss Hanson when they reached the refreshment table.

"Lucky you," was the unexpected reply. "Most of us have been aspiring for that level of distinction since we first came out."

Adelaide said nothing. She despised being laughed at and did not consider it any measure of merit. But her being silent at that precise moment meant that the chief of the exchange being whispered between the group of women behind her found its way to her ears.

“...sneaked away in the middle of the night.”

“With whom, do you know?”

“It must have been a man. Why else do young women ever run away from their families?”

“An elopement, then?”

“A failed one. Her cousin was obliged to fetch her home. No wonder she is marrying so low. She is likely ruined. ”

“Time will tell if their first babe comes early.”

Adelaide gasped, rapidly covering it with a cough and hoping Miss Hanson had not heard. She had gone cold all over and was too dismayed to know what to do—if, indeed, she should do anything. She could not bring herself to look at her companion, for it was not so very long ago that Miss Hanson had been carelessly throwing around defamatory remarks about her, and there was no guarantee her future sister would be at all sympathetic. Without a word, she clutched her glass in her hand and pushed her way back through the crowd towards Oakley.

Miss Hanson caught up. “Is something the matter?”

“Did you not hear those women behind us talking?”

“Miss Bartlett and her friends?”

“I do not know who they were.”

“Who who was?” Oakley enquired, for they had reached him and Mr Hanson in time for this last to be overheard.

“Miss Bartlett, Miss Owens, and another lady I do not know,” Miss Hanson answered.

Oakley wrinkled his nose. “I do not believe I know any of them.”

“You wouldn’t,” Mr Hanson replied. “They are of no consequence whatsoever, either of them—below your usual circle but a bit closer to mine.”

“Do you know them?” Adelaide asked.

“A little. I dined with Miss Bartlett’s father two days ago.”

He said it easily, almost glibly, but the truth of the matter cut through her shock immediately. She stared at him, her shoulders drooping with the weight of certainty. “You told them I ran away,” she whispered.

His features crinkled into a disinterested expression. “I might have done. I cannot rightly recall. But as we have established, they are of no importance to anybody, and besides, you and I shall be married soon. I do not see what it matters.”

Adelaide stared at him. They would, indeed, be married soon, but it was a union to which she had only agreed in order to protect her family’s reputation. Now Mr Hanson had blithely put about the very rumour she had been attempting to suppress. It has all been for nothing!

“Do you mean to say it was you they were speaking about?” Miss Hanson demanded in a strangled whisper.

“Now, now, Sister, do not be jealous. Miss Richmond cannot help being more interesting than you.”

“Hanson, this is not a joking matter,” Oakley said severely. He was flushed with anger. “I recognise that you enjoy the guise of fashionable indifference, but I will not stand for you treating my cousin’s reputation with utter contempt.”

Mr Hanson dropped his smile and looked affronted. “Your cousin’s reputation is my concern now, Oakley. And I beg you would remember who is marrying her to protect it before you start casting aspersions.” To Adelaide he said, “Forgive me. It was not my intention to give you any distress.”

She believed him; he was not malicious. He merely had, as Kem had once warned her, ‘a reprehensibly cavalier approach to life’. A life which, henceforth, would be hers. She could do nothing but smile weakly and nod.

“My cousin is too generous,” Oakley pressed. “I am sure her distress would be much alleviated if you were to find these friends of yours and explain that they have misunderstood you.”

“Will it alleviate your dudgeon, too?” Mr Hanson replied, rolling his eyes. “Very well. Come, Sister. You had better point them out to me, for I am sure I shall not be able to tell them apart from all these other bits of fluff.”

Adelaide stared at the floor, mouthing, “Bits of fluff?” to herself incredulously.

“I am certain he will learn to be more prudent, once he gets used to having a wife to consider,” Oakley said quietly. Adelaide was not sure whom he was trying harder to

convince, her or himself.

“Oakley, is that you?”

Oakley turned away to greet whoever had said this. Adelaide looked up—and just as quickly down again when she saw it was the ill-tempered woman from Hyde Park.

“It is !” Lady Sawlton cried, sounding a good deal happier than she had a few days ago. “It has been an absolute age! You look so well!”

“As do you. Congratulations on your marriage.”

“Never mind that. It hardly signifies compared to the unreasonable number of adventures you have had of late.”

“I have had a fair few.” Oakley stepped aside and gestured for Adelaide to join his conversation. “Allow me to introduce the instigator of all of them, my cousin, Miss?—”

“We have met,” Lady Sawlton interrupted. “Mr Hanson introduced us.”

“Oh! You did not mention it, Adelaide. Well then, you know our other news—that my cousin is engaged.”

“I knew beforehand. Kem told me.”

Adelaide looked up at last, her heart instantly beating at ten times its usual pace at the mere mention of him.

“Is he here this evening?” Oakley asked.

“No.” Lady Sawlton turned her eyes on Adelaide, levelling her with a cold look. “He said he could not endure it.”

Oakley nodded and ran a finger around his collar. “Excellent foresight as always. I wish I had known it would be this fiendishly hot.”

“Does your ladyship know Lord Kemerton?” Adelaide finally plucked up the courage to ask.

Her brother peered at her curiously and laughed. “Rum sort of introduction Hanson must have made if you have come away not knowing this is Kem’s sister!”

“What? I... Forgive me, my lady, I did not know, or I would have... It is a pleasure to meet you. When we met, I...” She stopped talking, unnerved by the woman’s unrelentingly icy glare and the sudden recollection of her saying, when they met, that she had been looking forward to becoming better acquainted—but was not any more. Did she hate Mr Hanson as much as her brother did? So much that they could not be friends? Or is it me she cannot abide?

Lady Sawlton gave a tight, unfriendly smile. “I believe Mr Hanson was more interested in crowing about his new connections than expounding upon anyone else’s.”

Oakley looked between them awkwardly and stumbled over his words as he observably rushed to change the subject. “Where is this new husband of yours, then? I must congratulate him, too.”

Lady Sawlton explained that he was in the next room and encouraged Oakley to accompany her. She did not look disappointed when Adelaide expressed the intention of waiting where she was for Mr Hanson to return. Oakley dithered and fretted, but Adelaide assured him she could come to no harm left alone for a few minutes, and he

eventually left with his friend.

She could not have gone with them. Lady Sawlton's inexplicable animosity was fraying her composure to the point of tears. This was supposed to have been her benign, well-practised, uneventful return to society, free from all the blunders and spectacles of the last year. Yet she was surrounded by calumny, despised by Oakley's friends, and inextricably engaged to a vainglorious self-seeker. She was not sure her evening could get any worse.

"Do you mind if I join you, Miss Richmond?"

A tiny, high-pitched laugh escaped Adelaide before she collected herself and curtsied. She might have hoped that Kem's absence would at least give her a reprieve from this encounter, but that just seemed to be the way her luck was running today. "Good evening, Lady—" She was not sure what to call her now and had no wish to use the name she probably ought to. She settled on, "Lady Sophia."

The woman she least wished to see in all the world sidled out of the milling crowd and came to stand in a disturbingly furtive stance next to her. She looked even more beautiful than ever. Adelaide was unsurprised; a woman married to Kem must be permanently aglow with happiness.

"I could not help but overhear some of your conversation just now," she began. "I urge you not to take offence. Lady Sawlton, as she styles herself now, has always been conceited and disagreeable. Marriage has clearly done nothing to improve her."

Adelaide knew not how to respond, and so did not. Lady Sophia evidently took it as an invitation to continue and did so in a more hushed tone.

"Miss Richmond, I owe you an apology. I am ashamed of how unkind I was the last time we spoke. It was beneath me to behave in such a way. But you see, Lord

Kemerton had only recently broken with me, and I mistakenly thought you were the reason for it.”

Adelaide could scarcely hear what Lady Sophia was saying, for blood had started rushing loudly in her ears after her first few words. “He broke your engagement?” she asked breathlessly.

“Oh, we were never actually engaged. Everybody thought it would happen soon— I thought it would happen soon—but when he came to me last autumn, instead of proposing, he told me he could not marry me. After an entire summer spent raising the expectations of all our friends, he started spouting nonsense about us not feeling what we ought to for each other and—” She made a dismissive talking motion with her hand and did not finish the sentence. “But I know now that it was because he was in love with a horrid little thing in the country.”

“In love ?” Adelaide exclaimed, far too loudly.

“Well, he did not say that. But I know him, and I know that was what he meant, for he was certainly sweeter on her than he ever was on me. But that is by the bye. The material point is that, when I saw him dancing with you, and heard Miss Hanson saying all those things about you, I thought you must be the woman he had been speaking about.”

Adelaide knew she must look like an empty-headed fool, for she had done little but stare and gasp since the conversation began, but she had no words and barely air enough in her lungs to say them if she should think of any.

“It was a foolish assumption,” Lady Sophia continued, “and I was very wrong to be so nasty, but I do not mind confessing that I was rather jealous.”

“Why are you telling me this now?” Adelaide mumbled. Her lips felt numb, her chest

tight.

“Because I have realised I was mistaken. You are engaged to Mr Hanson. It must be another country-town moppet over whom Lord Kemerton is mooning.” She tittered, and seemed to expect that Adelaide would join in, for her smile faded when she did not. “Well anyhow, I do hope we can put the incident behind us.”

“Yes, of course,” Adelaide said. “Thank you for explaining.”

Lady Sophia walked away. Adelaide stared after her until she disappeared into the throng, and then stared at the spot where she had last seen her. ‘ We were never engaged.’ People bustled around, knocking into her; she continued to stare blankly ahead. ‘He was in love.’ Her mind reeled, thoughts tumbling and spinning too fast for any one to be properly grasped. ‘ Your family wants you to come home. As do I.’

Mr Hanson appeared in her field of view. “I could not find them. I shall speak to them when I do.”

Adelaide nodded. She felt sick. Worse than sick; shattered.

“Oakley’s gone, has he? Are you on your own?”

She nodded again.

“Are you feeling unwell again? I must say, I had not taken you for the sickly type.”

Adelaide inhaled deeply. “The wedding at Avonwyke. It was Lady Sawlton’s, was it not?”

“It was,” he replied warily.

“You knew I thought it was Lord Kemerton’s. You let me believe it.”

He peered at her for a moment, then shrugged. “I did not set out to deceive you, but when I comprehended that was your assumption, I confess I was in no haste to correct it. I am not sure what else you expected me to do when an earl who is very clearly in love with you turned up at your door, trying to persuade you against me. I have little in my arsenal that can compete with that.”

“Perhaps you ought not to have tried to compete. You clearly do not hold me in any great esteem.”

“I was simply to step aside, was I? After everything I have done to win your hand. It was me who discovered you, remember? Oakley had you hidden away in the country until I came and persuaded him to share you with the world. I brought you to London, I introduced you to the ton, I showed the world you were a Richmond, a hidden treasure, a beauty that no one else knew about. Where was Lord Kemerton while I was busy making you somebody, eh? I found you, not him. You were not his to claim.”

Where had Kem been while Mr Hanson had been hastening her into a life for which she was not ready? She knew the answer to that now—he had been waiting. How she had not understood it before was a mystery, for he had made no secret of it. He had told her that he left Chiltern Court as soon as he realised the delicacy of her newly discovered relationship with her family. He had admitted to thinking she was thrust too quickly into society but nevertheless pledged to support her once he found out she was there. He had been angry when Oakley first talked of her marrying.

He had been waiting for her to become accustomed to her new life, but he had never once left her to face it alone. Where had Mr Hanson been all those long, lonely months of winter, while she had been removed from society? Nowhere. Whereas Kem had come, repeatedly, determinedly, despite being forbidden from speaking to

her, simply to ensure she was well. Every time she had run away, who had found her and brought her home, encouraging her that she did belong and helping her family to understand her motives? As sure as the devil, it had not been Mr Hanson.

Kem had been waiting for her to be ready, and in answer to his patience and devotion, she had accepted another man. No wonder his sister hated her. Adelaide thought her heart might cleave in two, so violently did it constrict.

“Yes, I was,” she whispered.

Mr Hanson did not hear. He seemed content that his point had been made and was returned to his usual vacuous chatter. Adelaide turned and pushed her way into the crowd, and if he noticed that she was gone, it evidently did not trouble him enough to come after her.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Several more people pointed her out to their companions as she hastened past. Whether it was the rumours of her supposed elopement or her ill-concealed distress that excited them, she neither knew nor cared. She wanted only to find Oakley, in desperate need of his compassion, for she felt as though her heart was breaking.

Card tables were set up in the next room, and a crowd of people was gathered around each, observing, calling out, and cheering or booing as hands were lost and won. She edged between the tables, searching the faces of everybody there, but soon concluded that Oakley was not among them—she had run in the wrong direction. That made her smile, at least.

“‘Twas ever thus,” she muttered with a feeble laugh.

She ceased smiling when she heard a voice she had not heard for a very long time and had not thought to ever hear again. She froze, questioning whether it could be so, attempting to convince herself she was mistaken, doubting that he could possibly be at such a gathering as this. Then she heard it again, as clear as day—her brother’s voice. Not the brother for whom she had been searching, and most definitely not one from whom she could ever expect to receive compassion—Benedict Booker.

As loath to look at him as she was to let him see her, she turned away from the sound and began trying to force her way through the swarm of onlookers with as much haste as she could, but it was too late.

“Fleeing again are you, Sister?”

She pretended she had not heard him. Her breath was coming faster, and her desperation to get away from him was making her shove too roughly; people were beginning to complain.

“A-de-laide,” Benedict called in the same, singsong voice with which he had used to taunt her as a child. “My my, look how prettily they have dressed you up. Like a little doll. ’Tis astonishing what a few shiny baubles can do, even for the sorriest of creatures.”

The crush around Adelaide eased as people stepped back to better observe the unfolding spectacle, forming a crude arena from which she could not find egress, despite how she pushed and elbowed at it.

“Not even all these jewels were enough to keep you tethered, though, eh? You ran away from your new family, just as you ran away from ours.”

She turned around, desperate to make him stop, but her wits failed her when she saw him. His leering expression was unchanged, only now supplanted on a man’s face. He had grown fat, but he must have grown rich, too, for he was dressed as finely as any of the grand noblemen in attendance. Hearing the whispers of shock and intrigue that were swelling around her, she forced herself to speak.

“You are not my family, sir. I do not recognise you.” To the person next to her, she said, “Excuse me, please,” but they would not move.

Benedict laughed, sending a shiver up her spine.

“Where did you go this time? To work in a mill? On a boat? You would have to go some way to beat the eight years you spent scrubbing floors.” A wave of gasps was followed by the complete silence of all those who had heard him. It was as though a bubble had formed at the core of Lady Ardley’s house, outside of which life

continued, oblivious, and inside of which, everybody was holding their breath.

“Oh, did none of you good people know?” Benedict asked with exaggerated innocence. “The Richmonds found their precious little orphan belowstairs at High Brook. Where she ended up after she ran away from us. Did you enjoy emptying chamber pots to earn your supper, Sister?”

“I never saw a chamber pot whose contents I did not consider better company than you,” she retorted. She ought not to have said it, but the pretence was done; she had no secrets left to keep.

“I told your cousin not to trouble himself looking for you when he came sniffing around the house. Seems he did not take my advice.”

“Viscount Oakley knows what it means to care for his family. ”

“You were not my family though, were you? If you had been, I should have taught you some damned manners.”

“Lay off, Booker. This is no way to speak to a lady,” said somebody Adelaide could not see.

Someone else scoffed contemptuously. “Whoever heard of a lady doing a servant’s work?”

“Plenty of people,” came another voice. “Not everybody has the good fortune to snare a widowed, octogenarian duke when they fall on hard times.”

“That was not good fortune, my lord,” the woman replied. “That was good planning.”

This remark sparked an argument between the pair that was rapidly subsumed by a

welter of other voices as more and more people passed judgement on the case. Occasionally, Adelaide heard somebody speak in her defence, but the tide of opinion was strongly against her, and she knew not what to do.

“Please let me through,” she begged the people closest to her.

Nobody moved at first, but the crowd reluctantly stirred and shifted when somebody began fighting their way through from the outside. Mr Hanson was abruptly spewed into the centre of the ring. For one beat of her heart, Adelaide thought he had come to offer his support. It was a vain and short-lived hope. He sneered at her balefully.

“You were a maid ?”

“Might we discuss this somewhere else?” Adelaide pleaded, sweat trickling down her back.

He ignored her. “I was prepared to put up with your boorish conduct and want of accomplishments to become your husband, but Lord above! I wish to go up in the world, not down ! I will not shackle myself to a servant !”

“As you can see, sir, I am not a servant.”

Without warning, Mr Hanson thrust out a hand and grabbed one of hers, lifting it roughly to inspect it and tugging her a few steps off balance in the process. “These are the hands of a labourer. A labourer, and a liar . What else have you neglected to disclose? Are you even truly a Richmond?”

She snatched her hand back. “More a Richmond than you ever will be a gentleman.”

“Is that so? Then you ought to have no difficulty finding yourself a different husband. You may consider my offer withdrawn. With God and everyone here as my witness, I

renounce this sham of an engagement!” And with that, he spun on his heel and forced his way back into the throng.

It ought to have been a joyous turn of events, but it was clear from the looks of pity on the faces of every person Adelaide could see that this was not an auspicious development.

Benedict began to laugh. “Dear oh dear, Adelaide. What have you done now?”

Nobody else was laughing. Even the people who had refused to denounce her moments before were turning their noses up now, frowning and shaking their heads. She felt faint, and it gave a dreamlike timbre to the whispers echoing around her .

“Orphaned, impoverished, and jilted. She is cursed. I would not marry her if you paid me.”

“No one will now.”

“Never mind her, who will have poor Lord Oakley?”

With humiliation threatening to overwhelm her, Adelaide staggered away from Benedict, but bumped into somebody behind her. “Pardon me, I?—”

“Would you care to take a turn about the room with me, Miss Richmond?”

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Adelaide let out a wordless cry and whipped her head up to look into Kem's dear, dear face. She nodded, though her breaths were coming in such shuddering waves, she doubted whether he would be able to tell.

"Come." With a strong but gentle grip on her elbow, Kem steered her towards the far side of the room. People melted out of their path as they had refused to do before, all of them lowering their eyes after one glance at Kem. Adelaide fancied he must be glowering something rotten to have such an effect on everyone.

"You rescued me again," she mumbled, still vastly discomposed. "You always rescue me. I do not deserve it."

Kem gestured for two people blocking a doorway ahead of them to step aside but did not answer her.

"Your sister told me you had decided not to come."

She thought he would not reply to this either, but once they were through the door, he said quietly, "I could not stay away. More fool me, I decided I would rather suffer the misery of being your friend than never see you again."

Something in his voice made Adelaide look up at him in surprise. He was not glowering at all; he was smiling. It was not his usual, broad, knee-buckling smile, but a small, private expression of barely restrained happiness. Hope erupted with palpable force in Adelaide's heart.

“You are my friend!” she exclaimed in a frantic whisper. “The dearest and best friend I have ever had.” Conscious of all the attention being directed their way in this new room, she added, more cautiously, “Though, you might wish to reconsider being my friend now. I think I am about to be London’s biggest scandal.”

“Was anything revealed that I did not already know about you when I said I would call on you at Chiltern Court?”

“Well, I have just been jilted.”

“Even better.” He looked down at her, his funny little smile doing something quite scandalous to her insides. “Did you truly not know why I was coming?”

“No, because I thought I knew why you were going—to get married. And before you say it, it was not such a stupid assumption when you consider that, until recently, I did not know you had a sister, no one ever told me she was getting married, and for as long as I have known you, I have thought you were engaged to somebody else.”

Surprise, incredulity, and comprehension played across his countenance, ending with a small chuckle and a shake of his head. They had reached another door, and he directed her through it, into what transpired to be the stair hall. “Well, I never was,” he said, leading her down the stairs, away from the principal reception rooms. “Unlike you.”

“Yes, but only for a few days. I am sure it does not count.”

He did smile his wonderful smile then—and laughed aloud to boot. Pulling her close to him, he leant to whisper in her ear, “I am so in love with you.”

Without a doubt, Adelaide would have fallen down the stairs were it not for Kem’s firm grip on her arm. As it was, she gasped and blushed and generally fumbled her

way down the rest of the steps, drawing more than one curious glance from everyone who was ascending from the vestibule below.

Kem paused at the bottom to speak quietly to a footman and surreptitiously pass him something. Adelaide knew from experience that it was likely a tip, and she guessed it must be a large one when the footman led them towards the back of the house, provided them with a lit candle, and stealthily shepherded them into what appeared to be Lord or Lady Ardley's book room.

It was on the tip of Adelaide's tongue to say she did not think Lady Tipton would approve of her being closeted in a room with a man, unchaperoned. Then she recalled what had just occurred upstairs and decided it scarcely signified. Besides, other than Oakley, nobody had ever taken better care of her than Kem. She would willingly go wherever he led her.

And where he led her was a state of intoxicating delight that took her wholly by surprise and left her breathless and giddy. Which was to say that the moment the door was closed, he kissed her. Her aunt would most certainly not have approved of that—but Patty would. Adelaide rejoiced at having finally discovered that happiness of which her friend had so often spoken—the sheer joy of being held, of being wanted, but moreover, of being loved .

“Marry me, Adelaide,” Kem said against her lips. “I am not strong enough to wait for you any longer. It near broke me when you said yes to that imbecile, Hanson.”

“I am so very sorry. I had no idea you loved me.”

He pulled back slightly and looked at her. “That is because you never think anyone will love you. Marry me, and I shall tell you every day for the rest of your life how dear you are to me. You will never be able to doubt it.”

“Oh Kem, I could never doubt your affections. Not now, when I finally understand what you have done for me. Though I confess, I do wonder how you arrived at them when all you have ever seen of me is a petulant little girl, forever running away from her troubles.”

He cupped her face and stroked her cheek with his thumb. “What I see, when I look at you—what I have seen, since the very first time we met—is the most beautiful, the most courageous, the most indomitable woman I have ever known. I have never met anybody as uncowed by life as you. Do you remember showing me your knife at High Brook?”

Adelaide winced. “Yes. You laughed at me.”

“No!” He took her gently by the shoulders, his eyes never leaving hers. “No, Adelaide, I was amazed by you. I have continued to be amazed by you from that moment on. Though, I first knew I loved you when you came downstairs in your blue gown at Chiltern Court.”

Adelaide remembered how he had stared at her. She also recalled that he had been the only one to mention how the dress accentuated her eyes, and it occurred to her that perhaps it had been Kem who inadvertently began the rumour about her ‘bewitching fey appearance’, which had brought Mr Hanson to Chiltern Court to win her.

“I wish I had known,” she whispered.

He smiled indulgently. “You were not ready to hear it. I would never have imposed on you—or Oakley—so soon after your lives were turned upside down. But my heart has been yours ever since.” He let go of her shoulders and ran his hands in a feather-light touch down her arms but ultimately relinquished the contact and took a step away from her.

“When I left the next morning, I went directly to Sophia to tell her I could never marry her. The alliance would doubtless have pleased both our families, but we had no great affection for one another, and once I met you...it was impossible. I knew, even if I could not make you love me, I could never feel about her the way I felt—the way I feel —about you.”

“But you have made me love you!” Adelaide closed the distance he had put between them and reached for his hands. Less urgently and more earnestly, she repeated, “I do love you.”

She thought it would make him happy. He only grew intensely serious.

“Is that a yes? ”

“I thought I had already said yes.”

He shook his head silently.

“Then, yes! With all my heart, yes!”

He lunged to wrap her in his arms so swiftly that she let out a squawk of surprise. His lips were a hair’s breadth away from hers when the door creaked open.

“Adelaide? Are you in there?”

Without looking away from her, Kem called out “No!” and reached sideways to shove the door closed again.

“That was Oakley,” Adelaide whispered.

“I know,” Kem replied, grinning, and kissed her.

Adelaide wished her brother would not persist, for Kem's attentions were heavenly, but she knew he would and was not surprised to hear the door open again.

"Hey, hey! What in blazes is this? Get your hands off my cousin this instant—Good God, Kem? Is that you?"

Adelaide felt instantly sorry for her brother; he looked caught between outrage and dismay and evidently knew not what to say. She took pity on him.

"Pray, do not be angry. Kem has asked me to marry him." Seeing it had done nothing to lessen either his fury or his confusion, she added, "Mr Hanson has broken with me."

"I know! It is all anyone is talking about upstairs. That and the fact that you used to be a housemaid. I have been searching everywhere for you, imagining you must be distraught, and all the while you were..." He gestured at them both expressively. "What the devil are you doing here, Kem?"

It was to everybody's advantage that Oakley was of such a good-humoured disposition, it took very little explanation to transform his violent indignation into heartfelt delight.

"I could not be happier for you both! And for myself, truth be told, for you were right, Adelaide, when you said Hanson is better in small doses. I had no idea, previously, of quite how irritating the fellow could be."

Seeing Kem's dour expression, Adelaide declared that there ought to be an embargo on the subject of Mr Hanson for the rest of the evening. "Will Lord and Lady Tipton be pleased to have such a nephew?" she asked instead.

"I should say!" Oakley replied, slapping Kem affably on the back. "They think the

world of this one. I daresay they would have married him to me if they had been able.”

“That is well. If they are pleased with me for securing a husband they like better, they might be less angry about Benedict telling everybody I used to be a maid. After all the trouble they have taken to keep it a secret, I cannot believe they will not be incensed.”

“If they are, it will not be with you,” Oakley assured her. “That was no one’s fault but Booker’s.”

Adelaide felt Kem slide his hand into hers and loved him all the more for knowing when she needed his assurance.

“It is better this way,” he said. “You would not have wanted such a secret hanging over you indefinitely.”

“But will there not be talk?”

“For a while, I am sure,” Oakley agreed. “But you are a Richmond. That counts for an awful lot.”

Kem squeezed her hand and gave her a gentle tug towards him so he could kiss the top of her head. “And soon, you will be the Countess of Kemerton. And then nobody will care who you were before.”

She smiled, though weakly. It was not for herself that she was worried. “But they said Oakley would never find anyone now.”

“They have been saying that about me since I was twelve!” her brother declared, laughing. “What say we really give them all something to talk about? Who fancies a

game of whist?"

Adelaide shook her head violently. "I do not want to see Benedict again."

"You won't—he has been kicked out. Literally," her brother said with a grin. "Lady Ardley did not take kindly to the scene he caused and had him and Peterson—who brought him along—both ejected. Only, Booker refused to leave, so Lady Ardley had her footmen encourage him. I told you—all hell has been breaking loose upstairs while you two have been hiding down here."

Adelaide's relief was great, though not complete. "What about Mr Hanson?" she asked cautiously.

Kem made a noise of disgust and said darkly, "Let me worry about him."

To her amusement, Oakley caught her eye and arranged his features into a vastly diverting expression which clearly indicated that this did not bode well for Mr Hanson. It endeared them both to her—Oakley, for colluding with her as only a true brother would, and Kem for protecting her as he had been doing from the very first moment of their acquaintance .

"With pleasure," she replied, and indicated that they should lead the way back upstairs.

It was with no little trepidation that Adelaide entered the card room, despite being flanked on either side by two of the highest-ranking men in attendance. The room fell silent, and she thought her skin might ignite from the heat of her embarrassment, but Kem pressed her hand—tucked into the crook of his arm—tightly against his side as they walked to the tables.

To her vast relief, Mr Hanson was nowhere to be seen. There were a few familiar

faces, however. It seemed the upper set had settled in now that the fringes of their circle had been scared off, and every one of them watched as their party approached.

“Will you join us, my lords?” came a voice from the farthest table.

Adelaide knew not whether to be relieved or doubly wary that their hostess had issued the invitation. It was her soiree, after all, that had been overtaken by the sensation of ‘the Richmond girl’s unmasking’. It would be at her ladyship’s signal that her guests were either scandalised or titillated by the goings-on.

Lady Ardley was already partnered, and after a brief discussion, it was agreed that Adelaide would sit out, while Kem and Oakley made up the table. She pulled up a chair between them to watch.

“Been a lively evening so far, I hear, Kem,” the fourth player, Lord Worthe, said airily.

“Certainly memorable,” he replied without pause, causing his friend to raise an eyebrow.

Nothing more was said while the cards were dealt and the bidding begun, at which point Kem, and then Oakley, both raised the ante.

“High stakes all round, gentlemen?” Lady Ardley asked.

“Not at all,” Kem replied. Turning his head to look at Adelaide in a way that nobody could have misinterpreted, he added, “This one is a safe bet.”

“Hear, hear!” Oakley agreed.

Lord Worthe regarded Adelaide for a moment, then shrugged, winked at her, and

threw his money in, too. Lady Ardley, more sedately, followed suit. A ripple of chatter ran amongst the onlookers, breaking the tension.

Oakley grinned at Adelaide. Kem pressed his knee against hers and smiled his bone-melting smile. And with her brother on one side, her beloved on the other, and the rest of the world having to fight through them to get to her, Adelaide knew she was where she belonged at last.

### EPILOGUE

Tipton House, London

April 1818

Adelaide met Oakley at the top of the stairs. “How do I look?” She twisted this way and that for his inspection.

“Exquisite. I daresay, if you were not already engaged, Kem would propose the moment he set eyes on you.”

She smiled and took his proffered arm. “Is anybody here yet?”

“Yes, almost everybody. You are eagerly awaited .”

With a deep breath and a nod, she turned with him down the stairs to face the great, the good, and the inescapables of Society, gathered in the saloon below. Now that enough time had passed for talk of the spectacle at Lady Ardley’s soiree to die down, Lady Tipton had arranged a dinner to formally announce Adelaide and Kem’s engagement. She had made no secret of being impatient to share the news abroad, delighted by it as she was. Indeed, she had gone so far as to confess that she thought Adelaide and Mr Hanson exceedingly ill-suited and had only refrained from saying so for fear of causing her niece distress.

Lord Tipton had accepted the alteration in marriage partners with far more aplomb than he had received the news that Adelaide’s scandalous past had been exposed . On

that matter, he remained resolutely furious. His anger was all directed towards the Bookers, Oakley insisted, though Adelaide found that difficult to believe. Thanks to her, the Richmonds had gone from being a well-established family of the ton to the focus of Society's intense scrutiny, and Oakley's true identity had never seemed more tenuously concealed. She could not blame her uncle for his resentment, which she felt in his every veiled look and clipped address.

Kem came to her as soon as she entered the saloon, his handsome countenance overspread with what Adelaide was only lately coming to comprehend was pride. It was a novel feeling to be the object of somebody else's gratification, but she was in no way averse to it.

He placed a kiss on the back of her hand. "You look beautiful. I thought I loved you best in blue, but this gown is most definitely my new favourite."

She bit her lip self-consciously, still not used to compliments of any sort, let alone such effusive praise as Kem was wont to give. "I have never worn pink before. It is not a practical colour to wear for polishing grates."

The corner of his mouth twitched very slightly, giving him a startlingly rakish appearance. "Well, it is an exceedingly practical colour to wear for bewitching one's future husband."

She shushed him quietly, explaining with a shy laugh, "Unless you wish my face to match my gown!" She pressed a palm to her cheek, praying that she would not blush like a schoolgirl—and then, because she suspected it was too late regardless, added, "Although, I thank you for the information. I shall be sure to add at least a dozen more like it to my wardrobe."

This did nothing to diminish his rapacious expression, but he had not the opportunity to reply, for Oakley had apparently tired of being discreet while they whispered to

each other.

“Look lively, you two! If you have quite finished your love-making, there are guests to attend to.”

And there were; no sooner had they turned to face the room than they were descended upon by the rest of the party. Lord and Lady Sawlton were the first to approach. Now that the confusion surrounding her acquaintance with Kem had been cleared up, Adelaide had formed the beginnings of a very pleasing friendship with his sister. Emma and her husband had both proved to be delightful company, displaying not a hint of the conceit of which Lady Sophia had accused them. They greeted her now with the warmest smiles, repeating their already generously given felicitations.

Next to approach were Lord Worthe and his brother. They both bowed, Mr Ashley saying, “You look remarkably well this evening, Miss Richmond. Every bit as lovely as the last time I saw you—at Lady Trowbridge’s ball, last year, if you recall. Though, I must say, it feels as though I have seen you a lot more recently than that—” He stopped speaking when his brother elbowed him in the ribs. “What?”

Lord Worthe shook his head at him, evidently vexed, but quickly turned his attention to Adelaide. “Miss Richmond, an honour and a delight, as always.”

“Thank you, my lord, though now you simply must tell me what your brother was about to say.” She had spoken teasingly, but her amusement faded upon seeing him glance with distinct unease, first at Kem and then at Oakley.

“It is scarcely worth mentioning, madam.” He smiled, but if he had been trying for nonchalance, it did not work and only made Adelaide more curious.

“But you have mentioned it now,” Kem said warily. “You might as well tell us what ‘it’ is.”

“Aye, come on, out with it!” Oakley added.

After a quick glance over his shoulder at Lord Tipton, which unsettled Adelaide further still, Lord Worthe shook his head. “It is nothing of any great importance. Certainly nothing worth encroaching on your special evening.”

“How would it encroach?”

“Truly, Miss Richmond, it is nothing,” he said firmly. “I beg you would forgive my brother’s indiscretion .”

Looking abashed, Mr Ashley echoed his brother’s plea for forgiveness.

A prolonged and expressive look passed between Lord Worthe and Kem before the latter inclined his head and changed the subject.

“What was that about?” Adelaide whispered as soon as the pair had moved away.

“I do not know, but I shall find out before he leaves,” Kem answered—and thus, what had been meant to be a joyous evening of celebration became the longest, most nerve-racking few hours in Adelaide’s recent memory. While she ought to have been enjoying the delectable feast and wonderful company, she was preoccupied imagining every conceivable explanation for Lord Worthe’s discomfort—and coming up with nothing positive. Had some new horror from her childhood been discovered that was, even now, being circulated about town? Something to cause her aunt and uncle even greater dismay?

At long last, the party came to an end, and every guest was waved off until only Kem remained with the family. Adelaide longed to ask him or her brother whether they had discovered their friend’s secret, but she could not seem to summon the courage. Instead, she sat with her aunt and sipped her coffee and prayed that whatever it was, it

would not steal away her newfound happiness.

In the end, it was her uncle who forced the issue, when he asked, “What were you both conspiring about with Worthe and his brother after dinner?”

Oakley and Kem exchanged a quick glance, then Oakley spoke. “It may be nothing, Father, but they attended an assembly in Luton recently, and while they were there, they made the acquaintance of a young lady who they say bore a singularly strong resemblance to Adelaide.”

Adelaide stared at them numbly. She had been preparing herself for disaster but—were they suggesting this lady might be her sister? She knew not what to think or feel or say about such a revelation. Oakley met her gaze. He wore his customary hopeful expression, and she would not have been surprised if he had already decided this stranger was irrefutably related to them and was troubled by nothing more than which bedchamber should be hers when she came to live with them.

“I feared this would happen,” Lord Tipton said, sounding displeased.

“What?” Oakley asked.

“That Adelaide’s story would give every person with a passing likeness to one or other of us leave to assert a similar connection. She claims to be a Richmond, I suppose?”

Oakley shook his head. “No. In fact, Worthe said she unequivocally discounted the possibility.”

“Then why the devil are we discussing her?”

“Because her resemblance is apparently more than passing,” Kem answered.

“More like the way in which I resemble my late grandmother?” Adelaide asked.

“More so. So much so that Worthe and Ashley both initially took her for you.”

“You mean a twin?”

“Impossible.” Lord Tipton made a disgruntled noise. “If Adelaide had a twin, the orphanage would have ensured they were kept together. ”

“Not necessarily,” Lady Tipton said quietly.

“Most likely, though,” he insisted. “Moreover, in the shadows of a candlelit ballroom, who could really tell?”

“In any case,” Oakley said with what sounded like forced ebullience, “Worthe is planning to visit her and has said he will report back on whether the likeness is as striking in daylight.”

Lady Tipton tugged at her necklace. “Should you not go with him?”

“No, he should not,” her husband said flatly. “We have only narrowly escaped the ignominy of Adelaide’s past being uncovered. We do not need to remind everybody of that by chasing after a new scandal.”

“Father!” Oakley said sharply.

“Hear me, Oakley. The whole notion is so improbable as to be impossible. Do not risk your reputation on it.”

There was an uncomfortable pause before Kem spoke to fill it. “Worthe preferred to go alone. He enjoyed their dance, apparently, and wishes to call on the young lady

without the inconvenience of an entourage.”

“Good,” said his lordship. “The rest of us may safely stay out of it, then. Lord Worthe may chase his country girl if he chooses. It has nothing to do with us.”

“Please do not dismiss her entirely,” Adelaide pleaded, finally finding her voice.

Everybody turned to look at her.

“I...I know ‘an earl does not acquire an orphaned niece without also inheriting the obligation of providing her with a fortune’. And I know that such an obligation must seem an even more disagreeable prospect after the example I have set. But this girl has not run away anywhere, so there is no cause to suspect that she is reckless or rebellious or disloyal. There is no reason to suppose she has an unsavoury past to conceal or impertinent manners to overlook. Indeed, there is no reason to think ill of her at all.”

Her uncle was almost wincing as she spoke, her words seeming to give him real pain. She was sorry for it, but she did not recede, for the matter felt suddenly and peculiarly important.

“I beg you would not take out your disappointment with me on an innocent girl by refusing her the chance to know whether we are her family.”

There was another pause, longer and weightier than the last.

“Adelaide, dearest,” Lady Tipton said at length. “Why ever would you say such things about yourself?”

“She did not,” Lord Tipton said soberly. After sighing heavily, shaking his head, and banging his glass down disconsolately on the table next to him, he looked Adelaide in

the eye and concluded, “I did.”

His wife expressed her disappointment eloquently and not very politely, and his son’s protests were not much more civil. Kem, Adelaide could tell, was barely keeping his anger in check. She ignored them all, for her uncle had risen from his chair and seemed intent on coming to sit next to her on the sofa. She knew not what to expect, and when he lowered himself down next to her, she began shuffling away to put more distance between them. She froze when he reached for her hand. His uneasiness was palpable, but to her surprise, he did not seem angry. He seemed overwhelmingly sad .

“Adelaide, I wish this was the first time you had made me consider a hard truth, but I cannot say that it is.”

“I am sorry, I?—”

“No.” He placed his other hand over the one he held, encasing it, and shook his head. “It is I who must apologise. I could try and excuse everything I have said and done to you since you came into our lives by claiming it was to protect Oakley’s future. Alas, whilst that is always a paramount consideration, I cannot pretend it is the reason I may have, on occasion, appeared...unfeeling. I fear the truth is far less honourable.”

He glanced at his wife as though for comfort, but by the turn of his countenance, Adelaide did not think he received any. He nodded to himself and continued.

“I was ashamed—deeply ashamed—to discover that I had neglected my brother’s child for two decades. If it turns out he had others, my shame will be greater still, but it is high time I ceased hiding from it. You are right to call me out on comparing you unfavourably to your father. I ought never to have done it, and I will admit that it has given me some exceedingly uncomfortable reflections.

“I was angry with him for choosing a different life, away from this—” He gestured

vaguely to the room. “—away from me, and I took it out on you. I wished to blame him for your situation, to believe it was his fault that you had lived such a difficult life. But it was not his fault. It was mine.”

Lady Tipton tried to contradict him, but he shook his head, silencing her. When he continued, he was still addressing Adelaide, nobody else .

“It is not my fault that Robert died or that you were adopted. But it is my fault that I listened to my father’s edict to denounce him. He was a good man, a good friend—the very best of brothers. It was a shameful thing to throw him over and a still greater evil not to heal the rift after my father died. If I had, I would have been able to look after you and Oakley from the start. It must be of little consolation for me to tell you that I wish I had.”

Adelaide was quite overcome, having never had so many words from him in a week as had just spilled out of him in one speech. He looked similarly affected—and tired, as though his admission had cost him dearly. She squeezed his hand. “Obedience is a virtue, too. You evidently had my father’s whole share of it, just as I inherited Oakley’s whole share of waywardness.”

He patted her hand and chuckled lightly. “You have your father’s spirit, child. He was cowed by nobody, afraid of nothing. He would have been prodigiously proud of you.”

His words touched a chord deep in Adelaide’s heart and without a moment’s thought, she threw her arms around his neck. “Thank you, Uncle!”

He stiffened but conceded to patting her on the shoulder before saying, awkwardly, “Yes, well, enough of this, now.” He extricated himself from her arms and stood up, nodding officiously at everybody in an obvious attempt to dispel his embarrassment. “Let Lord Worthe have his investigations, then. If it turns out there is more to this

young lady's story, then we shall hear it. That I promise you."

Adelaide looked at Oakley and smiled to see his hopeful grin returned, this time happy to be able to share in his sanguinity. She glanced around the room at her aunt and uncle and lastly at Kem, a sense of profound contentment settling upon her. She could do nothing but wait to find out whether her family would continue to grow, but the wait would be with the family she already had, a family who loved her, and that was reward enough to be going on with.

### CHAPTER ONE

The road to Luton, Bedfordshire

March, 1818

Scarlett Margrave was a lady meant to live in vibrant colours. She was sure of that, despite the fact that so far, the majority of her life had been lived in dull hues of ivory and grey that always appeared to have been laundered too much.

But here she was at last in a gown of cornflower blue silk with her fair hair having been removed from its usual severe chignon and curled and teased and plaited into something vaguely resembling what her dear friend, Miss Bess Leighton, had shown her in one of her fashion magazines. Bess, a plump young lady whose inherent sweetness marked her every feature, had also loaned her the gown; it was not quite long enough for Scarlett's taller, more slender frame, but her friend had assured her that showing one's ankles was not at all scandalous and, in fact, quite in fashion. Once they had tied the sash more tightly about Scarlett's waist, it almost looked as if it had been made for her. For the millionth time, she smoothed her skirts with her gloved hands, marvelling at the satisfying manner in which the fine materials moved against one another.

No piece of the evening was her own. The gown belonged to Bess, the carriage belonged to Bess's mother, Lady Leighton, and the assembly they travelled to was on the invitation of Bess's elder brother, Mr Oliver Leighton. Scarlett had been included in the scheme on the basis of the friendship—or perhaps the charitable impulses—of the Leighton family. Bess and Lady Leighton both thought it was high time that

Scarlett went to a proper assembly. Scarlett thought so too. To have arrived at the age of eighteen without ever having danced with anyone save for Oliver!

Leighton , she reminded herself. We are no longer children, and I must remember to call him Leighton.

She glanced at the well-fed young man of twenty-three who was very nearly a brother to her. Leighton was a reasonably appealing fellow, even though he did tend towards being ruffled. He had asked her to dance the first with him, which was excessively generous of him, even if she suspected his mother had made him do it.

Although it was a borrowed evening in every sense, she felt more at ease than she ever had before. Having only just smoothed her skirts, she now fluffed them a little, causing Bess, across the carriage, to roll her eyes and grin at her. Bess had kindly volunteered to sit on the backwards-facing seat, knowing that Scarlett sometimes became ill if she did .

“You look very well, Scarlett,” Lady Leighton, who sat beside her, said with a reassuring pat on the arm.

“Of course she does.” Bess leant forwards and smiled encouragingly. “She is shockingly beautiful, and I daresay if we had borrowed a grain sack from the farmers to dress her, she would make it look like haute couture . I should despise her heartily if she was not so dear to me.”

“I appreciate you letting me wear your gown,” Scarlett said quickly, not wishing to dwell on the subject of her looks. “I shall take good care of it and not get it dirty.”

“If it gets dirty, we shall have it washed,” Lady Leighton declared. “All in the course of a young person’s enjoyments, I say.”

Scarlett smiled, though such sentiments embarrassed her a bit. She had recently become aware of her status as A Project .

As the only daughter of a widowed parson, Scarlett was accustomed to a life heavy with obligation and stricture; she was more the reverend's helpmeet than his daughter, beginning each morning with a full slate of parish duties to occupy her every waking moment. Though the neighbours all smiled and nodded approvingly when they saw her trudging about the parish in her hated dull muslins and sensible but ugly boots, she knew they worried about her.

Scarlett had overheard more than one matron cluck that at eighteen she ought to have more diversion—to be doing something tonight, as she was, for no more reason than diversion was discomfiting to say the least!—and perhaps even a suitor or two. A suitor! The very idea made her laugh. Though she had never dared broach the subject with him, something within her just knew the reverend was in no hurry to see her married. Perhaps he intends to keep me at the parsonage, forever his spinster daughter with nothing more to do but tend to his parish for him.

The thought of being entrapped in such a way sent a hot, itching flush all over her body. To imagine that nothing would ever change, that day after day, year after year, she would move along just as she was, growing older, her chances at happiness steadily diminishing...

Stop that! she scolded herself. Not for tonight, these glum notions. For tonight, she would laugh until her cheeks ached, drink ratafia, flirt with gentlemen, and enjoy herself.

“Scarlett?” Lady Leighton said, suddenly looking worried. “You do know the dances—do you not?”

Scarlett turned her head to smile at her. “Thanks to Bess and Leighton, I do.”

“Oh good.” Her ladyship settled back into the squabs. “I should not have liked you to feel awkward in any way.”

“No, ma’am, I assure you, I am all anticipation and nothing less.”

“Well, ’tis time to stop anticipating and start dancing,” Bess announced. “For here we are!”

The horses stopped walking and the carriage came to a halt with a lurch that matched the one in Scarlett’s heart. She waited patiently while Leighton exited and handed down his mother and sister; then it was her turn to very gently lay her hand against his and step down, feeling herself the very picture of elegance and refinement .

The assembly rooms were on the second floor of the coaching inn, and Scarlett felt her anticipation mount with each step they ascended. The deep inhalation she drew upon reaching the ballroom was as much to steady her nerves as it was to catch her breath.

The ballroom was surprisingly commodious, consisting of a series of three rooms with little to demarcate between them, and surprisingly well-appointed. A multitude of standing chandeliers cast the room in a warm glow, and the wood floors had been chalked with the crest of the family who had sponsored the party. The musicians were at their posts, beginning to rehearse their instruments, and pale blue curtains fluttered at the open windows. A very charming setting , Scarlett thought. Not London, to be sure, but likely as close as I shall ever be.

Lady Leighton excused herself immediately, warning the girls to stay with her son. “Take good care of them,” she said sternly to him before gliding away to where a cluster of matrons had already gathered.

“Ah, her ladyship’s minions await,” Leighton said with a grin. Bess replied with a

sharp elbow to his ribs. He gave a little yelp, then instructed them, "Let us not commit to any particular position just yet. Let us take some time to walk about first."

Scarlett glanced at Bess who was looking around at the gentlemen who gathered along the edges like an ostentation of peafowl. She hid a small smile; Bess was likely seeking Mr Beamish, her current beau and the man who she hoped would soon offer for her. Whether Lady Leighton and Sir Humphrey approved of the match was less certain, but Scarlett knew her friend's wishes lay in that quarter.

The rooms were only about half-full as they had arrived early, but those present made up for it with loud chatter and laughter. Both Leighton and Bess knew a fair number of the partygoers and stopped occasionally to introduce Scarlett; to Scarlett's very great pleasure, she soon had partners for three dances besides the one promised to Leighton.

By the time they had made a complete perambulation of the rooms, the crowds had thickened considerably. "I could just sit and stare," Scarlett murmured to Bess, watching the spectacle—young ladies of all variations of beauty preening and flirting while the young bucks and dandies blustered and swaggered about.

"It is you everybody is staring at," Bess said with a proud smile on her sweet, rounded face. "I just knew you would be much admired."

"They are not staring at me. Or, if they are, it is your gown that is doing it."

"It is because you are quite the most handsome girl here. If you have not received an offer of marriage by the end of the evening, I shall think every man here has gone blind, mad, or both!"

Scarlett looked at the floor. "Can you even imagine some man coming to call on me at the parsonage? The reverend would have fits. I am quite certain he intends to keep

me forever at home, his spin?—”

“If you say ‘spinster’ I shall kick your shin, and that will ruin my gown, so you had better not!” In a kinder tone, Bess added, “I wish you would give up on this idea that you will never be able to leave home. He cannot keep you there forever!”

It was easier to smile as though she agreed than continue to argue, and the subject was soon dropped in favour of enjoying the spectacle unfolding before them. The dancing was soon to begin, and the noise and bustle were reaching a fever pitch; no one wanted to be left on the fringes, and those without dance partners were actively trying to secure one.

All at once, it seemed to Scarlett that things went very still. Everyone stopped walking and talking and indeed, seemed almost to hold their collective breath.

Scarlett craned her neck to see what was going on, only to see that two gentlemen had entered the room. Untrained though she was in such matters, she knew at once that these were men of superior birth. While both were handsome men—brothers, or perhaps cousins, she surmised—one in particular drew her notice and made her pulse quicken. He was slightly taller than his companion and had rich, dark curls arranged in the fashionably haphazard way. His clothing was modish, but not dandyish, and somehow Scarlett just knew he smelt of deliciously manly things—sandalwood and leather or something of that sort. He nodded to the people around him as he and his companion made their way through the thick crowd, and his eyes crinkled in a friendly way whenever he spoke to someone.

“Ollie, is that...?” Bess asked her brother from behind her fan.

“Jonathan Ashley, the Earl of Worthe and master of Ashworthe Park,” Leighton said discreetly. “I believe it is in Hertfordshire. The other is his younger brother, Mr Edward Ashley.”

“Are you much acquainted with Lord Worthe?” Scarlett asked.

Leighton shrugged. “It is up to him to decide how well we know one another. I have been introduced to him, but I am not on such terms as to presume on the acquaintance.”

Evidently most of the others had not Leighton’s scruples, for they all surged forwards, eager to claim friendship with the noble personages. It did not seem to trouble the two men; elevated though they were, they did not appear to be the high-in-the-istep type.

“He is certainly handsome,” she murmured to Bess.

With a giggle, her friend said, “His lordship has lips that look like they were made for kissing.”

“Bess!” Scarlett hissed back in a scandalised whisper.

“Well, he does!”

In fact, Scarlett did not disagree. There was something about the softness of them, the shocking pinkness in the countenance of a man that was quite enchanting. For a moment, she allowed herself to imagine standing in front of such a man, tilting her face towards his, her gentle smile soon covered by his...

Good heavens! No wonder the reverend has always prohibited me from coming to these things. I have not even danced yet and look where my mind has gone.

She shook her head and continued to watch the slow progress of the two brothers, assuming all the protection of obscurity would hide her frank interest. Then, just as they reached the middle of the room, an excessively strange thing happened—Lord

Worthe appeared to take notice of her. Their eyes locked into one another, a pulse of recognition thrumming between them.

“Oh!” Scarlett said in a faint whisper and immediately dropped her gaze. When she raised her eyes again, Lord Worthe was still looking directly at her, but speaking to his brother. His brother, too, seemed interested, narrowing his gaze to peer at her and then saying something to his lordship that caused them both to quicken their steps in her direction.

For a moment, Scarlett froze, feeling as if time itself had ceased to move. Then she laughed quietly at herself. Obviously, they are not coming to me! No doubt there was something behind her that drew them near. She glanced over her shoulder, seeing only a wall, a flat, yellowish-grey wall that could be of no interest to any sane person.

And yet—they came closer, in quick paces no less, or at least the quickest paces permitted by the crowd that thronged about them. Scarlett did what she could to recover her wits by the time Lord Worthe came to a stop directly in front of her. Her heart first stopped, then stuttered, and then began a rapid staccato within her chest. She heard, dimly, Bess’s gasp and glanced around her, seeing frank astonishment in the surrounding countenances as his lordship bowed to her. Bess’s gentle tap on her wrist reminded her to sink into a curtsy just in time to avoid being rude.

“How delightful to see you!” he and his brother beside him cried out. He then asked, “What do you do here? ”

“M-me?” The word emerged in a little squeak, and Scarlett felt herself blushing.

He looked at Bess and Leighton, and then all about them. “Is Kem with you?”

“I-I, um?—”

“I should have imagined that London and the wedding had you more than busy enough without coming up here!” He smiled broadly, one hand resting on his hip. Some dim part of her mind registered what a very nice smile it was, revealing straight, white teeth.

“The wedding?”

“Mr Leighton, is it not?” Lord Worthe had turned to Leighton and bowed, and Leighton, looking himself a bit shocked, returned it. His lordship asked to be introduced to Bess, and although Bess looked like she might faint, she conducted herself admirably.

“And it seems you are already acquainted with Miss Margrave,” Leighton said, “so?—”

“Miss Margrave?” Both Lord Worthe and Mr Ashley exclaimed simultaneously and returned to peering intently at Scarlett.

Again, she froze; the men did likewise. They appeared unduly shocked, and she had no idea what to do about it. Part of her wished to apologise—they evidently were not expecting a Miss Margrave. Perhaps stupidly, she said, “H-how do you do?”

The two men did not reply, both simply staring at her, until his lordship threw up his hands and said, with a little laugh, “I do beg your pardon! This is dashed awkward!”

“Dashed awkward indeed!” Mr Ashley repeated .

“A Miss Margrave, you say?” His lordship shook his head, seemingly lost in wonderment of her name.

“Yes, sir,” Scarlett replied hesitantly. “My father is Reverend Margrave in

Stanbridge.”

“Stanbridge!” Lord Worthe looked at his brother who shook his head, also seeming amazed. “A striking resemblance—do you not think so, Eddie?”

“Uncanny,” his brother agreed. “You must be some relation to the Richmonds, then?”

Feeling increasingly confused, Scarlett looked at Bess. Her desperation must have been evident, for Bess hurriedly offered, “Do you mean the family of the Earl of Tipton?”

Both brothers nodded and Mr Ashley said, “Yes, of course.”

Scarlett shook her head, barely managing to restrain her nervous giggle. “I am afraid not. My mother’s people were from Wales, and the reverend has always been in Stanbridge, the second son of a very small line.”

“Booker, then?” Lord Worthe glanced at his brother.

“Now Miss Adelaide Richmond,” Mr Ashley supplied.

The pair looked at Scarlett expectantly as if they thought these names might have some effect. They did not.

“I cannot account for it,” Lord Worthe said faintly. Then, more assuredly, he said, “I know of a lady in London, a lady lately engaged to my friend Lord Kemerton, and she is quite literally your twin.”

“Perhaps a bit more stout,” Mr Ashley added.

“A very little bit,” Lord Worthe agreed. “Likely due to the change...but never mind

that. You never heard of the lady?"

"Forgive me, but no, I do not know anyone by the name of Booker or Richmond or Tipton."

"I have heard it said that everyone has a twin." Leighton had decided to enter the conversation.

How I wish I did , Scarlett thought with a quick intake of breath. Just as quickly, she warned herself, pray do not be a fool!

Some years ago, likely after one of the reverend's infamous stern lectures, Scarlett had come across a letter in her father's study. Come across , she scoffed. No, you were snooping around in his drawer!

No matter how she had found it, the letter—which had remained in its original place in the time since—pertained to an orphan called Scarlett. An orphan who might or might not have been her namesake but otherwise had absolutely nothing to do with her. She had entertained certain fancies before, of course, childish dreams wherein some family, perhaps one like the Leightons, was out there looking for her, wanting her, wishing to love her above all things.

For better or for worse, she knew who her family were. If some lady out there looked like her, it was nothing more than a coincidence, or some exceedingly distant relation.

"In this case, it is surely true, for a more faithful likeness I do not think I have ever seen," Lord Worthe agreed with a hearty laugh, giving Leighton a clap on the back.

The familiarity inspired Leighton to make one of his famous, ill-timed jests. "Then we must hope the lady in London is pretty, else you would just have served Scarlett here quite the veiled insult!"

“Good lord!” Lord Worthe looked appalled. “Yes, I should have...the lady is quite handsome—as is Miss Margrave. In fact, I daresay Miss Margrave is even more handsome.”

Scarlett, who had finally stopped blushing, felt her face heat anew. “I thank you, sir, and pray you will forgive Mr Leighton who has fished for a compliment on my behalf.”

“Thank me? And when I have so clearly made this uncomfortable situation all the more uncomfortable for you.” He smiled, revealing a slight dimple on one cheek. “I suppose asking for a dance on top of that would be too impertinent, even for me?”

“Dance?” Scarlett asked.

He smiled again, his dark eyes twinkling. “If you are not otherwise engaged?”

It took Bess’s quick but sharp nudge to her side to shake Scarlett from her astonishment enough to reply. “Thank you, sir. Yes, I am pleased to accept.”

### CHAPTER TWO

Lord Worthe extended his arm, and with some surprise, Scarlett realised he meant to claim the first set. “Forgive me,” she said. “I shall have to offer you a later dance. I am engaged for the first with Mr Leighton.”

“Forgive me ,” he said smoothly. “I ought not to have presumed. All the most beautiful ladies have their cards filled early, do they not?”

Her upbringing made it vastly disconcerting to accept compliments; thus, the last minutes had been nothing short of torture. As such, she could not immediately think of any reply to his lordship.

In the brief pause, Lord Worthe turned to Leighton. “Sir, it would be exceedingly obliging of you to permit me the honour?”

Looking not at all perturbed—and perhaps a little relieved to have some means to smooth over his most recent error—Leighton replied genially, “If the lady has no objection, then neither do I, my lord. ”

It took Scarlett a moment to understand what was happening. Lord Worthe then turned his eyes on her, and she stammered out, “I have no objection.”

“Good man.” He patted Leighton lightly on the back, then said, “Call me Worthe.”

A wash of relief coursed through her. Far from being offended by having his dance stolen, Leighton had received his lordship’s favour; by the look on his face, he was

well-pleased by that, probably more than the dance itself would have pleased him.

It was an unfamiliar, breathless feeling to put her hand onto the comfortingly warm, strong arm of a young man, and to have him lead her with absolute confidence to the head of the forming set. People stopped their conversations and looked, some discreetly and some not, at the noble gentleman and the unknown lady on his arm. There were whispers, though thankfully Scarlett could not understand most of them.

Lord Worthe nodded at many people they passed but did not stop to talk in favour of speaking to Scarlett. "Do you often attend the assemblies in Luton?"

Scarlett glanced up and shook her head slightly with a little smile on her lips. "This is my first." She did not explain her life entombed in a parsonage where she was allowed to do nothing but distribute alms and study Fordyce.

"I daresay it is up to me, then, to be sure that you have a splendid time. Unless Mr Leighton is responsible for seeing to your happiness?"

"Not at all, I assure you. I have been raised side by side with Mr Leighton and his sister Bess. He is like a brother to me."

"Well...good." A little grin played at the edge of his lips for a moment as if her reply had pleased him but he did not wish to show her how much.

Calm yourself. Do not make too much out of any of this. She hoped she was sensible enough to not make a cake of herself, falling in love with the first man to ever ask her to dance!

Scarlett was relieved to hear a dance called that she knew well. It was also one that afforded ample opportunity to talk. That notion first gave her some anxiety. What could she possibly have to say to be of interest to an earl for an entire half an hour! Happily, those fears were soon dismissed. Lord Worthe was all ease and friendliness

and, true to his word, did everything he could to see to her delight.

“Your first assembly in Luton, hm?” Lord Worthe smiled down at her as they began to move through the patterns of the dance. “Are you much acquainted with the principal families here?”

She shook her head. “I am afraid I am not. Not only is it my first assembly here, it is the first time that I have ever been to Luton for any reason.”

“Then I suppose you must not know that gentleman dancing over there?”

Scarlett glanced to where he indicated a young gentleman who was nearly as fair as Scarlett herself was. “I know him by name only,” she said. “Mr Ellercamp.”

“I am going to tell you three things about him,” said Lord Worthe. “See if you can guess which one of them is untrue. He is a descendant of Sir Walter Raleigh, he was born with an extra finger on one hand, and he cannot read because he has some difficulty with his eyes.”

Scarlett gave a half gasp of laughter. “Well for his sake, I hope only that the untruth is either the finger or the inability to read!”

“Alas...no. The bit about Sir Walter Raleigh in fact belongs to that gentleman over there.” Lord Worthe gestured towards a pinch-faced man who Scarlett thought looked like every picture of the famed explorer that she had ever seen.

“Poor Mr Ellercamp,” she said.

“Ah, he does well enough. His man reads for him, and the finger was removed at an early age. Nothing but a pale white scar and a good story at parties now.” Lord Worthe smiled. “Ask him to take his finger off sometime—he has a little trick he does.”

Scarlett laughed again, marvelling that she could feel so much at ease, and so quickly.

“Now the true descendant of Sir Walter also has some peculiarities,” Lord Worthe continued after they had circled one another. “He keeps a parrot in his bedchamber that curses incessantly, makes his own ale that he flavours with scrapings from his beard, and is an expert fencer.”

The exertion of dancing and laughing and trying not to be too inelegant in her mirth was almost overwhelming, but Scarlett did, at length, manage to say, “I hope for the sake of his guests that it is the bit about the ale that is a lie.”

“Alas, Mr Raleigh is an absolutely dreadful fencer. I do not doubt for a moment that you could best him, Miss Margrave. But the truly unfortunate are those who have imbibed his ale without knowing what went into it.”

“Oh, dear!” She giggled. “May I hope that you were not one of the unfortunate ones?”

His cheerful grimace told her all she needed to know. It went on for some time, these little stories, until at last Scarlett begged for reprieve. She was not accustomed to unbridled mirth, and her stomach and cheeks ached from the unfamiliar activity demanded of them. “You have entertained me very well,” she said when the pattern required them to stand still for a little while. “But you have told me very little of yourself. All truths now, if you please.” The last was said very lightly, but she nevertheless found herself dearly wanting to hear what he would say.

“Me? I am just your average sort of nobleman,” he said. “I like to fish and hunt and fence, I have a curricule that I likely drive too fast—or so my mother thinks—and I enjoy reading, though not poetry. I loathe poetry.”

“I cannot say I much enjoy it myself,” she admitted. “Do you have any brothers or sisters? Besides the one I met, of course.”

He nodded. "One sister, younger than I am, who is married. I...I had another sister, an older sister, who died with my father in a carriage accident."

"Oh, I am so sorry," Scarlett said feelingly.

"It was some time ago," he admitted. "I daresay I shall always feel the loss of her, though. We were only a little over a year apart in age and played together until my mother absolutely forced her to leave the nursery. "

"How sweet that sounds! I should have liked to have a brother. Or a sister." She smiled up at him to show there was no true regret there. "Being an only daughter can be lonely sometimes. I was fortunate to have the Leightons, else it would have been intolerable."

"Do you wish to have a large family yourself, then?"

"I-I suppose I never really thought about it."

Lord Worthe smiled down at her. "How charming you are, Miss Margrave. Most ladies I meet seem to have their futures all decided and want only for an eligible man to insert into the role of husband."

Scarlett laughed, hoping he did not think her an absolute ninny for her incessant giggles. "Those sorts of tactics seem exceedingly unwise to me. I think you ought to meet the right person first and then decide together what sort of family you will have."

A slow smile spread across his face; she perceived she had pleased him, though she hardly knew how.

"Were your father and mother happy in their marriage?" he asked. "I hope I am not too impudent in asking."

She shook her head. “After all, I have learnt you drank ale full of beard scrapings—what harm could there be in telling you about my parents?”

That made him roar with laughter, loudly enough that their nearest fellow dancers looked over curiously.

“I believe my mother and the reverend were...content. They did not seem excessively unhappy, I do know that much.”

He looked at her with his brow furrowed, clearly wishing her to explain more .

“Neither my mother nor my father are the sort to overflow with mirth, so whether or not they enjoyed each other’s company, I really cannot say,” Scarlett explained. She was suddenly struck by how odd it must sound, their only daughter having no idea whether they were happy in marriage. “My father is a very serious person and my mother was as well, albeit in a softer way.”

“I see,” Lord Worthe said, although he did not seem like he really understood.

“My mother died when I was only twelve, so I was full young to really comprehend such things,” Scarlett added, hoping it sounded more usual when placed within the eyes of a child.

“My condolences to you,” he said with real sympathy in his eyes. “And your father?”

“Alive and well.” If he sensed any bitterness in her tone, he was gentleman enough to say nothing about it.

“And no brothers or sisters? What about cousins?”

“If I have any, I have never met any of them.” She was well aware that her entire demeanour had changed just by the mention of her father. She forced herself to smile

and speak lightly as she said, "Perhaps this lady you know in London is some long-lost cousin of mine."

"Next you are in London, you simply must meet her," he replied.

Next you are in London. It was difficult not to scoff openly at the very notion of the reverend allowing her to go to London, of all places. The City of Sin, he called it.

Almost as if he had read her mind, Lord Worthe asked, "Will you be in London for the Season?"

She shook her head. "The reverend does not permit me to go," she said, swallowing hard. Bess had invited her to go along with them. The Leightons had taken a house in Mayfair for all of May and some of June, and Lady Leighton had promised faithfully to care for Scarlett as she would her own child. The reverend had scarcely considered the scheme for a minute before refusing, telling Lady Leighton that Scarlett was needed at home. Again that frustrated feeling, the sense of being imprisoned in someone else's life, threatened to overtake her.

"Perhaps he thinks it unnecessary," said Lord Worthe, suddenly looking quite serious. "He might have in mind, already, a worthy gentleman to someday become your husband."

"No one that I am aware of. In truth, he does not much approve of the goings-on in London. He thinks it all quite..."

"Dissolute?" His lordship's laugh rang out again causing Scarlett to think of how much she enjoyed the sound. She wondered how it might be to be often around a person who was so much given to merriness. But he is surely no simpleton. He speaks just as easily on serious matters, too. Clever and good-humoured; she was sure she had never known such a man.

“He is not entirely wrong, although I would posit that good and evil are not dependent on location alone. But surely you must wish to go? Or do you prefer the country?”

“I have always been in the country, so I cannot speak to my preferences. I would like to go—it seems a shame to live relatively near and not ever see a place. Alas, my father is quite determined to keep me away from it.” And it away from me. The reverend thought as ill of the people who inhabited the capital as he did of the place itself.

Lord Worthe said nothing to this. Scarlett fancied he looked a little disappointed but swiftly reminded herself not to be silly. His lordship was amiable and his sportiveness might have been interpreted by some as romantic, but she was not a fool. She was pretty enough, she knew, but it took more than mere prettiness to win the heart of these great men of society.

Thankfully, the dance ended then. She liked Lord Worthe, likely too well. She had never imagined herself so much as speaking to an earl, much less laughing and chatting with one like they were old friends.

It was an enormous relief that he had not asked further questions about her, for her answers would have painted a dull picture indeed. She sewed and she visited the poor. She read Fordyce and Wesley, and had always been told poetry was the tool of the Devil. She knew no card games and would not even know the dances but for clandestine lessons in Bess’s former nursery. In years gone by, she had not overly chafed at the reverend’s strictures—for it was the life she was born to, was it not? What use were frivolous accomplishments to parsonage daughters who were destined to become spinsters?